

PATH OF THE DEATHLESS (BOOK 2 COMPLETED)

7 (I) Strangers

We, the Auroral Council of the Yellowstone Republic, have come to a unified resolution:

*On account of the unethical nature of Necromancy, we mark this Lore of Magic and all who possess its associated skills as **[Restricted]**. Those who walk the Path of the Necromancer are to submit themselves for immediate inspection and receive a monitoring curse for the good of public safety.*

For too long, we have allowed people to cross the lines of academic curiosity and fundamental decency. Now, in light of the crisis unfolding in our neighboring nation of New Albion, and the dark sects of the Necrotechs seeking to seed discord in our republic, we must take preventative measures—no matter how extreme they may seem.

The matter of one's soul is an issue of final dignity. Be they Pathbearer or Pathless, when death comes, the deceased should be allowed to rest and their loved ones granted a chance to mourn properly. To twist the very nature of death and to trap a soul when the body has died is an abominable act that will receive only one sentence: Death!

-*Sanction Upon Necromancy*, The Yellowstone Republic

7 (I)

Strangers

The last of the lesser vampires broke all of its teeth trying to take a bite out of Shiv's forearm. The Deathless coughed as he picked the monster up by its hip and slammed it against the wall. The stone shattered, and fragments bounced off Shiv's flesh. The lesser vampire struggled for a few moments longer, but after a few more whacks, it stopped moving.

Shiv dropped the broken creature, and rather than going for his knife again, he drove his fist through the monster's ribcage and grasped its heart. It whimpered weakly as its black blood caressed Shiv's hands. The Deathless felt the monster's core shiver once before he *squeezed*, ending it for good.

Toughness > 35

Physicality > 33

Reflexes > 26

Grappling Proficiency > 18

Striking Proficiency > 10

Skill Gained: Disease Resistance 1 (Initiate)

Vitality Drain > 4

Revenant > 3

It took Shiv three deaths before his body was so tough the vampires couldn't claw or bite through him. They resorted to pinning him down and slamming his head against the walls by that point. It took another two deaths before his head started functioning like a pickaxe and broke through the stone rather than the other way around.

After that, he started tearing through the vampires with blade and brute force. This initially ended up killing him as much as it killed them, as their blood got in his eyes and mouth. The vampirism caused him to sicken quickly, and he killed himself via the kitchen knife + artery combo before he could turn.

Shiv suspected that he might just be ejected from his body if the vampirism took hold. The Biomancers claimed that the host didn't technically survive the virus, that they effectively went brain-dead as a bloodsucking horror usurped their flesh and mutated into the ugly bat-like creature Shiv was so fond of killing. Aside from the potential discomfort of needing to kill vampire versions of himself over and over, Shiv didn't want to fight a vampire that had his skills while dealing with the others.

His Toughness was already growing at an absurd pace, and if things kept going like this, the kitchen knife was the only thing he could reliably use to end himself. His Physicality wasn't keeping up, and the rocks didn't do anything to hurt him anymore.

In the end, standing amidst a carpet of bodies, Shiv extracted his arm from the last vampire as he once again felt a burning discomfort build inside himself. His body was likely trying to fight off the vampirism again. By now, most would start exhibiting symptoms. Vampirism worked pretty fast, and so if Shiv didn't turn in the next two minutes, he might as well consider himself immune in most cases.

Disease Resistance. Now that was a useful skill to have. It would have been very helpful over the past three years when he was clearing lesser vampire nests in the ruins, trying to earn a Path, but he wouldn't complain about it arriving now.

What he enjoyed more than that was his Physicality and Reflexes. Georges wasn't lying—when your Reflexes got past twenty, and you focused, the world actually started slowing for you. It took a bit of effort, but Shiv could feel himself moving much faster than before. And he couldn't get enough of physically bullying the vampires with his newfound strength. Previously, they were faster than him, stronger than him, and tougher than him. Fire and intelligence were his only allies. Now, it was like he was wrestling with someone that was slightly weaker and a lot more fragile than he was.

Stomping over the vampires, Shiv walked over to claim the torch he wanted all along. The eye stalk was lying there on the ground, still glowing with its brilliant node that shone like a beacon in the darkness. Shiv picked it up warily, remembering that this node could project a beam that was capable of splitting him in half. As he grasped it, he felt something there—an almost-warmth that was slowly fading away.

It was like his vitality, but not quite. Maybe mana was what he was feeling. He tried to learn about magic from Tran's Jump Mage, Heather, but she simply snorted and muttered something about how he didn't have the wits for it. Shiv

thought of Tran and his team. He wondered if they were still alive. Despite everything, Shiv hoped Tran was fine. The others... Well, he wouldn't be too bothered if something happened to them.

Focusing on the energy he felt within the node, and though he felt it shift a bit as it grew slightly brighter, that was all he managed. Shiv frowned at the stalk. "So, you'll fire a beam when that fish wants you to, but you're just a torch when I hold you?" The node didn't reply. "Fine. You probably wouldn't have a good personality anyway. But I'm still going to use you."

He looked around and considered his next move. One thing he knew for sure was that he had to keep moving. The fact that he got attacked by twenty lesser vampires meant that there were many more slinking around in this place. It wouldn't be long until all the blood and death drew them in. As much as he would enjoy using them to level himself, it probably wasn't wise to linger in place if something much worse came.

The Necrotechs supposedly ruled down here, after all. If Shiv ran into someone like the vicar—or even the raven-helmed stranger—they probably could knock him out instead of killing him. And who knew what might happen then? He didn't want to discover what a Necrotech Necromancer could do to his spirit. Not without some major assurances, anyway.

So, he got to work. The first thing he did was peel the usable scraps of clothes from his corpses. The chef's outfit wasn't very tough, but it functioned well enough as a makeshift bundle. After that, he swallowed his discomfort and used his knife to disfigure the faces of his corpses. This was probably purely paranoia, but if a Necrotech came upon this place and found a bunch of bodies that looked the same and had the same face...

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There was a war going on. He wanted to keep them in the dark about him as long as possible.

This led to the next thing he did: smearing lesser vampire blood all over his current outfit and body. Previously, he used pheromones to mask his scent during his hunts. Now, he could just make himself smell like a lesser vampire. Since he hadn't turned, he probably didn't need to worry that much about diseases anymore, either. At least until he ran into something else that could kill him.

Finally, he went back over to the dead angler beast and surveyed his great kill. Yeah, its main eye was pretty ruined, but the meat should still be usable. The teeth too. He didn't know that much about monster harvesting, but some organs sold for crazy amounts of mithril. Crazy prices for a chef, anyhow.

He worked fast and carefully, keeping an eye out as he sliced pieces of flesh from inside the beast's mouth after pulling out most of the teeth. If he found a stick and some rope, he could make some spears too. For now, they served as reserve daggers.

One could never have too many knives.

As he filled his makeshift sack with as much angler meat as he could, he looked at the rest of the monster and frowned. He wrapped his arms around it briefly, and to his surprise, managed to slightly lift it off the ground. He was stronger than before. Much stronger. But he dropped it with a grunt. The damn thing was still too heavy. If he had more Physicality, he could maybe use it as some kind of punt-boulder—hide behind it and launch it into his enemies.

The very idea tickled him.

Tragically, the more practical option was to leave it behind.

“I’ll come for the rest of your kind,” Shiv said, offering the opposite of a fond farewell. “I won’t forget how you killed me. How you rammed me against the wall, and then ate me. Or the stupid beam. Or the suffocation—really hated

that one. If you have children, pray something else eats them first, because I'll probably find them and eat them. Like I'll eat you later. Over a slow roast."

And that was a promise. He might not have been strong enough to do anything about these monsters as a Pathless, but now? Well, now if he died enough, he could probably face anyone. And wasn't that an inspiring thought? To think that he was practically sick with envy and loathing for Adam Arrow and all the others just a while ago.

Shiv's glee dimmed slightly. He wasn't fully sure what happened to Adam Arrow. The Young Lord was taken by the raven-helmed stranger as Shiv fell, so... Well, Roland Arrow wasn't going to take this well. He definitely wasn't going to take Shiv's Path well, either. The Deathless frowned as he considered his calculus.

There were several things he needed to consider when he got out of the Abyss. He probably didn't want to just show up back in town with his Path and his word. He knew most people there well enough that they just might think he turned traitor and was actively aiding the Necrotechs. All the corpses he left around Roland's rear lawn likely didn't help either.

System knew what kind of slander his name was going through. But that didn't matter anymore. Because he was a Pathbearer. He got to decide the course his life took now—him, and no one else.

Never again.

I'm my own responsibility now, Shiv chuckled, mocking Roland from afar. But I just might end up as the one you fear anyway.

As Shiv ventured forth, he utilized his Stealth as much as he could. He listened to make up for his lacking sight, and he managed to scavenge a cloth cover for his makeshift torch in case he needed to hide.

From what he could tell of his surroundings, he was in a strange, sprawling cavern of some kind. He wondered how far down the Abyss he was. No way to tell. There were some small Slayer expeditions in the past. Treasure hunters, monster killers, and general thrill seekers hoping to advance their skills ventured down into the dark. This resulted in the term “the fatal fifty.” No one who ventured below fifty kilometers ever made it back. Apparently, forty was a slaughterhouse itself, with most monsters there well past Adept-Tier and above.

Thing was, the lesser vampires were definitely not Adept-Tier. The angler beast wasn't either. Shiv didn't know the exact numbers for each of the Tiers—mainly because no one would bloody tell him—but he could judge by someone's performance in combat. With enough advantages, surprise, and the right equipment, a Pathless could defeat a low to low-mid Initiate-Tier. It wasn't likely, but Shiv managed to do it over and over again with the lesser vampires.

Right now, if he were to guess, he was probably on the lower end of Initiate-Tier. Maybe not for Toughness and Physicality, though. He was probably sturdier than a lot of the Arrow Family Guards—maybe even if they were wearing armor.

Ironically, Toughness was one of the harder skills for most people to level because it demanded that they suffer harm and recover. Shiv just fought and died brutally. And then he came back better.

Along his journey through the tunnels, he found some strange and glowing mushrooms. They shone with the most appealing blue, and Shiv harvested them. He knew a little about mushrooms from Georges. Some of them were good ingredients, while others killed you pretty quick. He didn't know which ones these were, and part of him was raring to try, but since he wasn't sure that there were monsters nearby to draw vitality from, he decided to wait.

What felt like a day passed as he groped blindly through the dark. He caught sight of strange bugs with colorful shells and some manner of naked rodent that had no eyes—but didn't manage to catch any before they sank back into the dirt. After a few more hours, he threw a cloth over his torch as he encountered a nest of lesser vampires feasting on something.

He approached them with his Stealth skill and felt a rush as it advanced a level.

Stealth > 17

As he got close, following the sounds of their frenzied feasting, Shiv readied his angler teeth and his kitchen knife as he planned his assault. A second later, he chucked his torch in the middle of the vampires, blinding them suddenly with the bright light. While they were in disarray, he rushed forward with blades in his hands and a smile on his face.

The resulting fight felt more like dicing vegetables than hunting monsters.

They weren't ready for him to attack, they weren't strong enough to hurt him directly, and they weren't intelligent enough to know when to run.

Once again, Shiv found himself standing over fifteen lesser vampires, reveling in his success. He didn't even die once this time. A point of pride, but maybe not that optimal for him. The only skill that grew during this engagement was his Disease Resistance.

Disease Resistance > 2

Right. To grow my skills fast, I need to die because of something. I need to be lacking somewhere—and it needs to cause my death. Shiv studied the vampires. They weren't good for his conventional growth by this point either. He needed to fight a lot more of them to develop his martial skills. Toughness and Physicality were out of the question. In a very odd sense, he'd outgrown the lesser vampires he spent the last three years hunting for pleasure and purpose.

It was weirdly sad.

I'll probably find something nightmarish that will make me die a torturous death soon enough, Shiv thought, comforting himself. The thought of seeing his skills spike again cheered him up. There were plenty of monsters in the Abyss. He just needed to find and die fighting them. Until he exceeded them as well.

Finished with the vampires, he walked over to find out what they were eating. To his surprise—and disgust—the victim looked like a tall teenage girl. She was dressed in purple leathers and covered in bite marks. In her hand was a curved shortsword drenched with blood. Shiv noticed how her carotid was slit, and he understood.

He nodded. *Brave girl.* She probably knew her fate and decided to handle matters herself before the vampires did it for her. Shiv could respect that. From how pointed her ears were, he thought she was an elf, but he didn't recall ever seeing an elf with a complexion this pale before. Or eyes quite as dark. They looked like dark pearls in the torch's shine.

Shiv frowned as he studied her. The aesthetic of her armor was also foreign to him. She had a symbol of a spider-woman hybrid playing a lyre on her shoulder. Shiv was pretty far from religious, considering how much the war priests in town hated him, but he didn't remember hearing of any spider-woman goddess.

“Myrr... Myrr, are you there? Myrr? Talk to me! Sister? Sister!”

7 (II)

Strangers

The sudden crackle of noise made Shiv scramble back. He looked around for any attackers, only to discover that the sound was coming from a broach on the dead girl's collar. He narrowed his eyes as he studied it for a moment. Was this some kind of magical communication device? Strange. He knew the automata were capable of talking to each other over long distances thanks to their "netspeak." They were the main way the republic's many towns and cities communicated.

Aside from that, Mind Mages were used as messengers sometimes, but they were pretty heavily controlled by the council and had to bear Monitoring Curses to even exist in the republic. No one trusted a Mind Mage. Not even other Mind Mages.

Meanwhile, this girl had some kind of jewelry-sized communicator here. It was really impressive.

"Myrr? Please, talk to me... Please..."

Shiv licked his exceptionally dry lips. What should he do? He didn't know who she was—for all he knew, she could be among the Necrotechs. But according to the stories, the Necrotechs were mostly monsters and Necromancers. They were an empire of horrible nightmare-people who did nightmare things with their nightmare Paths.

There was a distinct lack of anything nightmarish about this girl. In fact, she looked like she met a bad end at the hands of the nightmares.

Right then, he had a choice: He could either err on the side of extreme caution, loot the girl, and move on. But that led to the next problem: Where was he going? What was the way out? He'd been down here for hours, and he was still more lost than ever. If he kept going, he would eventually die of

dehydration or starvation at some point. Who knew when that might be, considering his Physicality, but still, he was going blind.

As for the risks of talking to these people... Worst case scenario, he encountered the raven again and then got captured or something. Maybe held in stasis while the Necromancers poked at his soul. Pretty ugly, but he might end up there either way if he wandered into an ambush or something. He didn't think his Stealth Skill was nearly good enough to avoid the notice of someone with an Initiate Awareness Skill.

I do have the kitchen knife bound to my right hand, Shiv thought. He looked at his blade. So long as he had that, he had a means of killing himself and maybe escaping.

Frankly, everything he did was a risk. He was ignorant, blind, and lost in the Abyss.

So, Shiv did the only thing that could add a little more certainty to his situation. He spoke to the dead girl's brooch. "Sorry. I don't think she made it. Lesser vampires got her."

There was a brief silence on the other end. Shiv wondered for a moment if he did something wrong. Maybe he needed to press something or equip the brooch somehow?

"Lesser... vampires?" The speaker sounded confused. They also sounded like they were about to start crying.

"Yeah," Shiv said, wondering how best to make them feel better. "I killed the monsters, so... she's avenged, if that means something to you. They infected her, and she opened her own throat to stop herself from turning."

Another long pause followed. *"I see... And... who are you?"*

Shiv blinked. "I'm, uh... I'm Shiv..."

"Who are you with?" The speaker asked.

Shiv frowned. They were about as suspicious of him as he was of them. "No one. I'm on my own. I'm with no one." He tried to think of something to tell them that would reveal he was from the surface. "I took a bad fall from higher up. I woke up down here."

"Oh. You're very lucky to be alive, Penumbra."

Penumbra? Shiv stifled a sigh. What in the Broken Moon was that? "Uh, yeah. Very lucky."

"You're also lucky that you have defended the honor of my broodsister, for if you did not, I would have slain you for laying your unworthy eyes on her body."

And now Shiv failed to stifle a deep sigh. He fell from Blackedge to the depths of the Abyss only to discover that as the sky was filled with assholes above, so too was the darkness filled with jackasses below.

I'm going to throttle some of these felling bastards as soon as I can, Shiv promised himself. *People need to stop treating me like shit.*

"Yeah, sure," Shiv replied finally, unable to keep the disdain out of his voice. "Listen, what do you want me to do with her body? She's just lying here and—"

“Do not touch her!”

The speaker’s snarl conveyed all the rage she could muster. *“If you lay your wretched hands on her, I will cut them off and claim you for breeding.”*

“F-for breeding?” Shiv repeated, unsure if he heard that right. He’d been threatened and insulted a lot of ways in his life, but not like this. Especially not by someone who sounded like a woman.

Maybe they have some kind of... anti-sex skill. Is that a thing?

“Yes. Now do not touch her and wait, or we will discover the true fertility of your flesh.”

“My flesh?” Shiv was the most confused he’d ever been. Did things work differently in the Abyss? Could men get pregnant down here? Was that how things worked?

Part of him wanted to run for his life. A small part was curious about this whole breeding punishment thing, and wanted to prod the dead girl’s corpse so he could find out how bad it was—and if he could get a skill out of it. His increasingly dubious instincts left him in place, staring awkwardly at the surrounding bodies. He grunted as he decided to pile the lesser vampires. He also considered wrapping his face and pretending he had a head injury to hide his obvious surfer appearance.

He thought he was pale. He was wrong. Shiv might as well have been beige next to the dead girl.

They came with no more than a rustle in the air. Shiv blinked as he found a knife against his throat. He didn’t hear them at all—he didn’t even see them.

“The weapons you carry. Lose them.” The one he spoke to earlier was right behind him. And he had a feeling she wasn’t alone. He considered finding out if her blade could actually cut his throat, but he decided to play along for a moment. Mainly because of the breeding threats.

Shiv chucked a few of his teeth daggers. He held up his kitchen knife. “This one’s bound.”

“Then unequip it and drop it on the—what even is that?” the speaker sputtered incredulously.

“It’s a chef’s knife,” Shiv muttered, feeling somewhat offended. He thought it was a pretty good chef’s knife. “I got it from my mentor, and it means a lot to me.”

“Are you—Wait...” A sudden shove sent him stumbling forward, and he turned to see four figures standing before him. All of them were slightly taller than he was—which he wasn’t used to. The other part that he wasn’t used to was the fact they were all female. Except for maybe the fourth person at the back of the group. Shiv couldn’t tell with that one.

They all resembled the dead girl to some extent. Pointed ears, black-pearl eyes, pale skin, leather armor with spider-lady on the shoulder.

But while he regarded them with curiosity, they gawked at him with stunned disbelief.

“I... you...” The speaker pointed a spear at him, her hand shaking. “You’re not a *Penumbral*, you’re—you’re a *surfacel*!”

“Light-touched!” another of the strange elves muttered, and made a gesture Shiv struggled to follow. Probably High Initiate if judged by her Reflexes.

“Yeah. Hi. I’m Shiv. I found your sister. I killed the lesser vampires.” He shrugged. “Can you stop pointing that spear at me? I’m not hostile.”

“How did you even get here?” the speaker muttered. She was eyeing him like he was some kind of exotic creature.

“I fell.”

“You fell?”

“Yeah?”

“From where?”

“The surface.” Technically, it was higher, but he didn’t need to be that detailed.

“The—*what?*” She looked at the others, and a scowl appeared on her face. “You lie!”

“Why would I?”

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“I—you—” She stared at him, and her eyes flashed with a spark of what he recognized to be mana. She was Analyzing him. “Deathless? What manner of Path is that?”

“The kind that helps with falling,” Shiv answered. It was half a lie. It didn’t help with the fall, but it helped with making the sudden stop not permanent. “Listen: I took a very bad tumble after a very stressful day, and I came upon your sister by chance. I killed the lesser vampires because they had it coming, and right now, I’d like some directions out of here. That’s my deal.”

“Sister, we do not have time for this,” another of the elves said with an urgent undertone. This one seemed like the second of the group, and she held a shortbow of some kind—but Shiv found himself eyeing her daggers. Those looked nice. He could use an upgrade from his kitchen knife and teeth, though he’d obviously keep the former. “We should *deal* with this one and move on. We have lost too much already. The Order is nearby. The dagger must be delivered at haste!”

And, like a dog hearing something about food, Shiv’s attention snapped to full alertness. “Dagger?”

“It does not concern you, surfacer,” the speaker spat. “You should—”

“Can I see the dagger? I like daggers. I know a few things about daggers—”

“No! No, you cannot see the Cage of Valor Thann!”

Shiv cocked his head. Valor Thann? Cage? Sounded like a strange name for a dagger. Shiv really wanted to see this dagger now. "I'll let you see my kitchen knife."

"You—" The elf shook her hands at the ceiling as if beseeching some unseen deity. "I don't care about your *pathetic* kitchen knife."

A flare of rage passed through Shiv. "It's not pathetic. It fixes itself, it sharpens itself, and it cuts everything from fish, meat, potatoes, to the flesh of Adept."

The elves drew their weapons, and pure aggression radiated from their postures. "Was that a threat?" the speaker growled.

"No. I'm literally just recounting the things it cut. I was surprised it bled the Adept, actually. Really surprised me."

The elves looked at him and gazed at each other. The speaker's second in command leaned in. "I think the fall damaged this one's head. They might be a bit wrong up there."

"Why are you whispering right in front of me? Also, why are you all behaving like assholes? We just met. I saved your sister's body from these vampires—they were tearing her apart, I tell you about it, and now you just keep insulting me. I'm tired of it." Shiv let out a ragged breath as he finished his outburst. "Tired of this. I regret replying to you people. I should've just kept wandering the darkness alone. At least the monsters didn't insult me before trying to kill me."

The elves were staring at him again. The speaker's mouth opened and closed several times before she scoffed. "Utti. Go... Go secure Myrr's body. We shouldn't... We shouldn't leave her here."

The second nodded. "Yes, mistress."

Shiv watched as the elf knelt by her sister's body and muttered something. "Yeah. Sorry about her."

The speaker narrowed her eyes at him. "Speak honestly: Are you with New Albion? An agent of the Stolen Throne, come to sow discord among us Umbrals?"

"I understood almost all of those words individually," Shiv deadpanned.

The speaker shook her head. "You must know that the story you told me is... *absurd*. You fell? You just... fell?"

"Someone threw me first. But yeah, I fell."

"How high is your Toughness?"

"I'll tell you that if you let me see that knife you were talking about."

She didn't show him any knife, and he didn't tell her about his Toughness. So far, she seemed wary of him. That was good. It was easy to be confident if you didn't much care if someone killed you or not. In fact, he might even prefer getting killed by her on some level. "If you're not going to show me the knife, at least show me the way out of this place. I want to trade good deeds. I preserved your sister's body. You get me out of this place. Wherever this is."

“You are in the Umbral Gardens, surfer. Very few of your kind find themselves here. Those who do are mostly slaves, slavers, or something darker.”

“Slaves?” Shiv said. Well, that was horrible. The Republic had plenty of problems, but they didn’t do slavery.

“Indeed,” the speaker said.

“You got a name?” Shiv asked.

She paused. “I am Sister Nomos, of her Lady Archae. What is your name, surfer?”

“Shiv.”

“Just Shiv?”

“It’s what I call myself. It’s the only name I’ll ever treat as mine.”

“Why Shiv?”

Shiv looked at her as if she were simple. “I like knives.”

The elf almost laughed. “Of course. You are... very single-minded.”

Shiv sneered. "I like things. Can't a man have felling hobbies without being insulted?"

"She is prepared, sister," Utti, the shortbow archer among the elves, said. She had the dead one strapped to her back, and Shiv found that to be a show of dedication if nothing else.

"So, are you guys going to show me how to get out of here, or try to kill me. I'm fine with both." And Shiv really was.

The elves were tense again, and Nomos sighed. "You walk in front of me, surfacer. And keep your hands where I can see them."

Shiv rolled his eyes. "Fine."

"And lose the Cave Biter Stalk. How did you get that anyway?"

"Cut it off."

"Off a Cave Biter?"

"Yeah. I needed a light. I can't see down here."

"I... Oh, right, you have light-tainted surfacer eyes."

Shiv was about to insult her back for that when he realized she was technically right.

“Get rid of it. It draws attention—makes us obvious. We will guide you.”

“Yes. And I trust you completely.”

She barked a laugh. “If trust is what you’re worried about, then you should never have called us. If this was to end in blood, I would have attacked already.”

Shiv sighed and then wrapped a cloth around his torch. “How about this? No light.”

He couldn’t see them anymore—part of him prepared for an attack.

But then, Nomos spoke again. “Fine. Now.” He felt her grab his shoulder from behind and push him. “Follow my hand.”

Shiv frowned. “I feel like a meat shield. Is this your plan to find out how much Toughness I have?”

“And be quiet,” Nomos hissed. “Or we might be doing that very soon ind—”

Suddenly, something slammed down hard in front of the group. Shiv felt broken rocks crack and bounce off his body. One hit him in the eye but skipped off without harm. He smirked. Toughness was the best.

Without asking for permission, Shiv pulled the cloth off his torch, only to find another group standing before him and the elves. Said group was composed

of a few dozen lesser vampires, and a pale-skinned man with blood-red eyes clad in a bright red coat.

“Ah. Sister Nomos. We meet at last. Sister Nutu told me so much about you during my *conversation* with her.” As the man spoke, Shiv noticed how sharp his teeth were. There were also his human-like ears. This one was most certainly not an elf. Shiv just didn’t know *what* he was.

“Bloodspawn,” Nomos snarled. She pointed her spear forward, and the tip came alight with a cold glow. Shiv could feel the temperature around him dropping. “I give this one chance—depart and be spared.”

The man laughed. “You? Threatening me? Right now? I must tell my elders of this: It will be greatly amusing.” He kept chuckling as he shook his head. “No. *No*. Here is my offer to you. Give me the *Cage*, and I will let you choose one sister to go back alive with you. It is generous. Me and my kin have not had fresh succor in days.”

“Kin?” Shiv said. He looked between the lesser vampires and the man dressed in red. “But... they’re vampires.”

Suddenly, he felt like everyone was looking at him. The man, especially. “And... who are you? A surfer? Dressed like that? Has another lackey of the Stolen Throne gotten lost in our depths?”

“Don’t know what that is. I also don’t much know what you are, beyond the fact that you’re called Bloodspawn.”

“Me?” The man frowned. “I’m clearly a high vampire, boy. Open your eyes.”

“No, you’re not.”

“What?” the self-proclaimed high vampire said, frowning.

“Yeah, I looked in the bestiary. High vampires have wings and the head of a wolf and a bat. They also look ugly as sin and have these long claws—” Shiv gestured.

Everyone was still staring at him. The man looked especially amused. “I see, I see...” He giggled. “Oh, the pitiful surfacers and their terrible propaganda. So much effort to hide the world lurking below from their people, to preserve the supposed divinity of their so-called republic council.”

“So, you’re telling me high vampires don’t look like that?” Shiv asked.

The supposed high vampire considered that. “Well, we can choose to. Many of the kindred take on combat forms—” Then he caught himself. “What am I doing? Why am I explaining this to *prey*?” He sighed. “I must be tired. Time to be done with this hunt and return. Nomos. Your reply?”

“I will wear your heart as a necklace,” the elf sneered.

“Ah. So be it. You. Surfacers. What’s your name?”

“Shiv,” the Deathless answered.

“Shiv?” the high vampire frowned. “Well, I don’t much like the sound of that. Well. Goodbye, Shiv.”

Then, he waved a hand. Before Shiv could blink, his body was bloody mist, and he was a Revenant again.

Huh? That's new, Shiv thought, regarding his most recent death. That was most definitely magic. Some kind of Biomancy. Frankly, it felt exactly like Biomancy—instead of healing him, it obliterated him from inside.

Shiv wondered if he could adapt to that with a few more deaths.

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The Bloodspawn laughed. “Children. Go feed.”

And in the dark, Shiv heard the lesser vampires rush forth as a new battle was joined.