

PATH OF THE DEATHLESS (BOOK 2 COMPLETED)

8 (I) Biomancy

The Soul Cage analysis cannot be completed. Not without a soul still inside. Discovering the exact mechanics behind the rites of lichification isn't something that can be achieved through theory and experiments alone.

We need an intact Soul Cage. And we must have a sealed lich inside it. Without that, we cannot recreate the patterns to achieve a Dichotomously-Linked Soul. Only after can we undergo the next steps and present our findings to the Auroral Council.

If it is to be war between us and New Albion, we must know the exact mechanics of Legendary-Tier Necromancy. Failure to reach this standard will leave us vulnerable in the extreme.

“At risk of complete subjugation in the worst case.”

Keep that in the official report. Let the Auroral Council read that. Maybe it will motivate them to use their divine authority to press down harder on the Great

Families. We have enemies everywhere as it is; the last thing we require is more shadow wars between our nobility over who is the lord ruler of what.

There will be plenty of territory for them to fight over soon enough, if all goes right. Especially below.

-Prismatic Order Intelligence Report, the Yellowstone Republic

8 (I)

Biomancy

Shiv's impromptu torch bounced off somewhere unseen after a lesser vampire ran into it. All he could hear were the elves shouting and the monsters hissing and shrieking. The fact that he could still hear helped a lot, however, as it allowed him to tell if he was about to drain a vampire or one of the Umbrals.

And as far as he could tell, the Umbrals were going to need a lot of help to survive this.

“I gave you a choice, Nomos. I showed you such mercy. But I suppose I should have expected a lack of gratitude from an *Umbral*. Your kind has always overvalued their worth—existing only because the Composer took pity on you.” The higher vampire tutted as a frozen spear flashed in the dark. Nomos let out a cry of pure rage, and rows of jagged ice exploded up from the ground, spearing through a few lesser vampires as they rushed toward the high vampire. But the Bloodspawn just laughed, and the last thing Shiv saw before the glow of magic faded was the red-eyed man backhanding the ice-shards apart with contemptuous ease.

His Physicality must be monstrous, too. Maybe Medium Adept... Shiv could only imagine fighting him. *I’m going to get so much Toughness from this.* But first, he went after the high vampire and started draining them.

The high vampire cried out in alarm. “Agh! What—what are you attacking me with, Umbral? Sapping my vitality? Have you been speaking to the dagger? Is that it? Has it been whispering its secrets to you?!”

Shiv drew in the vampire’s vitality, and there was a *strangeness* to it, like the flame burned differently somehow. But there was still a flame there. It just wasn’t very human. There was something else on top of the warmth. The Deathless put the thought out of his mind briefly as he remembered he still had his knife equipped.

Time to see if a high vampire can bleed. And if I can even cut someone while dead. As he drained, he stabbed, and, to his pleasure, felt a jolt of resistance as the blade struck bone. Once more, the kitchen knife was damaged, but Shiv pulled it down along the high vampire's flesh with reckless delight. A bestial roar sounded from the high vampire in response.

"Enough!" The cavern came aglow in hues of dark red as the vampire's eyes went ablaze with mana. A spell pattern formed from what looked like the vampire's own blood. As Shiv carved upward with his kitchen knife, he felt the blade halt and almost break as the vampire's skin turned impossibly hard. Bathed by the high vampire's unholy mana, Shiv saw the Umbrals struggling against the lesser vampires—but more than holding their own. The elves were stronger than the monsters. Their weapons reaped death with almost every stroke, enchantments and skills working in tandem to hold the tide against superior numbers. Yet, Shiv was right about his theory earlier. Small cuts bled on their faces, and they winced as they were hit, their armor serving as their main line of defense against harm.

Shiv judged most of the Umbral elves to mostly be about Initiate-Tier based on their capabilities. Low Initiate for Toughness—maybe not even that. The only one who truly stood out was Nomos. She moved almost too fast for Shiv to track, and she created constructs of ice with every thrust of her spear. She wasn't nearly as impressive as Adam Arrow, so that made her very Low Adept, perhaps. Or High Initiate. Shiv leaned toward the latter.

This didn't bode well, as the high vampire they were fighting sneered and unleashed his spell. A wave of crimson washed over the Umbrals. Everyone other than Nomos twitched like they were having a seizure. Blood poured out from their orifices as they cried out and struggled to remain standing. The lesser vampires swarmed them, tackling several off their feet.

"No!" Nomos screamed. In the fading glow of the vampire's magic, Shiv saw that she was bleeding too. Then, the Deathless resurrected, and he was back in the fight. And his hand came to rest right on the high vampire's back.

"Hey, Bloodspawn. I'm back again," Shiv whispered.

The high vampire froze. "Wh—"

Once more, the fact that most Pathbearers didn't get any heavier worked in Shiv's favor. He wasn't nearly as strong as the high vampire, but he could still casually pick the monster off the ground and drop him on his head in a brutal suplex. The explosiveness of the throw caught the high vampire off guard. The bloodsucking fiend let out an uncharacteristic scream of alarm as Shiv bounced their head off the ground.

The Deathless heard stones break—but guessed that he probably did no damage to the high vampire. So he kept going—grabbed the high vampire by

his legs and threw him as hard as he could in a random direction. Another loud cry sounded from the vampire as they went flying. Shiv doubted that was going to keep the Bloodspawn stunned for long, though.

“Nomos! I need light!” Shiv called.

The elf responded by creating a massive ice crystal above her. Hanging overhead like some kind of ornate chandelier, the crystal lit the cavern with its magic. A second later, it began pelting the space around Nomos in a hail of sharp icicles. The lesser vampires—too focused on tearing into the other elves—were shredded. Interestingly, the other elves were never struck—the ice magic melting before it hit them. Very fine control on the part of Nomos. Shiv strode into the hail with reckless abandon, hissing in discomfort as the ice magic left shallow cuts on his skin but failed to go any deeper.

He got behind a lesser vampire that was trying to bite through the shortbow elf’s left arm—Utti, he remembered she was called. As she screamed in pain instead of stabbing the vampire with her daggers like a normal Pathbearer, Shiv drove his fist through the lesser vampire’s chest from behind. The monster went from gnashing on the elf’s arm to choking on its own blood in an instant. Utti’s eyes went wide. At the end of Shiv’s fist was a still-pulsing lesser vampire heart. It pumped once more before he took a step back—ensuring the elf wouldn’t be infected—and clenched his fist, turning the organ to bloody pulp.

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The lesser vampire sagged down on Shiv's arm. But he wasn't done. He drove his other fist into the same wound and pulled in two directions. It took a substantial amount of his strength, but—with a guttural cry—he ripped the vampire in half, sending both halves bouncing in opposite directions.

There he stood, his breaths coming fast, billowing steam in the rapidly cooling cavern. His body was covered in the black blood of the beast he had just slain, and Utti looked up at him, her face a mask of disbelief, her eyes wide. "C-Composer."

"I don't know who that is," Shiv huffed. Just then, another lesser vampire slammed down on him from behind and clamped its fangs around most of his head. Shiv cursed—mostly from surprise. And then the vampire cried out as its teeth broke apart against his skull. "Felling—ruined my moment!" He reached up, seized it by the back of the neck, and slammed it down on the ground next to Utti. The Umbral's jaw dropped wider as Shiv drove his right heel through the monster's back, crushing its heart underfoot in an instant.

“Come on,” he said, extending his hand. Utti hesitated for a moment, then reached out to accept his help.

Then, without any warning at all, she exploded into a puff of blood, coating the black ichor covering his body already with a layer of red. Shiv blinked. Nomos cried out Utti’s name with a despairing howl. Shiv instinctively turned, and at the very edge of his sight, bathed in a crimson glow, was the high vampire.

The red-eyed bloodsucker approached him with a look that was somewhere between disbelief and absolute hatred. “You... I *killed* you.” Shiv watched as patterns of red wove across the vampire’s arm, covering it in a magical glow. Slowly, his shape began to change. The limb mutated, extending into the clawed digits Shiv saw in the bestiary. Ah. Finally. The high vampire was assuming his “combat form.”

Shiv strode forward, determined to find out just how vicious a high vampire was. “No, you didn’t.”

“I did!” the vampire almost screamed.

The Deathless did his best to hide the grin on his face. Broken Moon, he was going to screw with this thing’s mind as much as he could. He didn’t know if

he was ever going to get that chance again. “If you did, how would I still be here?”

“I *liquefied* you!”

“You missed,” Shiv retorted, hiding his laughter with a cough.

The high vampire looked like he was about to have an aneurysm. “You *fetid vermin!*”

“You parasite,” Shiv spat back, his own dark anger rising to meet the high vampire. “You murdered someone I just tried to help. I’m going to pull your heart out for that. I’m going to make you watch me drive my kitchen knife through the pumping organ. It’ll be the last thing you see.”

The vampire charged Shiv with a deafening roar. The bloodsucker didn’t use magic on Shiv this time—which was a disappointment. Shiv wanted to die a few more times to the magic to see if he could get some kind of skill to resist it. The high vampire exploded off the ground. The air detonated in a shockwave at the vampire’s back. A few hours ago, this might have left Shiv deafened and broken. Now, it was merely like a particularly heavy gust of wind.

The Deathless dove forward just as he lost track of the vampire's movements. It was an act done on pure instinct. And it might have saved his life. A claw whistled through the place where Shiv once stood. The Deathless turned to tackle the vampire—perhaps hold them in place for Nomos or someone to take the Bloodspawn's head—but he underestimated the vampire's Reflexes.

The high vampire hit him like a tidal wave. Shiv grunted as he was launched across the cave and spiked into a wall. Stone burst behind him. One of his ribs didn't feel like it was in the right place anymore. Then the high vampire was on him again. The Bloodsucker drove its clawed hand into Shiv's chest, and the bladed digits punched deep.

But not deep enough.

They sank through the initial layer of flesh but found themselves stuck against bone and muscle. Then Shiv caught the high vampire's arm and tried to push back.

"What even are you?" the high vampire complained. "You're barely faster than a Pathless slave! Why is your Toughness so high?"

Shiv growled as he tried to push the high vampire's hand away. To no avail. The monster was stronger than him by far. He really needed more Physicality. The Deathless threw a heavy kick between the high vampire's legs, and he felt his foot crack against something almost as hard as metal. "I can ask you the same question," Shiv croaked.

A look of absolute indignation came over the vampire, and he drove his clawed hand as hard as he could into Shiv with a roar. The Deathless coughed blood as he finally felt his sternum break apart, but he twisted to his side and let the clawed hand tear out from him. He then jammed his kitchen knife under the vampire's armpit and cut all the way up. The knife sawed through several dense bands of tissue before reaching the severely damaged condition again. The high vampire's arm promptly dropped limp as if he were a deboned chicken.

Shiv spat blood in the vampire's face and laughed. "Look at that: You're pretty fragile, after all."

The high vampire blinked in disbelief before he snarled and flicked at Shiv with his still-working hand. A crimson spell flashed into shape, and once again, the Deathless felt the insides of his body swell and burst. There was nothing he could do to stop this death. It was like his biology was compelled to revolt against him. A spray of red covered the high vampire, and he tasted Shiv's misted blood on his tongue. The monster licked his lips and shook his head. "I don't understand. He's just human..." Whatever else he was trying to

say died off in a hiss of deeper pain as Shiv started draining the vampire again. “What... How... Where?”

Toughness > 40

Physicality > 35

Reflexes > 28

Grappling Proficiency > 19

Parry > 3

Before he could notice the forming shadow sapping his vitality, a massive spearhead of ice burst through his chest, and the high vampire barely twisted left at the last moment and spared his heart from getting skewered. A pale, blue hue of mana clashed against the vampire’s red. Nomos stood behind her spear, tears running clear trails through the blood streaks she had wept earlier. The other elves lay convulsing amongst a mess of lesser vampire bodies. “You will pay for the murder of my—”

“Oh, be quiet, blood bag,” the high vampire growled. He conjured a spell pattern with his still-functional hand, and Nomos cried out in agony. Blood gushed out from her eyes, nose, ears, and mouth. Her bones crackled. Her flesh began to warp. Shiv looked on in fascination and horror as he continued draining the high vampire. Nomos was handling the vampire’s magic far better than he was. Was it because she had some kind of resistance skill? Or maybe it was her Physicality. The high vampire’s magic completely bypassed Shiv’s Toughness.

But... that made sense on a certain level. The vampire’s magic was kind of like Biomancy—it twisted the flesh and blood inside someone and used it against them. How could Shiv *out-tough* his own body? It didn’t make sense. No. He needed something to contend with the magic. And he was willing to die as many times as he could to get that skill.

As Nomos fell to a single knee, the high vampire contemptuously gripped her spear by the blade with two fingers. While this was happening, he channeled blood magic through himself, healing the wounds that had been dealt to his body. Yet, his regeneration was slow and incomplete. The high vampire shook his head as blood spilled out from his mouth. “How are you doing this? How are you affecting my vitality? Answer me!”

Nomos’s eyes were rolling up into her skull as she hemorrhaged. But still, she clung to life and consciousness, if only barely, refusing to let go of her spear and just drop. Instead of answering, she spat at the high vampire, and he let out a snarl and prepared to obliterate her.

Then, Shiv resurrected beside him—his shadowy cocoon hidden by the surrounding darkness. The high vampire’s eyes widened in surprise as the Deathless grabbed him by the back of the neck, tripped his leg, and drove him headfirst onto Nomos’s spear. “Missed me again, parasite.”

The high vampire let out a shout of pain as the spear passed deep into his left eye.

8 (II)

Biomancy

Before Shiv could get any further, the high vampire let out a primal roar, and magic blasted out from his form. His body shifted. His skin and red coat ripped apart as he turned fully into the nightmare shown in the bestiary, complete with animalistic features and leathery wings.

With a sweep of his arms and wings, both Shiv and Nomos were knocked backward. The Umbral was cast from her feet, toppling over where the rest of her sisters lay. Shiv dug his heels in and refused to fall. “Finally. Now you’re a vampire.”

“You mongrel! You deceitful bag of filth!” The high vampire didn’t look so regal and human anymore. He was well over three meters tall, his body a mix between bat, wolf, and man. An orb of mystical blood hovered over his right claw while he flexed his left. ***“I will peel you slowly this time. I will make sure you have no more tricks! No more means to escape! I don’t know***

how you survived the last two attacks, but this time... this time there will be no returning. No mockery.”

Shiv laughed and pointed his knife at the monster. “Give it your best shot. But it’s still not going to matter. I’ll keep coming back. I’ll keep coming even if it takes a hundred tries, a thousand tries, a million tries. I’ll keep coming, and I’ll be the only one standing in the end.”

The high vampire snarled and charged Shiv. Shiv charged him right back. He knew the vampire was far faster, so he accepted the fact that he was going to get hit. Even so, he caught a flash of the blow that tore a burning line of pain across his stomach. Shiv’s Reflexes were improving too. He found himself grinning even as he was launched off his feet and across the cavern once again.

The high vampire’s speed was ridiculous. The monster caught him before he even hit the other side and slammed him hard into the wall. Once more, the stones broke, but Shiv just let out a grunt of pain. The back of his head was going to swell if he didn’t die soon, but he was used to smashing against things by now. The high vampire stomped Shiv deeper into the wall before tearing into him with claw and fang. Though the Bloodspawn left brutal lacerations all over Shiv, he struggled to break the Deathless’s bones or do more than bruise his muscles.

“What spells are you using? What Blessing do you have?”

The Deathless just laughed in response and started hacking at the vampire with his mostly repaired and re-sharpened kitchen knife.

The high vampire failed to bear his dignity and let out a cry of rage. For every cut Shiv left on the transformed Bloodspawn, it delivered a hundred in return. Shiv jerked and bounced. His world was pain and injury, but he just kept stabbing. When his knife got close to breaking, he moved on to clinching with the monster, hammering it with elbows and knees.

“Stop it!” the high vampire snarled. He sounded like he was throwing a tantrum by this point. Shiv just headbutted the bastard as he enjoyed his merry time. Though it seemed like he was the one suffering and losing, only one of them was getting a real benefit out of this deathmatch. Finally, the high vampire grew tired of the farce. He planted a hand against Shiv’s neck and pushed him into the stone with his superior Physicality. The Deathless’s face was a mess of open wounds and broken teeth. But he was still grinning.

“What’s wrong? Need a breather? Break a nail?” With every insult Shiv gave, the high vampire seethed with growing rage. “You’re real sensitive, you know that? Blackedge would have eaten you alive. You wouldn’t have survived a single day of the hate I experienced.”

The high vampire gripped Shiv by the skull with both hands. **“I will show you HATE!”**

And then, it began channeling all of its considerable magic into him. Suddenly, existence was pain itself. Pain Shiv couldn’t describe. Pain beyond anything he had suffered before. It was like every cell in his body was being tortured, like he was being boiled alive from the inside while he was peeled apart from without. But despite the maelstrom of torment consuming him, part of his mind was still aware of what was happening—followed the magic as it flowed through his body and ruined his flesh.

With so much magic poured into him, there was no mistaking that it shared a semblance to Shiv’s inner warmth—the vitality that everyone had. However, its composition seemed more focused, and the spell used his very flesh as a catalyst as the high vampire channeled his mana into Shiv.

The faint bit of coherence in Shiv attempted something. He reached inward with his Vitality Drain Skill and tried to sap his own vitality in the hopes that he could pull something away from his skill. What he managed to do instead was brush something with his soul, and suddenly, he gained a glimpse of insight

he never had before. Magic was the manifestation of a *concept*. Biology was a concept. Blood was a concept. But it took something to make it real. It took mana, and as a Pathbearer now, he should be capable of channeling that. He just needed to focus and—

The high vampire ended Shiv's ruminations and suffering with a resounding howl as he turned Shiv into a smear against the wall. Not yet done, the high vampire proceeded to drain all the blood out from Shiv's mangled remains and drink it down. As he swallowed, the high vampire's bestial expression turned sour. "It's still just... just *human*. There's nothing special here. Nothing at all I can taste. So, how does he come back? How?"

But while the vampire despaired in confusion and mounting terror, Shiv cheered silently as a Revenant as his ordeal bore fruit.

Toughness > 42

Physicality > 38

Reflexes > 32

Grappling Proficiency > 21

Striking Proficiency > 11

Parry > 5

Skill Gained: Biomancy (Initiate) 1

Yes! Wait, just Biomancy? Shiv paused. That couldn't be right. The bestiary claimed the high vampires wielded unholy Blood Magic as their main discipline. Shiv expected something like Blood Magic Resistance or Magical

Resistance. Instead, he got something that he'd experienced many times in Blackedge. Something he could wield directly in combat. In fact, he could feel things around him right now. It was like he had a new sense added to his body. It was pretty weak so far, but he could feel the blood in the air—and the vampire's body nearby. Faintly, he was also aware of small mushrooms existing a meter beneath him. And then there were the small particles of life all around him.

As Shiv focused, he found that his Biomancy expressed itself as something between a projected *field* and a new limb he could use to feel at the world. There was an ever-so-faint crimson hue outlining his ghostly visage. It was something the high vampire failed to notice. It was something that filled Shiv with wonder.

Magic was something he had lived surrounded by his entire life. But it was denied to him. Denied because he was Pathless. He heard about mages talking about the first time they successfully *attuned* to a lore after they got their Path. Was this what it was like for them too? No, it couldn't be. He had to die over and over to earn his.

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It was all so... *sublime*. Was this how the Biomancers saw the world? Feeling every bit of life?

“Good riddance,” the high vampire murmured. ***“I think... I think I finally got him.”***

Shiv eyed the high vampire as the bloodsucker turned to walk away. Across the chamber, a faint blue glow was coming alight. Nomos was leaning on her spear, staggering toward the high vampire. Her body was badly wounded, but her spirit wasn't done. Shiv really didn't like her personally, but... he could appreciate someone who spat in the face of death. It wouldn't be right for her to die here like this, to a vampire of all creatures.

Oh, we're not done yet. Shiv rushed the high vampire from behind as a Revenant, but as he made contact with the monster, he hesitated. He felt the high vampire's body in greater detail than ever before. It was like he was attuned to the vampire's biology on a synchronous level. The sheer sensory overload was a bit much for Shiv, and he really didn't know what he was feeling. What he could tell, though, was that the high vampire had a lot of mana rushing through him all the time. Expanding out from him, too. From what Shiv could sense, the high vampire's Biomancy field expanded outward in all directions for well over ten meters like a dome. That was a colossal amount of mana compared to what Shiv had.

But he had one advantage: The high vampire didn't know Shiv was right behind him. And so Shiv reached out with his tiny Biomantic field, felt for the softest tissue he could find in the high vampire's skull, and *squeezed*.

"Nomos," the high vampire drawled. ***"How pathetic your end will—ah! Oh! Oh, Moonspawn, my eye!"*** He suddenly clutched at his face, cursing loudly as he knelt over. Shiv felt his *spirit* strain from the effort. As the Deathless started draining the high vampire's vitality as well, he realized that, despite awakening himself to a form of mana and a corresponding magic skill to go with it, he was *very* weak so far. He needed to level this skill a lot more. ***"What is this?"*** the vampire hissed. Suddenly, Shiv felt the creature's mana field shift, and the vampire's considerably stronger Biomancy pushed Shiv's influence out from his skull with spiteful ease.

Still, the monster was lost. ***"How... Where..."*** There was something comical in the way the monster was constantly looking about, trying to find the culprit hurting him. Shiv kept draining them, and he rapidly began to recover vitality. But he quickly realized there was one downside to having a form of mana—your enemy could feel your presence too.

Slowly, the high vampire's Biomancy field clenched around Shiv's. The Bloodspawn's eyes widened. ***"Impossible. There's... There's nothing..."*** Then, he noticed Shiv's shadow forming—and then breaking around the Deathless's returned body. Shiv met the wide-eyed stare of the monster with a sneer.

“No. You didn’t get me. And I told you earlier, we’re not done. Not for a hundred times. Not for a thousand. Not till I’m holding your heart in my hand.”

Before either of them could act, the tip of a frozen spear burst out from the high vampire’s chest. The monster’s eyes widened. He gurgled with blood and pain. Ice spread across his chest as sharp icicles exploded out from inside his body. Shiv promptly made the wound wider by driving his hand into the cleft made by the spear. His Biomancy screamed at him, flooding his mind with too many confusing sensations. It was hard to focus with his new sense, but ultimately, Shiv managed to pull the high vampire’s heart off the spear on which it was impaled.

There, before the bloodsucker’s disbelieving eyes, Shiv squeezed the heart and crushed it between his hands. Rather than the black blood of the lesser vampires, the high vampire’s heart leaked with glowing red ichor. Slowly, the high vampire blinked twice, its monstrous jaw opening and closing. ***“What... are you...”***

“Persistent,” Shiv said.

He felt the vampire’s immense magic field grip at him for a final time, but then his mana faded, and he collapsed on the ground with a final gasp. Shiv chuckled. At the crushed heart. At the look on the vampire’s face. And at Nomos. Her spear lit the space between them, and now that the high vampire was dead, she held it at him.

“I... I have the same question,” she said, swallowing back mouthfuls of blood. Shiv *knew* it was blood—he could feel some of the damage inside her. Some many terrible injuries.

“Broken Moon,” Shiv muttered. “How are you still standing?”

She shook her head and gritted her teeth. “No... I won’t be... distracted... Who are you... *What* are you? I saw you die... over and over... I saw... I saw...” Then her eyes rolled over, and she dropped. Shiv caught her before she could fall face-first into the high vampire’s blood. He didn’t need her turning after all this.

“Nomos? Nomos?” Shiv stared at her. Her eyebrows fluttered, and he used his Biomancy to sense the damage inside her. He felt like a near-sighted man trying to put together a picture of a house. He had to guide his senses from place to place, feeling what was broken. Frankly, a lot was broken. Her blood vessels were shredded, her bones were shattered, her muscles had—there were massive growths spreading through parts of her. They were still growing. Were those cancers? Did Shiv just find some tumors?

He looked at her in disbelief. “How are you even still felling alive?” And why didn’t the high vampire just pop her with Biomancy?

He tried to do something to help her. Shiv channeled his Biomatic mana into her body, hoping to keep her blood flowing at least, but felt his field bounce off from inside her. He tried again, and it was like grinding his Biomancy against a steel wall. *She has magical resistance of some kind.*

Shiv frowned slightly. He wondered how she got that. It would have been useful for him. But then again, he wasn’t going to complain about Biomancy. He continued monitoring her body using his magical skill. Her breaths were growing weaker as her heart began to slow. He patted her body, looking for a potion of some kind, but... well, that would just make the cancer worse.

She needed a Biomancer. One strong enough to push through her resistance and save her. That wasn’t Shiv right now.

Slowly, her eyes opened, and she let out a breath.

“Hey, you got anything on you that can heal you without making your cancers worse?” Shiv winced. That was a blunt thing to say to a dying person, but he didn’t have a better idea.

She blinked a few times and coughed. “N-no. I’m... No chance.” She swallowed as she stared at Shiv. Her hands shook as she reached behind her hip, and then she held something up to him. It was a rough stone dagger of some kind, with deeply carved grooves running along the blade, and a gem embedded in the pommel. “Cage... of Valor Thann... You wanted to see...”

Shiv didn’t know what to say. “I... We can wait with that. Let’s try to fix you up first.”

Nomos shook her head. “No. I’m done. I’m already dead. Too late for me. Too late for all of us... But you... You can’t... Promise me... need your help. Take the dagger... home... to Weave. To the... Weaveresses... To the Composer... Promise me! Promise...” She nearly blacked out again, and Shiv took the dagger from her before she could drop it. He felt a strange presence inside the dagger, but focused on doing what he could for Nomos first.

“Hey, Nomos. I—I promise. I’ll go take the dagger back. But I... don’t really know where to go. I need to get out of here.”

She closed her eyes as she spoke her last words. “Compass... on me... take... take everything... take... spear...” She then opened her eyes one final time as she whispered: “Myrr.”

And then she was gone. Her heart stopped. Her blood stilled. Her tale ended.

There, in the lap of a complete stranger from the surface, Sister Nomos of the Arachnae Order finished her time on Integrated Earth.

Shiv stared at her for a long moment. Then he sighed. He felt sour, despite all he had gained. He looked at the other elves and realized they were still as well. "Dammit."

Death wasn't a problem for him, but for others... He needed to die more. Advance his skills. That was the only way he could have a say in a battle like this. As he prepared to carry Nomos back over to her comrades, he heard someone speak aloud.

"Nomos? Is that you? Have you returned to finish our chat? Are you finally going to let me out of this miserable cage? Nomos? Nomos!" Shiv looked around, startled by the voice. But there was no one there. *"I know you're there, Nomos. I can feel you holding me. I can feel that much still, at least."*

Slowly, Shiv looked down at his new dagger. He blinked. "Huh."