

PATH OF THE DEATHLESS (BOOK 2 COMPLETED)

Path of the Deathless (Book 2 Completed) #9 (I) Dagger - Read Path of the Deathless (Book 2 Completed) 9 (I) Dagger

What can be said about the He Who Halts Eternity: Valor Thann?

Oh, yes, dear reader. Valor Thann is not some myth made by the Pathless and the enslaved to comfort themselves, to imagine the undying lords of the Abyssal Lands also having someone they fear. He is real. I have met him, and though he remains temporarily absent, the great hero will return!

Though the world might seem unjust and sometimes foul, I want you to take heart: The flames of justice burn yet. Dimly, but still do they burn. For though the tyrants are many and monsters lurk around every corner, consequence might yet find them, for one still seeks to make right what has been set wrong.

-He Who Halts Eternity: Valor Thann

9 (I)

Dagger

"Hello," Shiv said, eyeing the stone dagger in his hand curiously. This was the second time that day he found himself talking to what he assumed to be an inanimate object. The presence he felt with the dagger earlier stirred, as if whatever was inside could sense him. "Can you hear me?"

"*You are not Nomos,*" the dagger said. Their voice was masculine, their tone careful and measured. The speaker pronounced each syllable with such fine focus that they reminded Shiv of the orators that came to speak and debate in Blackedge's public forums. He would have liked to hear those speakers in more detail, but he had to do it in shadows or from afar. People left when he approached. "*Who are you? And where is Nomos?*"

Shiv gave the fallen Umbral a final look and shook his head. He didn't see a point in lying. "She died. So did the others. A high vampire attacked us. I was..." Shiv kept his part in the story vague. "I was lost when they found me, and they were about to lead me out. I did what I could to help them survive the attack, but the high vampire was..."

"*Too much for them?*" the speaker finished with a weary sigh.

“Yeah,” Shiv answered. “But me and Nomos managed to finish the felling bastard off before the fight was done. I crushed his heart in front of him. The Umbrals didn’t die easy deaths.”

The speaker snorted at that. *“Ah. I appreciate your efforts at adding a dash of glory to this brutal butchery, but dead is dead to me, I’m afraid. That is the nature of life for most, fleeting as it is. The sisters struggled. The sisters fought. The sisters died. I will remember their efforts—and perhaps you will as well—but that is faint consolation for them now.”*

Of everything he expected the dagger to say, this wasn’t it. The words weren’t cruel, but they were casually cold and grimly accepting of the world’s depravities. “I think the way we die still matters. It shows who we are in the end. Sometimes, that’s the only thing the world can’t take from us.”

The dagger let out a laugh. *“Ah, you dabble slightly in the thoughts of the overman, don’t you?”*

“Overman?”

“A philosophy of thought. That the true manifestation of meaning in an ultimately meaningless world can be achieved when one grinds their will against the uncaringness of existence and asserts themselves. The man in the arena, so to speak.”

“I’m not really much of a philosopher. Never found all those words interesting. It’s like saying a lot but meaning very little to me sometimes. The words sounded pretty, though.”

Once more, the blade chuckled. *“Ah, I see. Yes, reading poor works does demoralize a person from seeking more of the philosophies. But that can be changed. Ah. Where are my manners? I am Valor Thann. I have many names, but this is the one I prefer above all others. I assure you: Whatever you heard of me is greatly embellished, for the legend is often greater than the man, but truth, likewise, is stranger than fiction.”*

This might be the most well-spoken dagger Shiv ever held. Well, it was also the only speaking dagger he ever held, so that technically also made it the *least* well-spoken. But still, it felt like there was a scholar trapped somewhere in the blade. “I’m Shiv,” the Deathless began. “That’s my name.”

“Just Shiv?”

“It’s something I picked for myself. I won’t answer to anything else.”

“I understand. And I can respect that. Well, Shiv. It seems we are both in a predicament. You sound like you are lost. And the fact that you haven’t told me more about yourself—

or which of the Five Fallen Faiths you are aligned with—makes me believe that you do not trust me. I cannot blame you. The stories of me are many, after all.”

Shiv didn't know any stories about any Valor Thann, but he nodded along. Then he stopped, feeling rather silly. The blade could hear him, but it didn't have eyes. It probably couldn't see him... Could it? “Yeah. Predicament might be right. But, uh... I took a bad fall before getting lost down here, and my memory isn't what it is was.

“Oh. That's not good. Have you experienced any seizures? Fallen unconscious randomly recently? How long ago was this fall?”

“Fell about a day ago. And no, I'm mostly fine.”

“Hm. You're quite fortunate. Brain damage and internal bleeding require the delicate touch of a skilled Biomancer to mend.”

Shiv pressed his lips together. Well, he was a Biomancer now, just nowhere near a skilled one. He warred internally over letting the blade know about his new skill, but he guessed that it couldn't do much harm. “I am a Biomancer. Just... very recent. It's a new skill.”

“Congratulations. Attuning your soul to a lore of magic usually takes significant exposure. Be proud of this accomplishment.”

And Shiv was. He smiled slightly at the dagger. “Thanks. You know, you're one of the nicer people I've talked to in the past day or so. It's kind of strange that you're a knife.”

“Oh, no, I'm not the knife. I'm merely trapped inside this relic. Caged, if you will. Hence the title ‘Cage of Valor Thann.’”

Did you know this text is from a different site? Read the official version to support the creator.

Now Shiv was curious. “How does someone get caged in a knife?”

“Now that is something I would ask you not to pry into. Yet. Just as you have been vague about your past, so must I. There are some bits of paranoia that remain warranted between us, no?”

That was understandable for Shiv. It was surprising how easy and enjoyable a conversation with someone was when they weren't screaming for you to get away from them, shouting at you to cook faster, or sneering at you for being born wrong. Apparently, there were still polite people left in the world. “Alright. Well. It's been fine to meet you, Valor, but I think we need to get moving.”

“Quite. The presence of a high vampire means that a coven is likely in the area. A coven means that their rivals are nearby. We should be gone from here indeed.”

A feeling of haste filled Shiv. He looked down at Nomos’s body and winced. “Doesn’t feel too right to just leave the Umbrals here. I don’t think I can burn them either—”

“Don’t do that!” Valor almost yelled. *“They will take grave offense at being condemned to the light. Such a thing is reserved for traitors and those who commit grave sins.”*

Shiv paused. Most people who died at Blackedge were cremated and cast to the winds. That was supposed to be a great honor, signifying freedom. “Really?”

“Indeed. You must have fallen hard or far to be ignorant of this.”

The Deathless winced. His lack of knowledge was getting in the way of things. The more he spoke to Valor, the more he revealed what he didn’t know. “I—yeah, sorry. Thanks for stopping me from... heresy.”

“You are quite welcome. Now. Do you have a weapon capable of Cryomancy? Or, if you are blessed to be so talented, are a Cryomancer yourself? It’s not the same as the Composer’s Stillfrost, but it will be close enough that the sisterhood will not take offense.”

“No. Sorry. I just got Bio—wait.” Shiv looked to Nomos’s spear lying nearby. Its tip was still glowing. “I can try to use Nomos’s spear. That channeled frost earlier, but I don’t know if it can still do magic without Nomos.”

A pause came from inside the dagger. *“Of course it can. An enchanted weapon will continue to bear its invested mana unless it is extracted by a Pathbearer sharing similar skills.”* There was no rancor in Valor’s voice, but he did sound rather surprised Shiv didn’t know this.

A faint flush of embarrassment came over Shiv. “Yeah, you’re going to have to help me out here with this. The whole magic thing is new to me.” He paused. “So is being a Pathbearer, to be honest.”

“Truly? You only recently found your Path? Earned or bestowed—wait, I apologize. Don’t answer that, it’s very private. Don’t tell me of your Path yet unless you feel like you trust me, either. But still, to face a high vampire so soon...”

“I got a lot of Toughness. And the little bit of Biomancy helped too.”

“Yes. Quite remarkable.” There was a tinge of doubt in Valor’s voice, but the man within the dagger moved on. *“Now, what you should do first is take what you need from the fallen Umbrals. You can claim their weapons and general equipment without much issue, but I would recommend that you leave their armor and bodies generally*

unchanged if you can. Bodies are sacred to the Umbrals; they consider their physical vessels to be gifts meant for the Composer—vessels of rebirth.”

Shiv nodded. “Alright. Got it.”

He picked Nomos up and placed her in a corner. He put the other three fallen Umbrals beside her. Shiv felt a bit bad about Utti, though. “Hey, Valor, one of the Umbrals got... *obliterated* by the high vampire. Is that going to be a problem?”

“Oh. That is a pity. The Composer will mourn for that sister twice over. But there is nothing for it now.”

The Deathless proceeded with his task. The first thing he took from the Umbrals was their equipment rigs. He strapped three different belts lined with containers, pouches, and empty quivers over himself. He found a half-finished Potion of Regeneration inside one—or at least one that glowed the same way. They also carried strange skeletal keys, an assortment of camping equipment, utility knives, and bits of rough-looking jerky. It was a paltry haul on the utility side, and Shiv wondered if they were lacking supplies.

“Take their brooches and leave them in random locations when you go,” Valor suddenly said. *“The high vampire found you suddenly, yes? The Bloodspawn just appeared?”*

Shiv paused. “Yeah. Didn’t even hear him and the lesser vampires until they were right in front of us.”

“Then assume that local communications have been compromised. The Court of the First Blood might very well have a Diviner tracking you as we speak.”

Something inside Shiv dropped a bit. Diviners could do that? Broken Moon, there was a lot he didn’t know—damn Roland Arrow for keeping him restrained all his life. Shiv wondered how much he could have known if he had just been allowed the information most people had while he was growing up. He paused at that thought. He considered the bestiary’s details on the high vampire, and frowned. Maybe most people didn’t know that much either.

For all that was written about the vampire’s foul blood magic, what he faced was Biomancy—the skill he got from surviving the effects over and over again was Biomancy.

Propaganda or genuine ignorance? Shiv wondered. Could be both by this point. He knew the Republic lied about plenty of things—like how there were no homeless in its kingdom. Shiv definitely didn’t have a home for a good few years. He got very good at learning which alleys had dumpsters filled with the freshest food, and which ones blunted the wind the most during winter.

Shiv collected the brooches and managed to find a revolving metal-ringed mechanism holding a shifting pointer at its core. The needle pointed away from him and toward a wall, and Shiv assumed this to be the compass Nomos was talking about. Useful, but he still didn't know what he was walking into or who he was supposed to take this to. *Weaveresses*. Broken Moon, he had a lot to learn.

Now, for the best part of the looting—the *weapons*. He left Nomos's spear for last, and went over what the others had first. Utti's bow had shattered in half when she burst, unfortunately, so that was useless. He managed to find three of her daggers and examined their quality. He was astonished to find that they were made from some kind of glowing blue crystal, and the edges were sharp enough to sink clean through rock. It still felt a bit brittle, though. Best be careful when using these in combat.

He found a shortsword on the Umbral he couldn't tell was male or female, but it seemed like a pretty typical shortsword. Not bad. Well-made even. Steel from the feeling. A shortsword was better than having no sword. Shiv faintly recalled the Umbral having a longsword as well, but couldn't find it for the life of him. The last Umbral beside Nomos had a mace. Shiv let out a grunt of surprised effort when he tried to pick it up.

Equipment Obtained: [The Pendulum of Burdens]

Tier: Initiate

Condition: Severely Damaged

Composition: Moonsteel

Enchantments > Mass-Storing

It felt like he was carrying something that weighed as much as the angler beast from earlier in his hands. Shiv took an awkward step as he trudged about. That Umbral's Physicality must have been pretty high for an Initiate to swing this. Shiv thought he might be able to fling this about, but it mostly just slowed him. It was also kind of bent and cracked all over. It was a shame, but he left it with the Umbral.

Movement was life, stillness was death. And Shiv intended to make his enemies work to kill him, even if dying was to his benefit.

Finally, there was Nomos's spear, and as he picked it up, he felt a surge of coldness rush up his hands.

Equipment Obtained: [The Scorn of Umetia]

Tier: Adept

Condition: Damaged

Composition: Nightglass

Enchantments > Cryomancy 30

9 (II)

Dagger

Shiv examined Nomos's spear. It was pretty well-balanced. The tip was some kind of glass—just like the daggers—and he could see a slight crack running along the top of the blade. A coldness trembled within the weapon, and Shiv felt that almost-heat again—what he knew now to be an ambient mana field.

On a whim, he decided to ask Valor about this, wondering what the dagger might tell him. "Valor. Question: Is magic tied to one's vitality? I know it's a strange question but—"

"Not a strange question at all. Vitality and mana are parts of the same structure. Well, vitality is... It is like the state of one's current existence—the health of your soul, so to speak. Most models of the soul include it as the pillar holding up the mind and serving as a sort of membrane for your soul. Magic, in its simplest form, then, is when a specific existential concept is imprinted deep enough on your mind that it seeps into your soul and causes something akin to another layer to grow over your vitality. Hence, most people view their magic as a kind of field or limb."

"Yeah," Shiv said, nodding. "That's exactly how it felt when I—when I faced the high vampire. His field was pretty massive, though."

"Indeed. It must have taken great fortune or skill for you to survive. Biomancy can be as insidious as it is helpful. Toughness offers little resistance when it is your own body that betrays you."

Shiv learned that in detail the hard way. Over and over. But that was also how he probably got Biomancy imprinted on him. That made him consider something: If he tasted death through the other forms of magic, could he imprint on those as well? Was there a limit? “How many magic skills can someone have?”

“There isn’t technically a limit to what can be attuned to one’s soul, but time is a major factor. Time, focus, and resources. Attunement can be quite difficult, as you might be able to attest, and growing your skills is a major commitment as well. Hence, this is why most people choose to focus their efforts, seeking to become Master-Tier in specific areas before they advance elsewhere.”

“Makes sense,” Shiv said. And it was also good for him. He might just be able to attune and level all the different magics. The Deathless was awash in questions now. After a few minutes with Valor, he learned more than he had over the years on Blackedge. Despite all the surrounding death, he couldn’t help but feel happier than ever.

He might be trapped in the Abyss for now, but his spirit was running free.

He wanted to ask the dagger even more things, but he decided to wait until he finished matters here and found a safer place. If Valor was right, he was probably going to run into another high vampire if he stayed. Maybe more. Shiv wondered if he could win that fight eventually—but considering how the high vampire he just killed figured out his great secret by the end, Shiv could see a situation where they focused on incapacitating him rather than killing him.

That wouldn’t end well.

As he nudged each of the Umbrals next to each other, he picked up Nomos’s spear with one hand. He knew there was magic expanding out from it, but it

wasn't his. He wondered how he could channel the ice. It was also awkward holding it in one hand, as his chef's knife was practically fused to his right palm. Shiv briefly unequipped the kitchen knife and assumed the stance he had watched Nomos take earlier.

Knife fighting came easy after a lifetime in the kitchen, on the streets, and murdering lesser vampires from behind. A spear was a formal weapon, though, and Shiv had no training in that.

"Valor. Final question before we go: I got Nomos's spear, but... how do I use it? The magic inside it."

"How do you use your own Biomancy?"

"Focus and intent?"

"Such is the same. Just focus on the spear. Tell it what you want it to do with your mind, as magic is born of the mind, after all. If what you desire is possible, well-defined, and within the invested skill's limits, it will be done."

Shiv took a breath and did just that. He imagined thrusting out like Nomos did, but rather than launching a wave of stabbing icicles, he desired a sheath of frost to encase the Umbrals. He stabbed. The tip of his new spear flared with magical radiance, and suddenly the fallen elves were covered by a dense layer of frost, protected from the hardness of the world and preserved in their final moments.

Shiv let out a breath as the tip of his new spear faded back to dimness. "Nice."

This was going to change a few things for him.

He left immediately after that—but not before splattering the high vampire's body with a massive slab of ice. Shiv chuckled as he walked away. Who said vengeance left one feeling empty? He was having the time of his life.

Using the spear to light his way in place of his now lost torch, Shiv moved along the walls with spear in one hand and compass in the other. He found a winding tunnel leading up and out from the caverns he was in. After what felt like ten minutes of twisting about, he came out into a wider set of tunnels. The ground turned flatter beneath his feet. Rather than standing on jutting stones with divots and uneven surfaces, he was walking over even—albeit cracked—ground.

Here, he chucked the first brooch, doing as Valor recommended.

As he looked about some more, he narrowed his eyes in suspicion. There was broken glass in some places. He passed through what looked like a damp room filled with rusted lockers. As he came out, he found himself walking along a strange, brutally mangled length of metal that vaguely resembled a carriage.

“Did someone build and abandon this place? It almost feels like the old city's ruins.”

“Because it was part of the ruins,” Valor said, confirming Shiv's suspicions. *“The city of Los Angeles. The sunken city. The split city. Once a great city, before this age of magic and mystery. The System may have made us Pathbearers. Legends unto ourselves. But I suspect mankind was great together once. Great even without mana and skills.”*

“How did they survive?” Shiv said, wondering how someone could even endure in a world where they couldn’t get stronger through effort. Even at his most desperate, at his lowest, a skill advancement ignited something in him. Made him keep going, made him want more.

“Together, I suspect. And with the help of the ancient automata. It seems the humans and machines had been together for a long time. Sibling races, if I were to guess. Or maybe more parent and child.”

A case of literary theft: this tale is not rightfully on Amazon; if you see it, report the violation.

Shiv continued walking as he stared at the long metal carriage that didn’t seem to end. “Did some great lord ride these carriages underground?”

“The underrail.”

“What?”

“The ancients called it the underrail. And from the old techno-texts I’ve seen, it wasn’t just for lords, but everyone.”

“Everyone?” Shiv said. He tried to imagine a world where everyone got to experience comfort and wonder. His mind couldn’t manage it. “It sounds like they cared about each other a lot. More than we do right now.”

“Perhaps so.”

Shiv kept walking for a while, doing his best to stay vigilant and careful. The good thing about the spear: Shiv could make it go dark at any time he wanted. After he left the dilapidated underrail carriage behind, he continued his journey

through the strange, artificial tunnel for what felt like a good few hours. He only made a brief stop once to collect some more of those glowing mushrooms.

“Hey, Valor. I got a question. The spear responds to me pretty well, but I managed to get an angler beast’s stalk earlier. It could shoot a beam when it was still connected to the monster, but I couldn’t get it to do anything while I had it.”

“Oh, you speak of a cave biter. Hm. You must have cut the stalk off the head of an infant.”

“What? That was a *baby*?” Shiv paused. He was imagining killing and eating the cave biter’s young—only to discover it was the young. “Just how big do they get?”

“Some lords of the abyss use them to carry merchant towns.”

“Merchant *towns*?” Shiv hissed. He tried to imagine a cave biter carrying all of Blackedge on its back—how large and mighty the creature would have to be. That was... terrifying. But then the Deathless remembered the vicar. The skeletal serpent showed an awesome display of magic Shiv didn’t even think possible. There was so much he didn’t know, so much he was learning.

Broken Moon, life can be fun when you're free to explore, Shiv thought with a faint smile.

“Well, anyway, the answer to your question is that the eye-stalk doesn’t have any mana in it. Not unless someone manages to invest part of their mana within the severed organ, which... There are better conduits for magic, frankly.”

“Well. I look forward to cutting the stalk off an adult someday,” Shiv said with a grim smile.

“That’s a very bloodthirsty statement, Shiv. Are you alright?”

“The cave biter tried to eat me.”

“Ah. Well. That explains it. I recommend you do not take too much offense at the creatures. Hunger and aggression are almost all they know. Such was the way the System changed most of them. Not all monsters live long enough to develop functional sapience.”

Once again, Shiv felt the ground vanish from under him. “Sapience? They can think?”

“Some. If they live long enough. The large, adult cave biters are sometimes merchant lords in their own right. The ones that managed to avoid an early Enslavement Curse, that is.”

The Deathless couldn’t help but laugh. “That’s... That’s awesome. Everything is incredible. The world is great.”

“And that is a remarkably positive attitude to have about life. Why, if more people thought like you—” Valor paused. *“You’re surprisingly resilient, aren’t you, Shiv? You seem to have handled the deaths of the Umbrals quite well.”*

Shiv shrugged. “A shame they died. Didn’t know them that well. Did what I could. Also, they were kind of mean to me.”

“Ah. Do not blame them, either. Most Umbrals bear a nightmarish history. Theirs is a tale of woe and salvation. Such is why they are so loyal to the

Composer and the Weaveresses. They would still be little more than slaves for the other faiths otherwise. I say this for everyone but Nomos. It is wrong to speak ill of the dead, but her issue was that she had a truly dreadful personality.”

“Yeah, I kind of got a taste of that.” Shiv shook his head. Out of everyone, the nicest person he'd met so far was someone trapped inside a dagger. This was all feeling like some kind of fever dream—a really nice fever dream.

Remembering Georges and how Blackedge was under attack reduced Shiv's enthusiasm by a bit. He didn't much like most people there, but he still needed to grow more powerful and help with the war. Mainly because he wanted to rub his ascension in their faces. Especially Roland Arrow. He always knew he wasn't who they feared, and that he was his own person.

The glory of his imagined return and everyone begging him for forgiveness was interrupted as he finally came to a wide-open exit. As he carefully stepped out from the tunnel, a scene of something magnificent unveiled itself before him.

He looked up to find brilliant, bioluminescent veins, the brightness comparable to that offered by the fragments of the broken moon, spreading all across the distant ceiling of the massive cavern. And it just kept going, even past the horizon. It was like a trail of flowing stars running through the night sky. Except he was still underground. Except the Abyss was supposed to be a nightmarish realm that only housed monsters and terrors.

Consulting his compass, he found it directing him forward into a dense forest of... Were those giant mushrooms? Trailing mycelia undulated through colossal fungi rising before him, each one towering higher than a normal residential cluster on Blackedge. It was like he was discovering wonder with every step he took. If things kept up this way, he would feel too indebted to the raven-helmed stranger for throwing him off Blackedge.

Maybe Shiv might spare the tainted bastard. Just for letting him experience this. That didn't mean Shiv wasn't going to beat them within an inch of their life and take all their weapons and armor, though. Mercy didn't come for free, and Shiv was a very materialistic Pathbearer.

"Shiv, are you out of the underrail tunnels yet?"

"Yeah," Shiv breathed as he strode toward the large fungi, feasting his eyes on everything. "I'm—I'm in a wide-open place now. Like a mushroom forest."

A beat followed. *"Ah. Not good. Nomos must have been in a terrible hurry to set a route through here."*

Shiv stopped. "What? What's wrong with this place? It looks really peaceful. It might be the most peaceful place—"

"Because Moonblood Sprawl is home to over a dozen colonies of feral Weaver nests. Shiv, listen very close to me: You need to—"

Something buried itself in Shiv's back before he could finish the sentence. A stiletto of pain burrowed deep through his lower back before stopping dead against his spine. Shiv let out a surprised shout of pain as he found himself lifted off the ground.

"Shiv? Shiv?" Valor called out, sounding worried.

Shiv somehow kept a grip on his spear even as the blade in his back twisted upward. He heard a chittering sound behind him, and when he turned, eight large black eyes greeted him. Four twitching mandibles flicked bubbling acid toward his body. Eight horrible, clawed hands clamped down his body, and

the monster that seized him spread four pitch-black wings as it started rising into the air.

It was vaguely humanoid, but mostly resembled something between a wasp and one of those large, hairy spiders that hid in the city ruins sometimes, and every part of Shiv recoiled in disgust. “I’m... I’ll be back...” he said to Valor, ignoring the stone dagger’s calls. Shiv *felt* a surging paralytic flood his body before his muscles went numb. His Biomancy gave him an intense sense of how it was rushing through his bloodstream and burning through his nerves.

His Toughness combated the venom quite well, but Shiv was still starting to feel lightheaded. He used his paltry magic field to *hold* the poison in place as best he could before turning the spear’s tip at himself.

He grinned at the thing he guessed to be a *feral weaver*. “Hey. Let me show you what it takes to drive a stinger all the way through someone.”

And with a surge of intent, a long needle of frost spiked straight through Shiv’s chest and ran the weaver through as well.