

Deathless 101

Chapter 101 (I) Feast [I]

It is beautiful how the smallest thing can bring down a giant.

Consider how minute a virus is, how delightful, how delicate. A slight change in temperature could kill it so easily, a slight shift in the way your biology works might see it crushed dead by the white cells in your blood. So vulnerable, yet so deadly.

If the virus sinks in, when it grips you, it can subvert the entire structure of your blood, of your organs, of your very flesh from within, and that's the beautiful thing. You cannot resist this with Toughness. Perhaps a more robust body is harder to infect, but any Biomancer who knows what they are doing can reach deeper, can reach beyond the limits of natural immunity. And so, when they touch that point, they can turn the body against itself. They can make things that kill so many; they can weave poisons born of one's own cells. That is the beauty of a virus. It is like a code in a certain sense, a command for your body to betray itself, and that is what we are going to learn today.

Oh dear subject, dear poor unfortunate victim, the things I will bestow upon you will be exquisite. I have not used this on anyone else. Be honored and rejoice, for you are the first to sample these delectable sufferings.

-Odes of Blood and Flesh, Sculptor Ekkihurst

Cade Morgan clutched his injured arm and ducked into a tent that wasn't his. After a brief moment of pretending to grimace, he staggered towards the other side of the tent, where a flap hung half undone. Beyond the flap was his destination—a secret place beyond the notice of the new Gate Lord.

Cade's breath came fast. His veins were surging with cold terror and rushing adrenaline. He wasn't sure about this. He wasn't sure about anything anymore, but he knew one thing. If he didn't act, then someone else would, and he'd rather take the chance than live beneath the heel of the three new tyrants.

Cade was done. Done with Gate Lords. Done with the Abyss. Done with all of it. He was gonna go back to the surface. He was gonna go find a nice, proper job. He was gonna retire for good. But to do that, he needed to escape. He needed out. But he wanted out as a Master-Tier. Adepts were a dime a dozen. On the surface, in the Abyss, anywhere. Adepts were the core and the meat, and the meat did the dying. Cade was done doing the dying. He was done with all this mercenary shit, to be honest.

Before he went through, he looked around. His heart was pounding hard. At any moment, he expected the pale-eyed monster to reappear. The Deathclad. Morgan made the mistake of looking into the man's eyes earlier. There was something wrong with his gaze.

Cade had faced down just about everything during his time as a mercenary. Demons, dimensionals, monsters, you name it. He charged down an orc once.

But Shiv—

A wail sounded from a nearby tent, and Morgan shuddered. That was Trish, the only survivor during the first attempt on the new Gate Lord's life. They tried. They didn't get far. Shiv made sure of that. She returned, covered in the blood of her own people, and now her maddened shrieks were mingled among the moans of the sick and spent. And that was the last push Cade needed. He pushed through the tent. He couldn't stay here. He couldn't handle the growing sickness and misery. Waiting here was just going to get him killed. If not by the Gate Lord during a purge, then Lord Scorn when he finally acted to take his gate back.

As he slipped through the half-open flaps, he found himself in another place altogether. A small, cramped room occupied by one other person greeted him. This place was a minor dimension, a Category One dimension disguised as a tent. And it belonged to another Pathbearer named Takeyama. They'd worked together on some other jobs. Enough to have built some rapport. Enough to know what the other could do. She came to him first, passing him a braille note while the Deathclad was talking to the rest of the mercs.

"Come find me on the other side of my tent. I might have a solution to our mutual problem." Those were her words, and Cade was more than desperate enough to follow through.

"Welcome," Takeyama said. "Were you noticed?"

"Don't think so. Fuckin' hope not. But seeing as I'm not dead..."

Takeyama was one of the few surviving virology Biomancers left within the gate. But she hid those skills from others. Most people just thought she had a thing for poisons and venoms in combat—was actually an assassin. The same people were confused about Cade's abilities as well. They thought he was some kind of heavy vanguard when he was actually an engineer specializing in bomb crafting. Together... They just might have a chance of ending the Gate Lord and escaping from this rathole instead of being burned alive.

"Good," she replied. Takeyama gestured behind her. A workshop was set up, one with several tools that Morgan needed. Some raw materials that had been scavenged during their flight to the Surface Gateway, and a shelf filled with books and schematics. It wasn't much, but there were enough components to have him make a particularly concentrated bomb.

Across the workbench was Takeyama's station. There were a bunch of tubes, flasks, beakers, and then there were a few transparent containers slotted into the walls filled with strange tissues and biological

fluids. It was kind of unnerving, but Biomancers were always like that. They needed to prod different kinds of organic tissue to figure things out. She also had a set of diagrams she was looking through, and right now she seemed to be digging through pages, studying things connected to the human nervous system, if the text was to be believed.

“We might need to forage for more supplies,” Takeyama mumbled as she flipped through her book. “We will need a stronger explosive for the Gate Lord. But before that, I am planning to develop a paralytic agent for the Deathclad first. He is a Biomancer as well, so I am considering a very subtle—”

A patch of space tore open. Takeyama’s head exploded. The Biomancer’s death was so sudden that Morgan barely reacted in time. There was a gulf in space before him. A dimensional rift opened just in front of Takeyama’s face. Her skull was gone. She dropped, her body twitching beside a dimensional arrow embedded in the ground.

Cade’s mouth fell open. His face was coated in Takeyama’s brain matter. Then, something slipped out from the rift and seized him. Something he couldn’t see, couldn’t feel, but that clutched his mind all the same. Cade felt his Magical Resistance shatter entirely as he let out a strangled cry. He tried to fight back, but the very thought was ripped out of him by an unknowable power.

“...I’m sure. It’s just those two. They aren’t connected to the last group.” The voice was cold and husky. A woman’s voice. A—Cade felt her notice him. “I’m going to put him in a coma for now, like the other containable threats. Yes, Adam. Killing the virologist was absolutely necessary. We can find and detect a bomb. We cannot stop a plague from tearing through this place. She was too much of a threat to be left alive.”

No-no! No! Wait! Wait! Wait! Cade cried out, and then he was severed, severed from his own body and trapped within his own mind. In the dark of his subconsciousness, Morgan screamed. But then, after a few seconds, he sank into a blessed silence and knew nothing for a while.

"And that's another group," Adam said with a sigh. He lowered his bow and glared down from on high beside the mana core. Next to him, Uva hovered upon her shield. They shared a look of mutual distaste. The ground she covered was larger than Adam's. Her mana strands were going everywhere, interfacing with as many minds as she could, scouring for any hint of potential betrayal.

They'd killed eight additional Pathbearers so far. Those fell into the unacceptable risk category. Uva had silenced ten more, cast into comas and marked for future detainment. To be honest, Adam wasn't sure how he felt about this whole thing. He understood the need for preventative measures, but he felt more like a conquering tyrant than a liberating Gate Lord. That being said, he was still Gate Lord for a reason. By acceptance gained through respect or fear, the survivors still accepted his authority. Even if some were trying to kill him.

"Uva," Adam asked, unable to restrain the question burning his insides. "Was killing the virologist really necessary?"

"Very," she replied. "As was making sure there was no one else working with her."

"Couldn't you have..."

"Put her in a coma too? Perhaps. But if I am killed or incapacitated at any point and the gate becomes something you or Shiv have to manage, what happens when someone like that wakes up? Or if we are attacked, and they gain a moment of opportunity to strike at our underside."

Adam saw the logic, but it felt rather brutal.

"It is brutal," Uva agreed. "But it is also necessary. This is a lesson taught to Weave over our years of survival. Allowing something terrible to happen because you could not weigh your discomfort and temper your actions with wisdom is a failure. And in the worst cases, a sin. We do not need to be cruel. But we must be decisive now. We may make mistakes. We likely will. But we must do everything we can to achieve the best results we can."

The Gate Lord grimaced. For the first time, he felt the weight of rulership press against his shoulders. Sometimes, his desired outcome ran hard and was counter to many people's. "I just wish it didn't need to be this way..."

The Umbral Psychomancer regarded him, and her own expression went from cold and focused to pensive. Her Psychomancy was sprawling. It wove across the last remaining district like a lattice or web. She was also scouting through the Owl's mind as she continued her monitoring duties. Parallel Thinking was a very useful skill. Adam had been trying to develop it. He even asked Uva for advice on why she was up here, giving him the part of her attention rather than everyone below.

She also knew he liked talking in person, hence the in-person aspect. Frankly, with how accommodating and effective Uva was, Adam wondered if she would have been the better Gate Lord.

"No," she said. "Leadership is more than just policy or decisions. Leaders are someone people can idolize. Someone that can command attention and rouse the public. Good leaders must care. And compared to you, my sympathy is severely lacking."

"But does that really matter?" Adam asked. "Can you fix that with your Psychomancy?"

She eyed him. "Can you shoot a man on the other side of the world?"

“Yes. But...”

“Yes. Effort, difficulty, and skill. A mind is a delicate thing, and altering a part of yourself without making it suit the entire architecture will cause ego-rejection. That, and it is hard to conceptualize something you are not. There are many obstacles. And there are trade-offs. Right now, I think our arrangement is optimal. You are the Gate Lord they must face. The positive. Shiv is the one they fear. I am just the one they don’t see coming.”

Adam nodded, but his attention drifted to a rising wail. A slave clawed at the body of what looked like their twin in a tent. She screamed and screamed, and other people sobbed beside her. More lives lost to wounds and disease in the aftermath. There were consequences for every action. “I thought we were going to save this place. Not this.”

“What do you think we did?” Uva asked. She sounded curious instead of judgmental.

“I... I don’t honestly bloody know. The things we did to break Confriga down, to break this gate down, have come back around to hurt us. But it’s like we’re being mocked for succeeding. I don’t know how we could have anticipated the Recollector. Hells, we weren’t even prepared to deal with the Educator. It’s like our triumphs are twisted into problems and consequences. And I hate it.”

“Such is the System’s way,” Uva mused. She hovered closer to him and gave him her full attention.

“Adam. Focus on developing Parallel Thinking. Don’t worry about this. Your need for perfection makes you betray your potential.”

A laugh escaped Adam. So far, despite his best attempts, Adam was easily overwhelmed. There was too much detail, and his training and general disposition made him inclined to focus on specific things, to narrow in, to be precise. That ran counter to Parallel Thinking. Parallel Thinking, at first, was simply switching between two tasks rapidly. Not so good for a marksman, but almost essential for a Psychomancer.

"I'm not sure if it's the skill for me. Despite being very, very effective."

"Give it time," she said. "You will adapt. You will achieve it. You have the mind and will. Difficulty should not dissuade you. You just need time."

"I don't think time is what we have right now," Adam replied. "This gate... I don't know if I'm ready for that responsibility. I have a mind to just abandon it. But the people, and the connection to the Abyss, are necessary. We need that. Blackedge needs this." He let out a slightly humorless laugh. "Did you know that I imagined myself fighting off the entire invading force, potentially sabotaging them from behind, developing a Stealth Skill as I took them down from the shadows? How in my delusions I imagined myself impressing my father and being hailed as a hero? Just like he did."

Uva nodded. "It is an understandable fantasy."

"Yes, fantasy." A feeling of slight disgust filled him. The System was a cruel bastard. "Well. Despite becoming an actual Heroic-Tier Pathbearer, I don't think I would have gotten very far without either you or Shiv. I probably wouldn't have become Heroic without him at all. Not this fast, anyway."

"That is very common," Uva replied. "When I first became a Psychomancer, when I first attuned, I was solitary. I had always been more independent than most Umbrals. My mother's death, it affected me in negative ways." Uva didn't sound fully comfortable saying this, but Adam guessed she just wanted to share for him, to bond with him. And he was grateful for it. "It took nearly being killed in active combat

and exposing my team to an enemy Psychomancer for me to understand the importance of having people support you, make up for where you lack, and guard them where they are not ready. Did you have a team at the academy?"

"Yes," Adam said. "Friends. Quite a few. But it's... Nothing is like this. I thought I was prepared for actual combat. For the possibility of dying. I'm still terrified. I still can't stop thinking of how my neck broke. How—how I should have..."

"I know," Uva whispered. "Would you like to hear my honest confession?"

"About?" Adam said, raising an eyebrow.

"Without my Psychomancy, I would be catatonic right now. The amount of trauma we experienced is great, far beyond the physiological limits of what our brains would normally be capable of handling. I have simply spread my emotional processing out—and it took great effort to do that. You are standing with a few mental adjustments. You have limitations, Hero Adam. But do not turn away from your glory."

He scoffed lightly. "I've been told I have a problem with arrogance."

"Arrogance is not pride. Arrogance is an urge toward constant and eternal affirmation. Affirmation you give yourself very little of. Don't starve yourself. And besides, if you are being arrogant, I will let you know."

The scowl on Adam's face turned to a slight smile. "Ah. Right. Reliable allies. I suppose I'll keep an eye on you. And make sure you don't get too cold."

"A most acceptable arrangement," Uva hummed. Her pensive look returned. "There is a lot demanded of us. We have been... drastically altered. There are things we must face about ourselves. I am... glad I do not need to do it alone. I am glad I am not alone. Just know that you are not the only one feeling this pressure."

"Yes," Adam muttered. "You and I. Shiv, meanwhile, seems as carefree as a bloodhound let loose on corpses in a battlefield." He laughed. "I'm probably more bothered by his torture than he is."

Uva's lips pressed together. "Me as well. It's just that Shiv is..." she tried to find the right words. Some immediate thoughts were a bit insulting. All the others, well, they didn't seem quite accurate either to Adam. "Shiv is a special circumstance."

"Yes." Adam nodded. "Very special. Very, very special. But so are we now." And now Adam was thinking about Shiv's screams. Those screams that bothered him more than they did Shiv. Frankly, a lot of this bothered him more than it did Shiv. Adam was doing everything he could not to think about his near-death experiences, not to think about the Stranger invading his very soul, trying to twist him from within. "How does he just shrug these things off? How does his mind just heal?"

"I am unsure," Uva admitted. "I am glad for his resilience. But the shape of his mind is..."

"Unnatural? Freakish?" Adam suggested.

"Optimized," Uva said, finally. "Optimized for combat and conflict, especially."

"And cooking," Adam added. Both of them shared murmured agreements. "But... Yes. It's like he's perfect for this. Little to no fear. No need to process harm. Constant urge to cook or fight. Drastic, surging growth. He is the ideal martial Pathbearer in many ways. Except for the training. And patience."

"Because his mind quite literally isn't human," Valor said from nearby. The Legendary Pathbearer hovered just under the core, analyzing it constantly, trying to judge how the decay would last. "I talked to him before he left earlier. His mind... I thought it was resilient before. Now I'm almost certain that it was purposefully enhanced with non-human aspects. His psychology is regenerative. There is a state he always defaults to. A baseline of perfect sanity. His mood is variable. How he learns and treats things can develop. But the structure of his consciousness and cognition do not seem altered. I suspect there will be many skills he cannot develop in the domain of the mind. And some skills he can develop that no one else might be able to."

Chapter 101 (II) Feast [I]

Uva considered Valor's words and narrowed her eyes. "When I pulled his mind together, I didn't do so much healing as..."

"You just meshed the pieces back together, and they fused back into shape naturally," Valor finished for her. A pause entered the conversation. Below, a massive platform rose from the ruins as Can Hu started rebuilding parts of the district. "There is only one creature I know that is capable of regenerating like that cognitively. Regenerating so perfectly and efficiently."

Valor paused. Mostly for dramatic effect. "A Tarrasque. A remarkable and terrible creature. One that is nigh impossible to kill. No one knows where they came from, but they are considered the perfect weapons by many scholars of the field. Enduring in flesh. Hyper-resistant to magic. Mentally indestructible. The only thing that reliably works on them is Necromancy or Animancy. Anything less will enable them to regenerate and return to the fight."

"That sounds like someone we bloody know," Adam muttered. Are you saying that Shiv's soul or mind literally has monster-bits inside?"

"Impossible," Uva replied. "I would have sensed something inhuman. He is different, but he is still very much a man psychologically."

"What about subconsciously?" Valor asked. "Instinctively. What if a man's mind was merged with that of the great beast?"

Uva frowned at that thought. "I still do not think that is likely. I do not know if such a thing is even possible. To mix the mind of a monster with that of a man is practically guaranteed to induce psychosis and insanity rather than create something like Shiv.

"I agree," Valor said. "There are only very few people in our world I could even remotely see capable of this. A soul is very, very hard to understand. The Animancers in the world number perhaps a few thousand at most. It is a rare skill above rare skills. And of the Master Animancers, not to speak of Heroic Animancers or higher, there are even fewer. Of course, among the Legendary Animancers, there's only one I know of who is also a Legendary Psychomancer."

"And who's that?" Adam asked, thinking he already knew the answer.

"My son," Valor rasped.

"The one who sealed you." Adam didn't quite know how to respond to that. Family issues aside, there was something else pulling at Adam, something else that clawed at his very emotions. "The only thing I

know about Abyssal Lord Udrael Thann is that my father supposedly bested and slew him during the war.”

Valor let out a sigh. "Embellishments, falsehoods, and missing information. Your father likely destroyed a vessel he had at most. My son has many vessels. His mastery of the dichotomous soul is second only to mine, but perhaps not anymore. He did manage to trap me, after all."

"So, if that's the case, then the ritual of Shiv's birth... could have involved him, somehow?" Adam asked. His veins were flowing with blood. There was a tightness in his chest that he didn't enjoy.

"My heart compels me to say no," Valor said quietly. "But I cannot think of someone else that could modify a mind and soul this way. I cannot remember, Adam. I cannot remember. I am sorry. The answers... My power... My skills... Once, I could have given you answers. I am sorry."

"It's fine, Valor," Adam said. He channeled a bit more of his Righteous Dawn Prevails into Valor as the skeleton started shivering in the air. "We'll put you back together. And then you'll be able to reveal to us more horrifying truths that will leave me shaken and disturbed."

Valor was about to say something when there came a ripple at the Abyssal Gateway. Someone was right outside. Actually, a lot of someones were right outside. Adam cast his Awareness toward the horizon and drove it through the gate. There, he found his Seer of Horizons pressed up against Shiv's big, stupid grin. Behind him, a flood of darkness hid whatever massive thing Shiv was dragging behind him. The Gate Lord rolled his eyes. "Ah. I think Shiv has finally returned with a solution to our food problem."

"What did he bring?" Uva asked.

"I'm not sure. He had his Creeping Void active." Adam narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

Uva replicated the exact same expression. "Why do I have a feeling we are both about to be unpleasantly surprised by whatever he captured?"

Adam signed. "Because it's Shiv. I also expect us to end up loving whatever dish he makes from it."

The two shared a mutual look of resignation. "Send him through. Let us see what horrible delicacies we are to indulge."

A ripple of Dimensionality mana pulsed around the Abyssal Gateway as it came alive fully. The first thing that came through was Shiv. The next thing was a massive tentacle. A tentacle that just kept going and going and going...

"Oh, Composer," Uva moaned, clutching her head. "Please, Composer. No."

"What?" Adam asked.

"I think I recognized those tentacles. Shiv..." She hissed, like a mother stressed to the breaking point by a naughty child. "I swear if... Composer's Broken Strings..."

And then the rest of the giant monster came into view.

The thing Shiv dragged in was huge. Larger than even the Recollector. Four kilometers long, with tendrils and bones sticking out from its gigantic, fleshy body. Pods lined its underside, and a sloped, axe-shaped head with clustering eyes was at its front. And then Adam narrowed his focus and cast his Awareness towards the creature. He noticed about two hundred Arachnae Sisters and Weaveresses standing on its back. Ikki was at the front, cheering Shiv on. There was also a shattered bridge window just on top of the creature's skull, and—Adam did a double-take at what looked to be a vampire sitting there.

And then Adam kept staring at the vampire, at his ridiculously silky hair, at his porcelain features, at his—

“God's dammit!” The Gate Lord tore his Awareness back. “Uva. Shiv might be mind-controlled by a vampire.”

“I sure hope he is,” Uva muttered under her breath. She was covering her face at this point. “If not, I need him to explain to me why he thought anyone could eat a Court Leviathan.”

“Because it's Shiv, and he'll find a way to make it taste good?” Adam replied.

Uva frowned. “This time... I have my doubts.”

He raised an eyebrow. “How much do you want to bet against him?”

Uva stopped talking.

A Veilpiercer crashed lightly into Shiv's forehead. He just chuckled. "Oh, hey guys," Shiv gasped as he saw Uva, Valor, and Adam emerge from the dimensional pathway. All of them were staring at him and his new pet in disbelief. "I got us some dinner." He gestured at the Court Leviathan.

A long sigh slipped out of Uva. She rubbed her face. "Shiv..."

"It's meat, Sister Uva." Ikki cackled aloud on the back. "He called it meat. Ethically sourced meat."

"Shiv..." Uva moaned.

The grin on Shiv's face grew. "It's got good regeneration. And also, one of your Biomancers," he gestured at a Weaveress who waved back at him, "managed to get the thing to stop spewing out plagues all the time. Which is great for you guys, but not so good for me because they tasted pretty good."

"They what?" Adam said, leaning in closer. Uva was too busy muttering to herself.

"The plagues, diseases, viruses, and nerve-stuff. It tasted good. I got a buzz from drinking that up. Hells, it even made me stronger and faster."

"Shiv..." Adam's jaw quivered. "What the felling shit are you talking about?"

"Oh, I forgot to mention the new Master-Tier Skill I got," Shiv said almost innocently. "It's called Plaguefueled. Yeah. A bit of missing context. Sorry. Anyway, it lets me absorb diseases and treat them like alcoholic magical steroids."

"Shiv, I'm going to kill you."

"That'll just give me another Master-Tier Skill eventually."

"I'll use Necromancy."

"That'll kill you and everyone else too."

"Worth it."

"My Woundeater might reach Heroic soon too..."

Adam shot the Deathless in the face again. Without any mana infusion, the arrow did little more than skip off Shiv's forehead and make him laugh. "Gods, you are obnoxious sometimes."

Shiv shrugged. "You can't blame me for wanting to have a bit of fun."

"We can blame you for bringing us this..." Adam looked at Uva. "What is this thing again?"

"A Court Leviathan," she said wearily. "It's something that is used to carry thousands of vampires." Then, her expression froze. "And it might have transported the First Blood army earlier. The one that attacked Gate Theborn. Shiv... Where did you find this thing?"

"Out in the wilderness while exploring," he said. He looked behind him and pointed to Angelo. "I came upon this poor bastard getting his core cut out by the other vampires. Turns out he's rogue, he's got—well, he had a town. First Blood did some stuff to the people there." Shiv's amusement flattened into a haunted look.

Uva's bafflement faded, and she gave him a nod. "I understand. Did you bury them?"

"Cremated."

"Good. It spares their bodies further misuse. The First Blood cares little for the sanctity of the dead. But this rogue vampire..."

"You can scan his mind if you want," Shiv said. "Outside Context Problem showed me a bit of his past. I didn't like what I saw."

“Not surprising,” Uva replied. “The Bloodspawn learn to abuse and mistreat the world from their sires firsthand.” Still, she clearly didn’t trust Angelo. The other Umbrals and Weaveresses were the same way. Shiv guessed that would take a bit of getting used to, but so far, Angelo was just content to stay quiet and keep to himself within the ruined, shattered bridge of the leviathan.

“So,” Shiv said, clapping his hands together. “Let’s get this started.”

“Get what started?” Adam asked, sounding exhausted. “Shiv... You said it carried plagues earlier.”

Shiv’s eyes lit up at that. “I almost forgot, I think I can cook those too!”

“Plagues?” Adam muttered.

“Plagues?” Uva repeated, incredulous.

“It is... strange, but possible,” Valor said.

Shiv just kept nodding. “They lit up before me. They were white. That means they’re ingredients. That means The Chef Unwavering works on them.”

“Shiv,” Uva began, her breath catching in her throat. “It’s not that I doubt your cooking—”

Shiv crossed his arms in pretend offense. "It sounds like you doubt my cooking."

"—But this thing is not edible. It's a biological weapon mixed with a transport ship."

"Have you tried it?"

"No, Shiv, I have not tried eating a Court Leviathan," Uva replied, exasperated. "No Sister or Weaveress will be mad or foolish enough to do such a thing."

"I'll eat it!" Ikki called from behind. Shiv's grin grew to absurd proportions. "If Shiv cooks it, I'll eat anything!"

Uva narrowed her eyes. "That girl is going to die."

"Or she'll get regeneration and Disease Resistance boosts. Or something." Shiv smirked.

"No, Shiv, I meant that I was going to kill her for making me look stupid. But yes, she is also likely going to catch a plague and die."

"I don't like the doubt, Uva," Shiv said, pulling out his chef's knife and spinning it between his fingers. "And I intend to prove you wrong."

She sighed. "Shiv..."

"You are going to love this," Shiv said. "All of you—oh, shit, um... Sorry, Valor."

"No. For once, I am more curious if you can truly make this into food rather than desiring its potential taste." Valor hummed. "This is a worthwhile experiment."

"Only because you can't get sick, you bastard," Adam hissed.

"Yes," Valor said. "Which is why I'm not worried at all. So. By all means, Shiv."

Slowly, the Deathless turned as he laughed evilly at the Court Leviathan. "Alright, Courtney."

"Courtney?" Adam gasped. "You named it Courtney?"

Shiv ignored him and continued chuckling. "I just need some meat from you. And some plagues. And a contained environment to work in. Maybe close to the Abyssal Gateway. Hmm. Those ruins might make a good frying pan. Someone call Can Hu. I need a large kitchen. And assistants." He froze, then regarded Adam and Uva.

“Shiv...” Uva exhaled.

“No,” Adam whimpered.

“It’s for the greater good of the gate,” Shiv said. “And besides. You might get a Cooking Skill from this.”

The two looked at each other. Shiv kept staring at them, smile locked tight on his face.

Uva folded first. “Fine. Only to make sure you don’t end up gassing the entire gate.”

“I just might,” Shiv said, staring at his own triumphant reflection in Halspur’s Perfect-Edged Chef’s Knife. “I’ll gas you all with flavor.”

Chapter 102 (I) Feast [II]

The beautiful thing about all biology is mutation; the transformation is synthesization. Everything can be something else, all can be true, and all can change. When flesh tears, it is not absolute. It can be regenerated, and yet all things have the capacity for regeneration, though some bodies need to be taught such things.

Now watch. Watch as this brutally dismembered, mangled ruin of a being is restored as I simply inflict a single dose of viral infections upon it. First, the infections will seep in. It will be little more than a cold, but it will greet his brain, it will modify the body’s bioelectricity, and soon, soon the virus won’t be so much of a virus anymore. Soon, the virus will become an educator, a teacher, an instructor of the flesh.

Soon, what is instinctively and intrinsically known to the virus will be bestowed upon the body. Watch now, it regrows.

And so, once more, I have transformed. Not only this body, but a concept—an idea of a virus that is meant to harm, an infection certain to kill. But within that, within everything I have done, is palliative, is transformation, is mending.

You do not tear and break if you cannot put back together; that is what I believe. And you cannot break properly if you cannot put something back together. For this is the beauty of Biomancy. With a few adjustments to the blood codes, a few moved proteins, a simple tweak of the structure, that which might have made your flesh peel from your very bones could make you utterly immortal.

-Odes of Blood and Flesh, Sculptor Ekkihurst

"I am the chef," Shiv said. He clenched his jaw and raised his kitchen knife. His reflection stared back from the fifty meters of severed Court Leviathan tentacle that lay in a huge steel cauldron. It had been shaped from broken remains found in the ruins of Gate Theborn. It took the aid of Can Hu to properly shape what once was a gnarled mass of scrap metal into something that was a good conductor of heat. Now, the setup work was done.

The cauldron lay partially embedded in the ground. It was held in place by curved grills, and the surrounding ground was rendered level and flat by Can Hu—an island of stability and cleanliness amidst a sea of rubble and devastation.

As most of the first response force from Weave headed off to render aid at the Surface Gateway, a few stayed behind to help Shiv with his meal. Adam, Uva, Can Hu, Valor, Ikki, Uva's team Pyromancer, and a few Weaveresses remained nearby.

With a gesture from Shiv, the Weaveress Hydromancers unleashed a deluge of water that quickly filled the cauldron. Next, the Umbral Pyromancer channeled a beam of searing heat into the water, raising its temperature to a grumbling boil in a near instant.

As he waited for the others to finish their parts, he observed those around him. Uva looked uncertain—Uva more dubious than anything. Valor was studying Shiv more than he regarded the slowly simmering tentacle. Not far away, parked in the sky over the Abyssal Gateway, was Courtney, the Court Leviathan. It barely reacted when Shiv severed its tentacle, but now it was making loud groans as several of Uva's Psychomancy strands burrowed in its many minds.

Uva scoured its memories over and over again to make sure it wasn't hiding any ugly surprises. So far, she said nothing. That was a good sign. But a Psychomancer's paranoia was not so easily stated.

But perhaps her hunger would be, as would her incredulity, when Shiv proved them wrong about this dish. And he would prove them all wrong.

"So," Ikki said, "how long is this going to take?"

"Patience," Shiv said, holding up a hand.

His eyes were narrowed, his Biomancy focused, but he didn't do anything with it. For once, Shiv did something very unlike himself—well, unlike himself in combat, anyway. He reached into the meat, but instead of ripping or twisting or using his Woundeaters to transfer wounds, he simply studied the tentacle. The Court Leviathan wasn't nearly as durable as the Jealousy; it was comparatively rather fragile. That meant he had to judge the heat of the water and be mindful of how roughly he prepared.

Also, severed from the rest of the body, the tentacle did not retain any regenerative properties.

Between the Court Leviathan and its severed tentacle, Shiv gleaned a few differences. First, there was obviously no brain governing the tentacle anymore. Secondly, a surging wave of bioelectricity would pulse through the Court Leviathan, signaling different aspects of its flesh and blood to respond in specific ways. That facilitated rapid regeneration. He left several more wounds on the Court Leviathan, but its regeneration response was too fast for him to keep up with. He would need to use his Chronomancy to get a proper, in-depth look. Despite this, he still gained a bit of insight into the functional process of regeneration.

Practical Metabiology 36 > 37

It didn't seem like the Court Leviathan was forcing its cells to rapidly multiply. Instead, it was signaling different things deeper within its body using bioelectricity. It was like its blood was communicating with itself on a higher level somehow, and the rest of the body knew exactly how to react in accordance to the signals. Also astonishing to Shiv was how cancer-free it remained when it healed this way. It was faster, cleaner, and less complicated than any feats of biological regeneration he experienced before.

The Jealousy just constantly regrew parts of itself. It healed much slower than this thing too. You're going to show me how to grow back my arms and legs without using a Woundeater, Courtney. But first, I gotta show some people what I can make with your meat.

Shiv turned his attention to cooking. The water was boiling hot, steam rose into the air, and slowly the limb began to cook. But Shiv used his Biomancy to peel slight openings into the tentacle. He needed to let the heat seep through, and to do that, he had to tear it apart and start moving the flesh around. The main reason why he wanted to make this as a broth and a soup was because some nutrition could be distilled in the water, and people needed liquid right now as much as they needed food.

Shiv considered adding some Mendules, but frowned as he regarded the temperature. He felt at the tentacle in the cauldron and then mushrooms in his cloak. Yeah, they would probably dissolve into nothing almost immediately.

He made the “mixing ingredients too early” mistake more than a few times. It was a bad habit that took a while to break under Georges’s supervision. Different levels of temperature would affect different ingredients, and different substances had different levels of readiness and whatnot.

Shiv needed to do this perfectly, and so he examined the state of the tentacle in exquisite detail—used his Biomancy to compare its integrity and condition to his other ingredients. It was the centerpiece, after all. The thing that would hopefully offer some healing effects for the people in the gate. The first part was making sure the meat was thoroughly cooked. It could survive a long time. That was when he would add the additional tasting ingredients and let them soak for a while.

Now, what truly came aglow was the tentacle, but the glow was not universal across the length of the limb; rather, it was concentrated at the parts that weren't so cooked yet. This, again, was why it was beneficial to have Biomancy. Shiv continued twisting the flesh around, turning the meat over around itself. What was inside went to the outside, allowing the already cooked bits to simmer for a moment while the relatively raw sections were properly heated.

"Why are you doing that?" Ikki asked with a frown.

The Weaveress Biomancer answered for Shiv. "He's making sure every part is evenly cooked." The Weaveress regarded Shiv for a moment. "Do you often use Biomancy to aid your cooking?"

"All the time," Shiv replied. "In fact, I don't think I could cook this well if I didn't have good Biomancy. It tells me how well done something is. How much more heat it needs, if it's burnt or not. More

importantly, it lets me feel the entire structure. Especially necessary with stuff like this to make sure this thing doesn't have any unexpected cancers or other strange surprises."

"Cancers?" Adam muttered with a deep frown. His arms were folded. "There were cancers in the tentacle?"

"Not a single one," Shiv replied. "Which is actually stranger because things that heal fast should develop cancers pretty quickly. Damn vampires made something pretty stable. If you ignore all the plagues and viruses sleeping inside its blood."

The Gate Lord looked like he wanted to leave immediately.

"Just trust me, okay?" Shiv said. "I am the chef. With enough heat, I think I can cook the viruses and other stuff too." And true to his word, he saw the sicknesses and diseases ingrained in the tentacle glitter with a faint white. It wasn't as bright as the rest of the meat, but it was there. He just needed to follow his instincts and see it prepared.

"You can say that as many times as you want, but—"

"I am the chef," Shiv interrupted. "Trust the chef. Trust me."

The Gate Lord gave Uva a defeated look, but she just offered an uneasy shrug. Her incredulity had faded. Now her attention was mostly focused on Angelo, who was still inside the Court Leviathan, and the massive beast itself. In the corner of Shiv's eye, he saw a thoughtful expression come over her. She was considering things about the Court Leviathan, opportunities, perhaps. He was considering many opportunities as well. They might not be thinking about the same things, though.

Time passed. The meat heated and hissed with the temperature. Its texture went from a rough, raw-red to an even mold of glistening, bright tissue. It would be soft enough for even a Pathless to bite into now. And just then, the Chef Unwavering did something Shiv had never seen it do before. Motes of light rose from it, motes that passed from it into his cloak. It highlighted a specific ingredient. Shiv blinked. There was a connection there, a connection he was instinctively feeling, and the skill was expressing it, commanding him to apply the weeds he found at the bottom of the river first, before anything else.

He didn't chuck it in immediately, however. He learned that lesson earlier. Instead, he dipped a piece of weed into the cauldron and used his Biomancy to see how it reacted to the heat.

As part of the river weed absolutely disintegrated into little more than blackened particulates, Shiv shook his head. "We're starting a second pot," he declared. "We'll add it to the main cauldron when the temperatures equalize. Can Hu! I need more metal! Small pot. Second grill. And a third and fourth. Third for Mendules and other shrooms. A fourth just in case."

"You will have it, Pathbearer." And immediately, the Penitent started molding nearby clumps of metal. They came together, fluid at first, but slowly they twisted into shape. A smaller cauldron formed and was planted in the ground beside Shiv. The Hydromancers filled with water, and the Pyro channeled a small gush of heat to bring the water to a slow simmer. She didn't unleash a dense beam of fire like she was doing with the tentacle cauldron. Instead, with a simple wave of her finger, it started boiling immediately. Shiv could feel her Pyromancy, feel the potency and her control. And through his focus, he felt a surge of excitement.

Magic was wonderful. More than destruction, magic gave you options in creation.

He applied the river weeds, and slowly the water took on that glowing, pristine, bioluminescent quality. And Shiv realized the minerals that refreshed him in the river came from these weeds. The same benefits infused this water as well, and that brought a smile to his face.

"System's being a sneaky shit again," Shiv muttered to himself. Things had a tendency to come back together in his life. Things experienced, and things recreated. He asked Can Hu to mold him a ladle, and the Penitent did. Shiv took a scoop of his newly brewing mixture, and as he swallowed it, a rush of refreshed energy filled him. His body felt lighter, ecstatic, and electric with motion.

"Yeah, this is gonna go well," he said under his breath as he started chuckling. He didn't know why The Chef Unwavering wanted him to connect this with the tentacle specifically, but he looked forward to finding out.

The cooking continued. Shiv had two more cauldrons ready. The third one was filled with Mendules and some other shrooms. A few of the shrooms did not glitter, and Shiv decided to examine them using his Biomancy to see why. The answer came when he found strange, parasitic growths trapped inside their mycelia. He wasn't exactly sure what the growths were, but he suspected they might cause more mass casualties than mass-satisfied stomachs if applied to the overall dish.

The Mendules were, as usual, relaxing for the mind and focused one's thoughts. But a few of the other mushrooms provided a rich, earthy aroma that was bitter and then fresh thereafter.

Soon, the flavors mingled in the air, and Ikki breathed in deeply. "Smells great."

Adam, meanwhile, was trying to hide how much he was sniffing. The Gate Lord's senses were the sharpest here, but he still eyed the tentacle with a special look of suspicion.

Finally, the tentacle itself approached the point of being well done. Every part of the meat sang with a sizzling, clattering noise that pleased Shiv's ears. And now, even Adam was leaning in, slowly drifting

forward as his vector wings glowed bright. Overhead, however, the mana core pulsed once, then radiated twice. A notification appeared in everyone's eyes.

Mana Decay Concluded

Significant history loss accrued.

Gate [Name Pending]

Category 2

Skills

The Dawn Unites 1 (Unique)

Biomes

[Undetermined]

Districts

Surface Way

Gateways

Vulketh: [Under Lockdown due to Mana Insufficiency]

Earth (Abyss): [Under Lockdown due to Mana Insufficiency]

Earth (Surface): Under Lockdown

Suddenly, the horizon began closing in. Things more than five kilometers away from the gate center dissolved into smears of mana, and then nothing at all. In an instant, what used to be Gate Theborn shrank on itself. Entire sections of the gate faded into thin air, and the temperature began to grow increasingly cold.

More than that, the distances between the Surface Gateway and the Abyss Gateway tightened dramatically as the two blurred closer together. It made it easier to get around, but also it only left approximately nine kilometers of distance between the surface district and Courtney, the currently non-infectious Court Leviathan. The Vulketh Gateway, meanwhile, became a perfect midpoint in between. The wondrous change was so normal and subtle that Shiv did a double-take—and then cursed as he began rapidly churning the tentacle flesh in on itself again, making sure the heat settled to its very bone.

"Well, this is a wonderful time for the decay to conclude," Adam muttered to himself. His surprised expression turned to a glare as he regarded the single skill the mana core had left. "The Dawn Unites?" He stared at the core, and it glowed in the same hues as the faint blue sun hovering just over his head. Slowly, it began to pulse. Thin sheets of solar-bright resonance twisted around the mana core, and Adam took a step back. "Uh, Valor. The core seems to be doing something..."

Chapter 102 (II) Feast [II]

"Yes," Valor said, briefly turning his attention away from Shiv's cooking. "Let us see how this skill manifests. Activate it. Reach out with your mana and learn what the core might offer us."

Adam looked uneasy, but did as Valor asked. Uva soon found herself torn between the trembling mana core and the massive cooking operation Shiv had going.

"Stop heating the cauldron for the tentacle," Shiv called out. "It's enough. Let the water boil and cool. We're going to pour the cauldrons over when they're all the same temperature in a bit."

The Pyromancer killed her beam and let out a breath. "This better taste heavenly, Shiv. I can't believe I let Ikki talk me into this."

"It might taste more than just heavenly," Shiv replied. "It might just let you grow back an arm or a leg." Not that she was missing either, but it did seem to raise her expectations.

He administered additional adjustments for the Mendules and the river weeds. More ingredients were added. Temperatures were adjusted. As he worked, focus consumed him. So much focus, he didn't notice the mana core growing brighter and brighter behind him. Finally, as the three cauldrons achieve a uniform temperature, he poured the Mendules and river weeds in with the leviathan tentacle.

From there, the mixture was complete, and Shiv began to stir. And he stirred using the very bone of the massive tentacle. He peeled away the flesh, now well-cooked, and then he split them apart, cutting them with laceration spells until they were minced into drifting pieces. Afterward, he shaped the bone to have its head be longer, flatter, and he used it to churn the waters fast.

A bubbling, gleaming whirlpool began to develop, colors of greenish bioluminescence and glittering blue mingling with chunks of pale red flesh. As it turned longer and longer, the soup got brighter, and there came crackles of bioelectricity between each of the pieces.

Shiv felt it, then, the same pulses of signalled regeneration rushing between each piece of meat. Somehow, he was replicating the effect in the tentacle without having kept it attached to the leviathan's body.

Uva blinked. Adam blinked. Ikki leaned forward, almost tipping her head over into the cauldron. She drew in a lungful of air using her nostrils, sniffing wildly, and then her eyes began to roll.

"Whoa," Ikki breathed, "that's got a lot of kick to it. Sister Uva, come over here, take a whiff."

Uva stared at the younger Umbral. She looked reluctant, but then Shiv muttered something to her that completely changed her expression. "That's okay, Ikki. Some of us are brave. Some of us, however, are... Well, they would call themselves cautious. But I would call them chicken—"

But Uva stomped right past him, glaring at him from the corner of her eyes. A telepathic message hit him then. "You will regret ever teasing me this way." Her mind was alight with a vicious implication, and Shiv did his best not to cough in front of everyone.

“Sure I will,” Shiv replied.

“I will drive an apology from your lips.”

“You might get me to do more than just apologize if you try.”

She narrowed her eyes, but before anything else could be exchanged, a light flashed over them, bathing the world in azure brightness.

The mana core pulsed, and it did so with a flaring, coronal radiance of azure blue. The power the mana core unleashed was similar, in a way, to Adam's The Righteous Dawn Prevails Skill. The color was the same as well. But rather than empowering everyone, increasing their souls' integrity and temporarily raising their skill levels while they were in his presence, it wrapped them in a layer of cerulean brightness. Now, everyone present was shrouded in their own azure corona.

But rather than burn, Shiv felt it blend into

his very being. The Deathless stared on in astonishment as two of his skills were bridged together.

[Temporary] Skill Fusion: The Chef Unwavering (Master) - Woundeater (Master) > The Flesh Delectable (Heroic)

Shiv blinked, and everyone else around him let out brief gasps as well.

"What in the hells did I just do?" Adam breathed.

"I think... I think your Unique core is showing its hand."

Shiv regarded his newly fused Biomancy and cooking with astonishment. They didn't feel truly fused, but with the azure glow binding them, using one pulled on the other. All of a sudden, his body came alight with the pristine glow of The Chef Unwavering. But the glow also pulsated with Biomancy, as did everything and everyone else that could potentially be cooked and eaten.

From them extended attributes and traits, icons indicating bonuses Shiv might get from consuming them after proper preparation. In fact, he felt as if he could consume and make anything into an ingredient if he just channeled his Biomancy into them. Including his own flesh. The sheer strangeness of his new Skill Fusion broke Shiv out of his trance.

Most of his allies had their own skills, and right now, The Flesh Delectable told him that he could temporarily gain some of their abilities if he just ate them using his biology magic. Like how he could get a much improved version of Psychomancy from eating Uva, for instance.

Shiv could put up with so many things. He was willing to eat a lot. Potential Biomantic cannibalism was a step too far for him. He didn't want to eat his friends. And that earned him a nod of approval from Uva. "Good. It's frankly surprising that you didn't even consider eating any of us for more power."

Shiv stared at her. "Uva, I'm not actually a monster."

Valor and Adam made eye contact before they looked at him, but said nothing.

"Yes, I know that," Uva said, though she sounded like she didn't fully believe it.

Shiv frowned, his enthusiasm dying down slightly. "Why would you say it that way?"

"Nothing. Just continue on using your new skill to deal with the food," she mumbled. She shot a brief look at Valor, and that made Shiv do the same.

The old Pathbearer let out a breath. "I will explain things to you later. That's what I told you earlier. The matter related to your mind."

"Oh," Shiv said. He didn't much like the sound of that.

Tearing his mind away from the conversation, Shiv focused on his Leviathan Tentacle Soup. He felt it was rapidly approaching completion. More importantly, he read the benefits it could grant him if he absorbed it with his Biomancy right now. Perfect regeneration. Hyper-enhanced immunology. Shiv blinked. Biological rejuvenation restores organs to a pristine state. Absolute focus as well... Godsdamn...

Woundeater 85 > 86

The Chef Unwavering 55 > 57

He started as both his Biomancy and his cooking skills leveled. However the mana core's Unique skill worked, it fused skills together, but it didn't truly change their separation within a Pathbearer, so it seemed like a sort of external soul bridge that connected the most recently used skills.

"Can Hu," Shiv declared, "I need a bowl. Time for a sampling."

Immediately, a small, round metal object hovered next to him. Shiv picked it up, offered Can Hu his thanks, and dipped it into the great mixture. As he brought the bowl before his face, staring at chunks of minced tentacle floating on the surface, partially glossed by glistening weeds and lit by half-melted Mendules, Shiv prepared himself and sampled his newest dish.

Immediately, electricity flowed through him. It pulsed under his skin, traveled through his marrow, and ignited his blood with a rush of freshness and relief, the likes of which he had never felt before. Shiv let out a shuddering gasp, and Uva stumbled back. She looked at the Weaveress Biomancer, calling out to her, and as the Weaveress came rushing, Shiv simply shook his head and choked out, "I'm fine!"

"Shiv! Shiv, are you all right? Do you have a sickness? Is the Leviathan gonna kill you like I said?" Uva cried.

"No!" Shiv shouted. "It's just... good. I can feel a rush of regeneration crackling through me."

His heart felt like it was stronger, immensely so. His lungs filled with more air. Shiv's stomach felt expansive, iron-cast, like it could eat raw garbage for a month and remain unaffected by the toxins and

waste. His muscles also trembled with power, and more importantly, there was the rushing relaxation that consumed him. Everything was perfect. Everything was relief.

And then Shiv felt his externally fused skills detach from each other with a pop. Woundeater became Woundeater again. The Chef Unwavering was The Chef Unwavering, but the levels they gained were retained. And the food he made with them still remained pristine and magnificent, even if he couldn't see the exact details they offered anymore.

Shiv's hands were shaking. Soup, he realized, began to splash down his arms. He stared at the others, and he waved to them. "Get... Take a sip. Have... have... have a bite." He let out a breath and tried to wrestle himself under control. "Just try it. Trust me."

Adam's gaze met Uva's, and they both hesitated.

Ikki did not. She called out to Can Hu, and soon she was scooping up a bowl full of tentacle broth in her own bowl.

"Ikki!" Uva said, looking slightly worried.

Before she could do anything, however, Ikki poured the broth into her mouth. Her eyes immediately shot wide, her pupils dilated, and her muscles began to tremble. Ikki bent over and shuddered violently. Uva reached out, trying to stabilize the young umbral. But that wasn't necessary, for Ikki started stomping on the ground and shaking her hands, her body language overflowing with excitement. She immediately leaped down and scooped up another bowlful of soup.

Soon she was drinking greedily, hungrily, ravenously—practically a starved wolf lapping at fresh meat. She was barely even chewing the bits of meat. "It's so good! It's electric! What did you put in this thing?"

"Mendules. Also, some kind of bioluminescent weed that really fills your body with relaxation. It lined the river beds outside the gate."

The Weaveress Biomancer stared at him. "Wait, you applied glisgeg to the mixture?"

"That was what it was? Glisgeg?"

"Yes. It's usually used as a muscle relaxant and a skin-rejuvenating substance for saunas," the Weaveress explained. "The effects are not usually this extreme..."

"Well, it seems it triggered something when mixed in with the tentacle. Bioelectricity keeps jumping between them," Shiv muttered. And there was another angle he could study. Bioelectricity. It seemed capable of signalling things to bodies, but it was also still electricity as well...

The Weaveress hesitated for a moment before she also asked for a bowl and tested the mixture with a more refined spoonful. Her reaction was even more extreme than even Ikki's. She stumbled backward, her wasp stinger trailing against the ground, digging a deep gouge in the earth. Soon, she fell onto her back and spread her limbs out wide. The humanoid fingers on the ends of her long, exoskeleton-covered arms spasmed, and she sucked in a deep breath. "My lungs! My lungs—They feel better than ever before! Ah, my skin! I think... I think my palp eczema is gone!"

Soon, there was an onrush of Umbral Sisters and Weaveress making a beeline for the tentacle broth. As they savored and slurped up what Shiv had to offer, he felt a feeling of pride wash through him, and that manifested as a large, shit-eating grin he directed at Adam and Uva.

"So? You guys going to try it, or...?"

Adam stared, his expression quivering. "I'm going to give it a few more seconds. Just in case one of them drops dead." He paused. "Well, that's most likely to happen just from being near you. Struck down by the System."

Shiv wanted to rebut that, but then he paused and gave an awkward grunt. "Yeah, that's probably likely."

After another five seconds had passed, and no one had died, Adam sighed, asked for a bowl, and set out to enjoy his own meal. Finally, it was just Uva.

She stared at the tentacle, stared at the Court Leviathan, and pouted at Shiv. "You're really going to do this to me?"

"Do what? Make you a meal? I do that all the time."

"No, not that. You're really going to make me eat a piece of a First Blood Court Leviathan. It almost feels like sacrilege. It does feel unnatural. These things spew plagues and unleash monsters."

"And now it's just filling our stomachs. You can think of it as an insult to the vampires. I know I do. Besides, Courtney's not a Court Leviathan anymore. She's my pet now."

"Yes, your pet that you chopped a limb off of. That you then cooked and ate."

"It's an ethical and renewable source of meat," Shiv smiled, "just like the Jealousy."

She frowned at him. "You have a disturbing knack for kidnapping large, regenerating creatures. If I had to count, that's twice now. That's two more large monsters than most people would have kidnapped in their life."

"I don't like thinking of it as a kidnapping."

"What would you like to think of it as?"

"It's more like a virtuous repossession. I'm a Pathbearer. It's just part of adventuring."

Uva rolled her eyes, but he knew he had her when an exasperated smile took over her face. "Fine. But if I get sick—

"I will nurse you back to health. Whatever it takes," Shiv said.

She stared at him. She stared at the tentacle soup again. Off by the side, Adam let out a loud moan.
“How? One day he's gonna be cooking me literal shit, and I'll be thanking him for it...

Shiv smirked. Uva shook her head. "He might just be right."

“It'll be the best piece of shit either of you will ever eat. I'll eat it first, of course.”

As Uva rolled her eyes once again, she placed the first piece of tentacle meat in her mouth. Her eyes briefly rolled, but she tried to hide it. Uva tried to keep her reactions restrained, but her mind was still connected to his, and he felt more than a little of what she felt.

"That good, huh?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Do not start."

"Oh, we haven't started yet, dear Sister. But I will bring this up from time to time, about how you doubted me. That really hurt my feelings, you know?"

“Yes, yes, dear brute, I apologize.”

“I suppose you'll have to make it up to me later.”

"I will?" Uva replied. "Did you not insinuate I was... What was it? A chicken-shit?"

Ah, Shiv thought. Right.

"Well," he said, "I guess we will have to make it up to each other later. But for now..." He stared at the cauldron and smirked. "For now, let's slap a handle and lid on this thing and bring it up. We got survivors to feed."

Chapter 103 (I) Reforge [I]

Repeat that.

Say that again. Say it. Keep your face straight and say it to me.

Say "someone killed an entire court of our descendants and stole our Court Leviathan" again! Do it! Do it, you rat piece of shit! You come to me on this day of siring to spit these... these festering jokes at me? These stupid, stupid mocking jokes? Is that what you think I am? Some kind of... stupid, mockable elder?

Huh! Huh! AM I A JOKE TO YOU TOO! AM I a JOKE TO EVERYONE? LAUGH! LAUGH AT ME! SAY IT AGAIN TO MY FACE WHILE LAUGHING!

...

Ahem. I apologize for my outburst. I... I see now you are serious. Someone actually murdered an entire court and stole a Court Leviathan. Do... do you know who did it?

One guy? Wearing a visage of death? Oh, fuck me, a Necrotech Deathstalker? What are they doing in Compact territory? Are they trying to cause an incident? Well, we were invading, so maybe they just wanted to hit us.

Shit. Dammit. I—I apologize for yelling at you earlier. You seem like a nice girl—just a messenger. I was like you too, you know. It's a shit job. I won't even lie. I used to report stuff to Second Elder Simmons, and he flayed me out of sheer anger three times. Right, you don't know Elder Simmons. That's because about a hundred years ago, he decided to accept a duel with Sir Marikos.

Yeah. That's the expression I made to his face too. How bad was it? I still have nightmares sometimes. You ever witness a beating so bad that the other Descenders start begging their guy to kill yours out of mercy because his screams were getting to them? Yeah. That bad.

Anyway. You did a great job coming to me instead of Muriens. Saved your own skin. But still... Shit.

What kind of mad sonnabitch steals a Court Leviathan anyway? Agh. Get out of here, kid. I'll tell the Firsts. They're going to hate this. We're probably going to need to prepare for a full reprisal raid into Necrotech territory soon.

Which... Fuck me, I hate fighting the Necrotechs.

-Third Elder Malkide of the First Blood

“There is enough food for everyone,” Shiv declared, holding a whimpering, beaten mercenary by the leg. The merc dangled in the air, blood spooling out from his face in vicious ropes as he moaned with pain. “There are also enough ass-kickings for everyone who tries to steal food from literal children. If you want another bowl, you wait. You do not take. This is mine to give. It wasn’t yours to steal. If I see someone else taking something from someone weaker, I will take it back from you. And then I will take other things from you. Like your ability to walk. Is that understood?”

A flood of fear rippled off the mercenaries in waves. They quivered beneath Shiv’s glare, and after letting them soak in terror for a few more seconds, he chuckled his newest victim at them. The merc struck the ground with a loud scream as he landed on his broken ribs. No one on the bridge helped him. No one even looked at him.

Shiv let another uncomfortable silence follow as he regarded the gathered Pathbearers on the bridge to the Surface Gateway. “I’ve also heard of a few more attempts on the life of the Gate Lord. I heard that some of you thought it was a good idea to move on to explosives and sabotage. Or prepare new viruses. Is that true?”

His Dread Aura trembled inside him, and most of the mercenaries reacted like petrified children. On one hand, he couldn’t blame them. On another, if anyone hurt Adam or Uva in any capacity, Shiv would probably gain a Brutal Torture Skill from the shit he would do to them. “Thelora. Siggy.”

A goblin and an elf shared the same shudder. Siggy spilled some of her leviathan tentacle soup. Thelora’s legs did more of the shaking.

“I—Great Hero. Please...” Thelora began, shrinking beneath his glare.

“I’m not blaming either of you. But you guys need to police yourselves some more.”

With an annoyed sigh, Shiv pulled off his helmet and descended onto the bridge. The dense crowds of mercenaries parted before him. The crowd squeezed together, desperate not to impede his person, desperate not to draw his attention. As Shiv marched toward Thelora, he looked in Siggy’s direction and gestured for her to come over. The goblin swallowed and shuffled herself between her fellow mercs.

All around him, hearts were pumping hard and fast. Hands were clenched tight, and ass-cheeks were clenched tighter. Shiv’s Biomancy gave him a lot of detail—and it also told him the mercenaries were much healthier than before. The soup had cleansed the survivors of the bowel-breaker and most lesser diseases. Those with lingering biological atrophy were restored as well—more energetic and limber than before.

In that respect, Shiv was pretty happy about what he managed to pull off. But on the other hand, he dramatically underestimated just how unruly the people got when he came offering food.

He thought he was going to have to give a long speech reassuring them about how the thing was edible. Instead, they all rushed forward, seeking to be served by one of the many distribution stations being run by the Arachnae Order. The slaves and Pathless were ravenous. Shiv expected that, but the behavior by some other Pathbearers was genuinely pathetic.

Pathetic to the point where it pissed Shiv off.

Among the many things that annoyed him, stealing food from a child was one. Shoving the child to the ground and trying to stomp on them for trying to get her bowl back went a little further. Shiv calmed himself by loudly beating the offending Pathbearer over the district. In the sky. Before everyone’s eyes.

The mercenary broke several times, but thanks to Shiv's Woundeater, he could still take just a little more punishment.

Just enough for the beating to last another round.

When Shiv was done being upset, he hit the man a few more times just to let the point sink in before he returned to the mass encampment trailing across the bridge. A general sense of order manifested among the survivors after that. This showed that people could learn. You just had to beat the shit out of one of them so hard that they started screaming for their long-dead father to come save them from Shiv.

"What's that over there?" Shiv asked, looking at Siggy and Thelora first. Then, he swept the ground with his gaze. Not far away, where the bridge met the rest of the surface district proper, was a large metallic cauldron, installed by Can Hu and monitored by two Umbral Sisters. There was a slot at the bottom of the cauldron with a valve jutting out over it. When people went there, a Sister would turn the valve, and soup would flow out into a bowl. Used bowls would then be returned, cleaned, and filled once more.

"Food station," Siggy croaked.

"Food station," Thelora whispered.

"Food station."

"Food station."

“Yeah. Uh. Food station.”

A chorus of murmured echoes followed. Shiv nodded. “And what is my Tier?”

“I... Hero?” Thelora squeaked.

“Right. Okay. So. Here’s something that you guys need to understand. I’m going to feed you. I want to feed you. I’m not going to torture you pointlessly. Or just butcher you without reason. But I also don’t much like any of you. I understand that most of you are amoral at best or slave-driving sacks of shit at worst, but this is no longer Gate Theborn. You might have noticed the horizon shrinking earlier. There is no more Confriga. Lord Scorn is not here. Not yet. And there are no slaves here. They’re just people. Just like you.”

Some of them grimaced at being declared equal to slaves, but Shiv paid them no mind. “And it doesn’t matter if you’re an Initiate, Adept, or Master. It doesn’t even matter if you are a Hero. When I feed you, you are all my customers. This gate is my kitchen. And when you are in my kitchen, you can complain about the service. You can say my food is shit and that you want something changed. You can even insult me to my face and not die for it. But you will not get in the way of another customer enjoying their felling meal. Is that understood? Because of how things are for now, I can’t throw you out. But I can leave you broken. Even if I don’t want to kill you.”

“Yes,” Thelora wheezed.

“Yes,” Siggy muttered.

More agreements followed, and when Shiv judged them to be adequately terrified, his expression softened. “Alright. Another thing: Anyone who is sick and hasn’t eaten should get fed next. There’s going to be more food. I’m always going to make more food when I’m here, but there are people who have priority status. If you want to be selfish, you must be powerful. And no one here among you is stronger than me. So. Be ethical. Or I’ll get unethical.”

Silver Tongue 20 > 21

Dread Aura 88 > 89

Another wave of muffled apologies followed. Shiv let the moment stretch a while longer and held back a faint smile. His attempt to advance both Silver Tongue and Dread Aura just worked. There are opportunities to build yourself everywhere if you just look. I’m also starting to get why Georges threw so many people out. I don’t see the point in being a Pathbearer if I end up acting like an alley rat in the end anyway.

“Right. I’m done chewing you out. Get that idiot fixed up—but no Biomancy. Let him heal naturally after he gets another meal later. I’m not giving him another Woundeater.” He looked at Thelora and Siggy. “And you need to manage yourselves. Right now, you might be wondering if you’re prisoners, slaves, or just awkwardly stuck. The answer is I don’t know either. We’re still trying to find out. But if you’ve noticed, I haven’t forced all of you into a prison or tried to butcher you. I didn’t feed you to my Court Leviathan to be used up as biomass. I fed you. Using the Court Leviathan. So you can expect a few different things from me. Right?”

There came a few nods—then the mercenaries froze. Several people squinted into their bowls, and one of them spat the soup back out.

“It’s made from what?” someone coughed.

"It's made from meat

that gives you regeneration, rejuvenates your organs, and cures your diseases," Shiv declared. "And you liked the taste? Right?"

"Right!" Thelora breathed. Siggy nodded vigorously. Her nodding spread through the group.

A tall automaton among the mercenaries reached out and forced the guy who spat his soup out to drink it back up. "Do not get us killed by this maniac, meatbag! Drink! Enjoy! Moan! Moan loudly, now!"

"Right. Okay. You need to watch your own people." Shiv's voice dropped lower. "There are Umbral Sisters here. Weaveresses. Other people. I better not hear about you giving them trouble. I better not hear about one of you attacking any of them. And pray to your gods if any of them end up getting injured or worse, because that just might make me properly mad. And we'll see how unethical I can get."

"We—we won't do shit, boss!" Siggy said, sweat pouring down her forehead. "If anyone's stupid enough—"

"You deal with them. You guys do. Since I still don't know how to handle any of this, you police yourselves. Do not make me come see you day after day. You understand? I told you earlier that I don't care about you. I don't care about killing you. I have killed some of you. But things must just end up getting worse if I make a habit of that. I'm going to stay two things: Chef and Pathbearer. And my Path isn't Warden or Slaver, unlike some of you. Do the very simple math and understand that if things get hard for me and mine, I will kill all of you."

That wasn't a threat. It was just a statement. It shook the mercenaries all the same. Thelora was always a bit pale for an elf. Now her complexion was approaching the hue of bones.

"So, save yourselves. Sigg. Thelora. You guys run this place. Don't make me come around unless it's to deliver food or help you out. I've lost taste in bullying you into compliance. And that's all I'm saying. Now. What else do you guys need?"

The sudden shift in the conversation caught Thelora off guard. She blinked rapidly and stared dumbly for a second.

Sigg, meanwhile, was more prepared. "We need a place to live. A place to stay. We're packed tight on the bridge, and there's no room in the residence. They're kind of busted up anyway, so they probably need to be fixed up too. Also, the ugly thing you guys killed won't stop fucking screaming. It, uh, might drive some people nuts."

Shiv winced as he turned to the soft blue patch of Animancy seared into the skin of reality. Just a few meters above the Surface Gateway, a massive smear of color still glowed faintly, and from within whispered a distant scream. The scream of an eldritch entity melted into existence itself. The Recollector wasn't entirely dead, and that unnerved Shiv. But what shook him more was its current state of agony. Constant and unceasing.

When he focused on the patch, he felt faint pulses of horror radiate free.

"I'll spend some time clearing out and scavenging from the rubble," Shiv said, ignoring that topic for that. "We can probably get a simple camp set up soon."

Someone cleared their voice behind Shiv. “We can... help and shit. If that’ll make things go faster?” Shiv considered the speaker. It was a bronze-colored, rod-thin automaton with a dozen whip-like arms. It quailed before his stare, but Shiv gestured for the bot to continue. “If we’re working and got stuff to do, there might not be that much trouble either. Right now, we’re kind of packed up on this bridge and waiting. Some of us asked if we could go and help with the cleanup earlier, but the Gate Lord didn’t give us a clear response.”

“Maybe because some dumb-fucks tried to kill him!” another mercenary shouted from near the gateway. “You think someone’s going to let us dig through the ruins without looking over our backs after that?”

Shiv noted the suggestion and nodded. “I’ll bring it up to the Gate Lord again. Anything else?”

“Ask him if some of us can leave!” another mercenary yelled—a woman who wore a suit of bright yellow plate armor and seemed pretty well-off. She appeared to be middle-aged, which, as a Pathbearer, meant she had to be quite old. “Some of us can be ransomed, if that is what the Gate Lord desires. We do not all need to be kept in place here, penned together like animals. It will lessen the burden on the Lord and this decaying place.”

A series of agreements and muffled scoffs followed. This Pathbearer had her share of supporters and detractors, it seemed.

“Only when the Gate Lord says so,” Shiv replied. “We’ll let you know what we want to do there once we agree. Not before.” He wanted to tell them that the problem wasn’t money, but secrecy from Sullain and the Inquisition, but they didn’t need to know that much.

When no one spoke after, Shiv gave a grunt and prepared to depart. But then, he saw Thelora holding out a slip of paper. “What’s this?”

“You asked for a list earlier. I... I didn’t have a chance, and I forgot when you returned, but... This is a requisition for proper supplies and necessities. Emergency medicine and rations are no longer needed, but the automata still need power and maintenance stations.”

And that was when Shiv noticed how rough a state many bots were in. He had been thinking so much about the needs of organics that he forgot about them. “Right. Housing first. Then, power and maintenance. Is anyone here in dire condition?”

A lull followed, and electronic voices declared various states of damage, but none of imminent mortal danger. Shiv nodded. “Alright. Hang in there. We’ll get you all sorted too.” He put his helmet on thereafter and gave those around him a final stare before he pulled himself up in the air. “And don’t make me come back early. When I next get back, it better be for supplies or housing.”

And with that, he launched himself up into the air. But this time, he shot well past the surface district and headed for a structure rising in the distance. He passed by hundreds of Sisters and Weaveresses administering assistance and aid to the slaves and other non-martials. Thousands of heads turned upward as he shot by, and he felt from them a rush of fear—though it was far more reduced than before.

They might learn that they shouldn’t be scared of me. That’s for the mercs.

As his Biomancy passed through them, Shiv let out a relieved chuckle as the bodies below actively healed and cleansed themselves of atrophy and disease. With the proper food, the body knew what to do. And this, more than taking the Court Leviathan and clearing it of vampires, filled Shiv with pride.

Many people died at his hands. And now a lot of people were going to live because of him.

Chapter 103 (II) Reforge [I]

As he traveled, he regarded the current state of the gate. With everything compacted together, the amount of detritus they needed to clean through was dramatically reduced. However, that also removed a great deal of materials they could have scavenged and reused. The closeness of the gateways also made getting around easier, but it meant that if they were infiltrated or invaded through one gate, they didn't have as much space to retreat as before.

The System gave. The System took.

As Shiv got to the midpoint of the gate, he slowed and descended. Tides of twisted metal had been shaped into a dense barrier over the dormant Vulketh Gateway. Spirals of spatial magic patterns lined the knotted clumps of metal, and Shiv guessed it was another layer of restriction

Nearby, a team of Umbral Geomancers was using sections from the obsidian tower Shiv had dropped on the Vulketh Gateway earlier to create a building. Though most of the tower got destroyed, enough of it remained intact even through Shiv's devastating struggle against the Recollector. The Geomancers were slowly sculpting the obsidian tower back together, and stone by stone, it climbed higher into the sky.

At its base, along a patch of flattened and reshaped ground, the portal to Can Hu's Garden of Bountiful Alloy was splayed open. A tarp had been set up over it; nearby groups of Weaveresses and Sisters were setting up something of a temporary operating base a few meters away from the unfinished tower. Within the garden, Uva was busy debriefing her team and a good number of Weaveresses on what had happened within the gate. He frowned slightly as he watched one of the Weaveresses gesture aggressively at Uva's skill-altered eyes. Uva betrayed little through her expressions, but she was clenching her jaw tightly. He saw her make that look more than a few times during combat. That was anger. Or frustration.

The hells are they saying to her? Shiv crashed down against the ground with a large thud, breaking up the conversation. Heads turned, and he met Uva's gaze first, and one of her Psychomancy strands slipped into his mind.

"What's going on?" Shiv asked. "You look kind of pissed." And he could feel from the anger repressed within her mind that she actually was.

"I'll tell you later," Uva answered. Her mana strands were heavy with unvented stress. Unvented stress that was still building. But before he could decide between pressing and just letting the topic go, a Veilpiercer burst out beside him, opening a dimensional pathway leading directly above the still rising obsidian tower.

"Come over," Adam called out through the dimensional pathway. "There's something I need to show you!"

Shiv shot Uva a final look, but again, she shook her head. The rest of her team looked displeased as well, but the Weaveress jabbing at Uva's eyes just kept going, snubbing Shiv's presence altogether.

He regarded the Weaveress and noted the metallic hairs lining her limbs, as well as the faint sparks of electricity dancing around her. Shiv had a feeling he was going to be having his own conversation with her very, very soon.

"So," Shiv asked as he emerged through the gateway. "What's got you so excited? And why up here?"

“Because they haven’t finished making the door, and the teleportation anchor we’re going to is planted in the middle of the building,” Adam said, chuckling. The Gate Lord was grinning. He was a bit excited—despite seeming utterly exhausted as well.

“Alright. Take me to whatever this surprise is.”

“First, take off your Magebreaker. It’s still damaged, isn’t it?”

Shiv regarded his still-broken gauntlet. Parts of it were vibrating, but it wasn’t coming back together like it did before. Using it on Absence and the entity had left it damaged on a deeper level than Shiv expected.

Adam descended and led Shiv down into the hollowed-out interior of the tower. Though the tower itself remained intact, most of its interior didn’t survive Shiv’s brawl with the Recollector. As such, only a few structural support beams were holding the entire edifice together.

“I had to talk with the mercenaries again,” Shiv said.

Before he could continue, he heard Adam scoff. “I know. I heard. Bastards. But that mercenary from Lone Star might have a point.”

Shiv narrowed his eyes. “What mercenary from Lone Star?”

“The one in the yellow armor. She had a Sign of the Unbroken painted on her shoulder and several orc teeth hanging from her hip. She’s Lone Star.”

“Huh. I didn’t know that.”

“You would if you paid more attention and knew what cultural artifacts to look for, but back to the point—Mithril. Treasures. Loot. Equipment. We collected some from this very tower, and with Blackedge close at hand, we’re going to need more resources than ever to help lift the siege. Sell-skills. Rebuilding equipment. Supplies. All of that is going to be necessary, and since I had a brief moment to myself, I decided to go over all the loot you managed to seize from Confriga’s vault.”

Adam suddenly turned left along a large support column, and Shiv reverted time by two seconds so he could adjust and keep up with the Gate Lord instead of shooting off further ahead. They landed on an extended balcony leading into an extremely dusty but mostly intact teleportation anchor fused into the walls of the obsidian tower.

“Why’s this here?” Shiv asked.

“Because we’re going to set up a teleportation network, and the placement is temporary,” Adam replied. “The loot is being stored here temporarily because it’s also the closest thing to a vault we have.”

“Aside from my cloak,” Shiv replied. “And Courtney.”

“Yes, well, you’ll be unequipping your cloak as well in a moment. And despite pulling off that ridiculous meal, you must forgive me for not trusting a massive, oversized monstrosity with our valuables. Or lives.”

"It can barely think," Shiv said. "It's harmless. Besides." He bumped Adam playfully, and the Gate Lord kicked at him, growling in annoyance. "If anyone tried to hurt you, I'll do terrible things to them."

"Truly touching, Shiv. But I think I'll err on the side of wisdom rather than becoming a tragic footnote that leads into one of your many violent rampages."

"Think of the story, though."

"How? I'll be dead."

"Maybe you can be a ghost. And I'll build you a statue. Well, I'll have Can Hu do it. And speaking of..."

Inside the anchor, Shiv saw Can Hu weaving rivers of flowing metal around a pair of boots. As he entered the chamber, Shiv found mithril ingots stacked to the ceiling along a curved section of wall. There were also pieces of gold and gems overflowing from the insides of twelve different chests. Shiv barely even remembered collecting that much treasure from Confriga's vault, but he was in a hurry at the time.

"The treasures are going to be very useful for us soon," Adam said, gesturing at the gathered wealth without looking. "It was good of us to capture and store this loot. But that's not why I called you. After your experiences with melding Biomancy and Cooking, several other people experienced the temporary skill fusion as well. It occurs when someone uses two or more skills intensely at the same time. And now..." The Gate Lord held a hand out at Can Hu.

The Penitent looked better than Shiv remembered it being. The paintings lining its skeletal chassis were bright with the azure twilight of Adam's skill. But more important was how the cracks and erosion lining Can Hu's body seemed reduced as well. Nearby, Valor was leaning over a table, studying four pieces of a broken blade. A colorful, thin blade that Shiv remembered breaking while facing the Recollector.

"Huh. You found Absence," Shiv muttered. He stared as Can Hu continued molding metal into the cracked stone boots hovering before it. "And what's happening here? Can Hu, did you apply your Master-Tier Skill Evolution reward to crafting?"

"Geomancy," Can Hu replied. "And with the mana core's Unique Skill, it has melded with my crafting to create something Heroic—TheForge of Material Synthesis."

That was a pleasant surprise. "Heroic? That's great. Although I'm really glad I got my Heroic Reflexes Evolution during the fight, otherwise I'd be left completely in the dust by you three there. What's the skill do?"

"Legend Valor, if you'd please," Can Hu asked politely.

Shiv watched as Valor brought a fragment of Absence over. Then, the liquid metals flowed out to connect the boots Can Hu was currently manipulating with the fragment of Absence. Shiv looked on, his attention completely consumed by what the Penitent was doing. Originally, the boots resembled broken concrete slabs. If that was because of damage or simply the nature of its original design, he didn't know. Now, though, it was changing. A rainbow-colored gleam coated the once cracked boots, and Shiv felt a rush of magic flood out from the altered item. As the synthesization finished, small chunks of prismatic stone hovered around the boots, but it looked partially fused with the composition of Absence.

"The merging was successful," Can Hu declared. "It is still at Master-Tier, however. I have not achieved a reliable Heroic-Tier item breakthrough."

Adam smirked. "That's no major issue. It would be preferable if you could craft Heroic-Tier weapons, but the fact that you can combine broken items together to repair them to fullness both in condition, functionality, and retained Enchantments, is more than enough for now."

And suddenly, Shiv understood why Adam had asked him to remove his Magebreaker earlier, along with his Cloak of Midnight's Kindred. As Can Hu finished its initial administrations, an azure glow radiated from its body, shrouding it in a coronal radiance comparable only to Adam's sun.

"I still think we can do better," Can Hu said. "Pathbearer Adam, I request that you infuse me with the light your Righteous Dawn Prevails. Perhaps a combination of two Unique Skills might be enough to see an ascended synthesis rather than merely a proper merger."

"Certainly, we can try again," Adam said. "But the main thing is..." He pointed to the table behind Can Hu, and Shiv saw some other Equipment. "Picking out the pieces that go together the best."

Just then, Shiv realized he vaguely recognized them. After all, he was the one who took them from Confriga's vault. He had extracted five pieces of Equipment from their display cases then.

One was a full set of armor. It was slatted and flexible, made from focus crystal. That one was lined against a wall and currently seemed mostly undamaged.

Aside from that, there was a thin wand filled with compact Hydromancy. It did not radiate out in a field of considerable size, but it was so concentrated within a rod that was barely longer than Shiv's index finger that it made him wonder just what exactly it was capable of.

Then, there was a leather helmet with scuff marks on its sides and a diamond gem implanted at the forehead. It gleamed softly, but the gem was also slightly cracked. Shiv was relatively sure they weren't damaged during the battle. He'd kept them in his cloak and only pulled them out earlier, handing them off to Adam for him to observe and sift through while he was out on his hunt. It seemed they were already damaged when Confriga took them as trophies.

Another of the five items were the boots Can Hu had just merged with. But then on the table, he saw another familiar weapon: a shattered rapier, snapped along the middle. That used to belong to Harkness. It was the rapier that allowed Adam to clone himself many times over in battle. And now, it might have a second lease on life, if Can Hu's new skill had anything to say about it.

Finally, there was the smallest dagger Shiv had ever seen in his life. It was little more than the size of his pinky. It resembled a rondel dagger, round at the hilt, with a circular guard and a long, thin blade. Despite the diminutive size of the weapon, Shiv found himself drawn to it, mainly because his kukri—or the remaining pieces of his kukri—were laid beside the small blade.

Quietly, Shiv unequipped his damaged Magebreaker and started offloading the objects stored in his cloak as he took it off as well. As he placed it on the table, he picked up the tiny knife and narrowed his eyes at it.

"First, I think it's best that you go through all the different items," Adam said. "After all, it would be awkward if you merged a piece of Equipment with your Magebreaker that didn't align with it."

Shiv looked at his broken gauntlet and nodded. The Magebreaker hated magic—attuned magic specifically. If Can Hu's skill could fix it, but it ended up taking on an attuned magical Enchantment, it would probably break in little to no time. And then there was his Cloak of Midnight's Kindred. If he was going to have that synthesized with another item, he didn't want to lose its spatial storage. That was the best part about it. That, and the fact that it allowed him to see in the darkness. He needed to think about this.

"Alright, little thing," Shiv muttered. "Let's see what you offer."

Equipment Obtained: [Skypiercer]

Tier: Master

Condition: Moderately Damaged

Composition: Adamantine

Enchantments > Spatially-Anchored; Size-Shifting; Master Self-Mending; Mass-Stealing; Binding

Chapter 104 (I) Reforge [II]

Your Equipment is going to break. Your weapons are going to break. Your armor is going to break.

This is inevitable. If you are a martial Pathbearer operating in the field, you will break things. The stresses and rigors of active conflict will press your weapons and Equipment to the very limit. Even Master-Tier weapons have a breaking point.

Your Mending Enchantment is not going to be enough to spare them sometimes, because you're going to need to use them hard. And if you use them hard, they're going to break. I'm going to say this again. They're going to break.

And that's fine. Broken Equipment is a fact of life. And, depending on the Equipment's Tier and whether or not you're a crafter—or if you have a good crafter supporting you—you can turn it all around.

Now, as mentioned in the previous chapter, a proper piece of Equipment is imbued with an ambient mana capacity. That is what its Tier corresponds to. This ambient mana allows it to interface with the world and you as a Pathbearer in the form of Enchantments it can contain.

What is also known is that when a piece of Equipment is broken, it is no longer capable of interfacing with the ambient mana in the world. However, the ambient mana will not simply dissipate. The Enchantments will not simply cease to be. They will linger and undergo a sort of mana decay similar to a damaged mana core. This is slightly like a story forgetting itself—consult the Theory of Legendary Atrophy for the theoretical details.

This, however, means that if you can get a crafter to reforge these broken pieces of Equipment, you can still preserve their Tier and some of the Enchantments. A few of the invested levels might be lost—or an entire Enchantment might be atrophied into nonexistence—but the item itself might be saved.

Some crafters even specialize in fusing broken pieces of Equipment together—or even deliberately breaking lower-Tier items to smelt them into higher-Tier ones as a sort of item Skill Fusion...

This is a process known as Tier-Synthesis, and though it sounds convenient, the outcome, as always, depends on the crafter's capabilities.

-The Paths of Ascension, Essential Reading at Phoenix Academy of The Yellowstone Republic-

Shiv examined the tiny blade in detail. There was a lot of mana pulsing from it, but it was slightly damaged. He could see a spiderweb of cracks running along the flat of the blade. More importantly, however, he saw that there was a deep groove of corrosion that lined the very base of the blade like a cavity.

That was Necromantic withering. He could tell from how severe the rust was, and the tinge of sickly green left behind.

It occurred to Shiv that the Equipment he'd retrieved from the display cases might have been literal trophies taken from dead enemies. That seemed to fit Confriga's nature. He was the kind to revel in cruelty and triumph. It also explained why Confriga didn't use these items in combat. They were more mementos to his dominance over powerful foes than anything else.

"I guess even vile sacks of shit can have a sentimental side," Shiv muttered under his breath.

Then he observed a few of the more exotic Enchantments he found within the dagger: Size-Shifting and Mass-Stealing. They both sounded self-explanatory enough, but he wanted to see how they actually worked. With a thought, he willed the Skypiercer to be bigger—if it got any smaller, it might vanish altogether.

Immediately, the Skypiercer expanded. Its hilt extended first, growing longer until it became more like a piece from a greatsword. Its guard also grew wider, becoming a round, curved shield as if it were a small defensive item meant to ward off blows. The greatest change of all was how the blade itself lengthened. It went from being a small rondel dagger to something of a gleaming, thick, albeit corroded and cracked, lance.

Shiv blinked as he found himself holding a three-meter-long weapon, and it was still getting bigger. It kept growing and growing until it hit the fourth meter, but remained as light as it had always been. But at five meters, he had to stop as cracks began to spread forth from the corrosion, compromising the blade further.

Equipment Obtained: [Skypiercer]

Tier: Master

Condition: Severely Damaged

Composition: Adamantine

Enchantments > Spatially-Anchored; Size-Shifting; Master Self-Mending; Mass-Stealing; Binding

"The damage the weapon sustained in battle against Confriga when he presumably killed its wielder is severe," Can Hu said. As the Penitent gestured toward the weapon, it directed rivers of fluid metal from a bubbling spell shape. Can Hu's temporarily fused Crafting and Geomancy Skill expressed itself in the form of a mercury bubble it clutched between its bottom, industrial limbs. Meanwhile, it used its more human-like manipulating hands to weave and shape currents of liquid metal to interact with nearby pieces of matter and Equipment. "Furthermore, the Necromancy afflicting the blade has damaged its Enchantments and composition. It is missing several Enchantments as well. Likely the strongest Enchantments, as the others barely add up to 120 Skill Levels of mana invested in this blade. In total, it should be able to contain about 199 Skill Levels. Just one away from the maximum Skill Investiture Threshold for a Master-Tier Weapon."

The Penitent fell silent for a beat, and Shiv studied Can Hu. The machine seemed oddly reserved, even faintly sad. It probably felt a strange sort of kinship with the dagger itself. Shiv couldn't blame the automaton. It was hard to see magic broken. It was hard to see something deformed from what it once was.

In that instant, Shiv also noted Valor in his periphery, looking at the blade. The ancient Pathbearer was still damaged. Cracks lined his skull—composed of a strange metal Shiv didn't know the name for. Despite this, the Recollector had broken Valor. Beneath the glow of Adam's Unique Skill, Valor seemed to be mending slowly, but Shiv could taste the misery radiating off of Valor. Both Valor Thann and Can Hu understood what it meant to have and then have not, to be powerful and then lose that power.

In some ways, that might have been worse than never having any power at all.

Shiv tested the mass-increasing Enchantment, but felt nothing. He frowned. "Is the Mass-Stealing Enchantment damaged?"

"I think that only works when you stab someone with it," Adam said. "I recall one such Enchantment. It comes from a Physicality and Thieving Skill Fusion. It won't manifest without taking mass from something or someone."

Shiv reached out with a hand and called one of his corpses over. He casually jabbed the blade against one of his bodies and felt a pulse of weight seep into the blade. "Ah. There we go." With a pull, Shiv drained the mass from the body. In a moment, the feather-light weapon became as heavy as an iron ingot, and then a small boulder. Just as it reached that capacity, the Skypiercer began to shudder and crack.

Shiv released the weight before his weapon got damaged any further. "Neat. But it's also too fragile. I think it'll break if I use it in active combat."

"Indeed." Can Hu's inner machinery whirred and whined as it moved its upper arms. "But it can be reforged. Restored to optimal condition or greater by fusing it with another piece of Equipment. That is the foundation of my current Skill Fusion—the Forge of Material Synthesis."

Slowly, a thrill began to rise inside Shiv. He looked at the broken pieces of his kukri still on the table, and then he studied his Magebreaker and cloak lying there as well. "Alright. I see where this is going." He eyed Adam. "So. This is why you wanted me to be here in person."

"Right, but more than reconstruction, this can be an upgrade to our kits," Adam said, a tired excitement bleeding over into his voice. "Can Hu can elevate Adept-Tier Equipment to Master-Tier Equipment simply by synthesizing it with another, preferably higher-Tier item."

"So, this is like an item Skill Fusion?" Shiv asked.

"Yes, but rather than just one item or skill, Can Hu can handle multiple items," Adam replied. "As it just did with the boots."

Shiv looked at the now prismatic boots placed on the table. The fragment of Absence filled in the cracks of the once-damaged stone boots. More than that, a flow of power radiated from it—a palpable taste of magic Shiv didn't have stained the air. Small, radiant pebbles hovered beside the boot. Geomancy, Shiv guessed. Or something like that.

“My new Skill Fusion allows me to merge two or more pieces of Equipment as well,” Can Hu explained further. “It allows me to add their total Skill Investments together. Or infuse existing Enchantments from one item to another. But the items must have suffered decay or damage first. One should preferably be broken, even. And the higher the Tier, the greater the effort on my end. However... with sufficient effort and focus, I should be able to synthesize two Master-Tier items into something that befits the Heroic category.” Can Hu paused. “Theoretically. I feel it is possible, but I have not performed such a feat yet.”

“You will,” Adam said with a certain air. The sun hovering behind him shone with a joyous radiance. Shiv let out a breath as he felt his own skills grow stronger as well. “But don’t over-exert yourself. We do this right and do it effectively.”

“Yes, Pathbearer Adam,” Can Hu replied, like a soldier affirming a commander.

Shiv placed the Skypiercer back on the table and reached out to regard the boots. “How does investment work beyond just infusing a set of levels from one of your skills into an item?”

“Levels and Tiers,” Can Hu said. “You cannot invest a level below your current Tier.”

“Yeah, Tran said something about that,” Shiv nodded in reply. “So if I invested one level using Gravitic Wrestler, then say, Might of Mass... The Enchantment would be different. But would it still be a single level?”

“Indeed, Pathbearer. However, Equipment is not the same as an individual or a monster. As such, the Enchantments express themselves differently from a skill born in relation to a Pathbearer. They transform and adjust themselves to the item they are invested in. More importantly, they need levels to be potent. Every level is a threshold of mana. As such, what is a higher-Tier skill in a Pathbearer might prove feeble for a piece of Equipment if only a single level is invested. Comparatively, a lower skill with more levels will function at a far higher capacity. Up to its Tier limit, that is.”

“Tier limit?” Shiv asked. He guessed he knew what that meant, but he wanted confirmation.

“Only fifty skill levels of Might of Mass can be invested, using your previous example. It is not capable of sustaining mana beyond that. Gravitic Wrestler, meanwhile, will run to two hundred.”

So that made sense. What also made sense now was how expensive and valuable certain pieces of Equipment were. Also, why item Tiers mattered so much. It’s like holding a small Semi-Pathbearer I can wield in battle.

Equipment Obtained: [Sabatons of the Arcanite Deepstrider]

Tier: Master

Condition: Perfect

Composition: Arcanite

Enchantments > Matter-Phasing; Master Magic Amplification; Geo-Anchoring; Architect’s Memory (Fort); Binding

“Arcanite?” Shiv muttered, studying the boots.

“It’s a magical hyperconductor,” Valor said. “Very rare. It is like a... dimensional evolution of the focus crystals.”

“And that’s what Confriga’s blade was made from,” Adam explained.

“That’s why my Magebreaker cracked so fast,” Shiv whispered to himself. He remembered catching Absence—the weight that went through him. But he broke the blade. Or an iteration of it. This one might have been the Absence that was lost near the end of Shiv’s berserker rage.

“The boots are for Uva,” Adam said. “If she is going to be operating with us on the surface at all, we need to give her means to avoid the sun. I doubt we will always be able to hide in the shadow of night—or that there will always be someone for her to possess.”

Shiv grunted in approval. “Good call. The Magical Amplification... That something that will boost her personal magic too?”

“Not unless she uses the boots as a focus. But that won’t be an issue.” Adam pointed at the focus crystal armor. “I think Uva needs another set of armor as well. Wouldn’t you agree?”

The Deathless offered a laugh. “Very thoughtful, Adam.”

"I try. Now." The Young Lord walked over to the table and tapped the wand. "This is a relatively intact wand. It's functional even without reforging, so I'm leaning toward claiming it. My rapier, however... It's missing its Temporal and Spatial Wardings now. The cloning Enchantment has suffered some slight erosion as well, so I need to make up for that." And now Adam was looking at the pieces of Shiv's kukri.

"Oh," Shiv chuckled. "I see. You want to take what's mine."

Adam frowned. "It's broken."

"It can be fixed."

"You don't need it anymore. You have your own Chronomancy."

"Two Chrono-Anchored Strikes are better than one," Shiv said with a smirk.

Chapter 104 (II) Reforge [II]

"Correct. Your Chrono-Anchored Strikes are powerful, but it will be better for me, since it will give me an extra skill for repositioning aside from my spatial magic."

Shiv considered that. It wasn't a bad idea. Frankly, it was downright essential. The ugliness of Adam's near deaths came back to haunt Shiv as he recalled how close the entity came to killing Adam each time it got its hands on him. "Hm. Fine. But I want something in return for this."

"Like what?" Adam asked.

"I'm not sure yet," Shiv admitted. "I'll think of something..." He frowned at the Magebreaker on the table next to the broken pieces of his kukri.

"Can you mix three things at once?" Shiv asked. "And remove existing Enchantments?"

"Yes," Can Hu said, "it will take more effort for me to sift through high-level and high-Tier Enchantments. But it can be done. There is also a risk of breaking the items if I am not capable of properly completing the reconstruction effort."

And that made Shiv consider what he wanted to do with his cloak as well. The answer there wasn't too complicated: More spatial storage. The other Enchantments were good, but the dimensional pocket was the single greatest piece of utility he had. Maybe mix that with some Arcanite. But what about the Magebreaker? I could mix that with a dagger if the spatial magic Enchantment is removed, but that'll make my weapon doubly-strained as offense and defense. I can see it breaking pretty fast again. No. Magebreaker stays its own thing. Or I get it merged with a shield at some point...

Then, Shiv's gaze fell on the helmet with a diamond gem socketed into its forehead. He walked over and picked it up. No surges of mana rushed into him. No Magical Skills triggered.

Equipment Obtained: [Helm of the Farsighted Deceiver]

Tier: Master

Condition: Severely Damaged

Composition: Trollskin Leather; Diamond

Enchantments > Master Farseeing; Master Self-Mending; Minor Illusion of Self; Chameleon; Binding

As its Enchantments loaded, Shiv looked inside the helmet and winced. The interior lining was utterly consumed by corrosion, a spread of rot and decay that left the helmet borderline ruined from within. The thing felt more than a little fragile in Shiv's hands, like it was on the verge of falling apart and would fall apart if he exposed it to any strain or damage.

But the Enchantments—that's what he was interested in. Chameleon, Minor Illusion, Master Farseeing. These were all utility options as well, and more importantly, unattuned utility options. None of them projected a magical field, and none of them should clash with the Magebreaker's functions.

"Hey, Can Hu," Shiv asked, "can you fuse this helmet into the Mage Breaker?"

The Penitent directed its streams of fluid metal, threading them through the helmet and connecting it to the Mage Breaker. A spell flashed between its hands, and another shape quivered in the mercury sphere held between its industrial arms. Can Hu fell silent, and Shiv just watched the automaton for a moment, patiently waiting for a response.

"It's a good choice," Adam said off by the side, nodding at Shiv in compliment. "Farseeing will help you contend with invisible adversaries or others with high Tiers in Stealth or Deception. Additionally,

Chameleon and Minor Illusion will make you an even greater terror on the battlefield. As if your Creeping Void wasn't bad enough already."

Slowly, new options for combat took form in Shiv's mind. Casting a minor illusion might be useful for baiting out enemy attacks. Chameleon would be another layer of concealment, allowing him to blend in without ever invoking his Creeping Void. That would also solve the subtlety problem. Right now, his stealth was a very specific kind of stealth—the kind that let his enemies know he was there but rendered them unable to truly pinpoint his exact location. Chameleon was quiet. Chameleon allowed him to blend in without infecting his environment at all.

Finally, the idea of escalating degrees of stealth appealed to Shiv: going from blended into the backdrop, then being detected, breaking contact after casting out a minor illusion, and then finally unleashing his Creeping Void when the situation truly devolved into havoc.

Shiv's eyes flipped over to another arcanite fragment—another piece of Absence. "I'm going to ask a stupid question, but I think I already know the answer. I don't think arcanite and Inertium are going to mix very well, are they?"

"Absolutely not," Valor said. "A magical hyperconductor and the single greatest magical nullification material known to the Integration would likely come together like Necromancy and, well, you, Shiv."

The Deathless let out a grunt of displeasure at that. That was all the convincing he needed. Still, this was a good mixture, and more importantly, it would fix up his Magebreaker.

"Yes," Can Hu said finally, "it can be done. In fact, I am certain I can do this. However, fusing the diamond gem will take a bit more consideration. Do you wish for it to be placed on the outside? It might affect the vibrational frequencies of the Inertium if placed along the way and render the structure vulnerable."

Shiv shook his head. "I don't care about the aesthetics. I just want functionality. Arrange the composition whatever way you see fit, so long as it works."

"Understood. I will create an extension for the gem then."

And at once, the synthesization process began. Both items rose off the table as streams of fluid metal poured into them. A layer of gleaming, bubbling mercury swallowed them, and the layers were promptly meshed together, fusing into a singular pool as Can Hu continued the crafting process. Then, there came a flash of light by his side as Adam's Unique Skill triggered. The Azure Dawn hovering above the Gate Lord's head flared bright, and a beam of concentrated radiance poured into Can Hu.

For a brief moment, Shiv caught a flash. A flash of what Can Hu used to be: a towering, chrome-shelled weapon of war, sporting multiple limbs bearing heavy weapons—guns of every caliber and every variety. But within its unfurling chest was the shape of a faceless pilot, and they held out a hand, reaching toward Shiv.

But with another pulse of brightness from Adam's Righteous Dawn Prevails, the illusion faded, and Can Hu, in its current form, emerged from the illusion. Even so, the Penitent looked better than before. It worked more efficiently, even as its joints screamed with every articulation and minor movement. It didn't seem as fragile as it once was.

A twisting spiral of spell patterns circulated the mercury pool, and the faintest hints of Geomancy mana ignited in reality. Most times, if you didn't have the right Magical Skills, you couldn't perceive someone else casting the same category of magic. Before Shiv had Biomancy, his death at the hand of the high vampire came as a mystery—a gesture and nothing more.

But now the world was alive with color, and Can Hu was channeling so much magic, straining its Crafting and Geomancy skill fusion so hard that it bled its wavelengths into the physical spectrum of the world.

"Godsdamn," Shiv muttered. The pool of mercury composing both items lit up like a second sun in the room. It wasn't as vibrant as Adam's azure sun, but it was no less potent, no less impressive. Slowly, Can Hu began to compress the sheen of mercury in on itself. It crushed harder and harder until it began to sink, until a shape emerged: the shape of a vibrating gauntlet.

A smile emerged on Shiv's face. The Magebreaker had been restored, but it was more than the Magebreaker he remembered it being. The gauntlet was larger, and more importantly, it blended with the background as he stared at it for too long, its colors mixing and merging with the cold metal of the teleportation anchor. Connected to the gauntlet were several arm straps, all made of leather. They ran all the way up toward Shiv's shoulder, if judged by the length, and at the end, the gem gleamed, fastened to the intersection of various straps.

Can Hu's Geomancy mana faded from view, but the finished and reforged Mage Breaker hovered in place, held by Can Hu's strings of fluid metal. "Does the composition please you, Pathbearer? I think I can still make a few adjustments."

"No," Shiv said, cutting Can Hu off. "It's good. In fact, I kinda like the new design. Good job, Penitent."

Can Hu raised its shoulders back as a hint of pride exposed itself. "It is only proper."

Shiv reached out and ran his hand into the Mage Breaker. Suddenly, he felt a new sensation inside. So that was where the leather went, Shiv mumbled. A soft leather glove clutched him. He would have complained about the temperature being too hot if he were still Pathless, but after all he'd experienced and all his new recent evolutions, a little heat didn't bother him anymore.

Equipment Obtained: [Armguard of the Unseen Magebreaker]

Tier: Master

Condition: Perfect

Composition: Inertium; Trollskin Leather; Diamond

Enchantments > Attuned Mana-Nullification; Master Self-Mending; Master Farseeing; Minor Illusion of Self; Chameleon; Binding

Once he equipped it himself, he began testing out his new capabilities. First, he blended into the backdrop just like the Mage Breaker did. Then, he projected a minor illusion, and that was when the gem along his shoulder flared and channeled out a stream of light that created a copy of Shiv. To his surprise, the minor illusion mimicked his every action, and he could move it further or closer to him as he pleased. Ultimately, however, it was just a mirage, and a keen-sighted adversary could likely see through it.

But finally, he triggered the Farseeing Enchantment, and suddenly he found himself capable of casting his gaze further and further. It was like his eyesight was magnifying with every thought. Soon, he peered at a specific patch of the wall and saw everything there in vivid detail. The smallest cracks revealed themselves to him, along with chunks of grime lining the edges of said cracks. He enhanced his far-sight even further, and his gaze slipped through the crack until he was staring at a surface of uneven and partially chipped obsidian—the exterior of the tower. A flood of nausea swept through Shiv, however, and he shook his head, trying to dislodge the feeling.

"Ah, Farseeing, eh?" Adam asked, smirking. "How do you feel?"

"Yeah," Shiv agreed. "Is this what it's like to be you all the time?"

Adam tilted his head. "No. It's incomparably inferior to what I have."

Shiv winced in response. "So your hearing, your taste—

"Even my touch," Adam replied. "All that is of my Awareness has been amplified. My Hypersense was superior to Farseeing in every way. It's an evolution gained when you strain all of your senses in combat, not just your gaze. A hawk relies on more than just its vision. Father prepared me well."

Shiv let out a whistle. And then he thought back to how Adam was uncomfortable when he was surrounded by large crowds, how he often preferred to soar alone to keep moving.

Then Shiv thought back to a certain incident in a certain apartment a few weeks ago, and a posthumous feeling of regret hit him. "Shit, Adam. I didn't know it was so rough for you. I, uh, I kinda feel like a bastard now for doing some of the stuff that I, uh... you know. So. Sorry."

Adam studied Shiv for a moment, and then he let out a quiet scoff. "It's alright. I learned to live with it. Part of having a high Awareness is understanding what to focus on and what to ignore. Actually, this is something I'll train you to do. Everything you see is important. You need to learn to distinguish between different details and detect the subtle things as well."

For the first time, Shiv was honestly intrigued by the prospects of dramatically improving his Awareness. It was more than just another thing for him to do now. "Sounds good. I'll show you how to cook, in exchange," Shiv offered.

"I..." Adam blinked. "You will?"

"Yeah. Why not? It's a useful skill."

"I don't even have Common Cooking," Adam said.

"The perfect chef wouldn't have a Cooking Skill. Means you haven't shit the bed enough yet to disgrace yourself with a level."

"What?" Adam asked, incredulous.

"It's something Georges always said to me when I messed something up bad early on. You want to fuse something next?" Shiv asked. "I've got my go."

Adam shook his head. "No, we do your priority Equipment first. I want you prepared."

"Prepared?" Shiv asked. "Prepared for what?"

"Someone needs to survey the surface. Well, two people. You and me. I'm not exactly sure where we will emerge once we pass through that gate, but I can tell you this: If Sullain's army is competent at all, they will have scouts hidden in places nearby. Pocket dimensions, hidden strongholds, scouts, and the like. More importantly, I want to know who else is watching. Lastly, even if I can cast out my Awareness, I want to stay close to the gate. I cannot direct the core once I leave these boundaries. And I have not set up a proper or strong enough teleportation network yet. I might be able to travel quickly using the Veilpiercer, but..."

"Yeah, but it's best that I risk myself instead of you," Shiv said, finishing the ugly part of the statement with a nod. Adam tried to hide his awkwardness, but Shiv just shrugged. "Yeah, it's fine. I've got no problem with it. Frankly, I like it this way. You can be the hunter and I can be..." Shiv thought of the metaphor he was making. "Well, I wouldn't even call myself bait. Maybe poison bait."

"You're my killer rabbit now," Adam declared with a slight smirk. "I need the wolves to come out of the woods so I can see them. And you need the wolves to come out of the woods so you can tear their heads off."

Chapter 104 (III) Reforge [II]

"Tearing off heads sounds great to me. When are we doing this?"

"As soon as I can inform Uva of the situation. She should be prepared too. More importantly, we have to go over a few things related to the Inquisition, Aviary, Compact... Basically all the madness that has happened to us recently. We need to debrief ourselves before anything else. But we don't have long. We have to be fast. We desperately need to know what Blackedge's situation is. All these resources, all this mithril treasure... I need to know what to buy and prepare first. The town has been besieged for weeks. Gods know how much damage it sustained, how many casualties there are."

"You're thinking of evacuating some people over to our gate," Shiv said.

"If possible. And so, I want you as dangerous and prepared as you can possibly be for our first scouting run. Expect the System to be its usual horrible self and throw something we're absolutely not prepared to fight, but we can make sure it strains itself doing so."

Adam looked at Can Hu and studied the Penitent for a moment. "Penitent Can Hu, are you well enough for another synthesis?"

"I am," Can Hu said. But Shiv noticed a shiver run through the machine, and if even he noticed...

Adam sighed. "Can Hu, do not lie, and do not over-exert yourself. You have nothing to prove. More importantly, you've already finished two syntheses. We need you in an effective state not only for the synthesis, but also to rebuild the gate. You are not to break yourself. You have obligations to the rest of us too, no matter how you feel. Actually, I am going to go there: You did not fail any of us by being disabled in battle, and you do not need to make up for it now. I understand you might not feel this way, but you must accept this. Whatever lack or regret in your performance, you are more valuable now as a crafter."

Can Hu's green optics narrowed and then brightened as he studied Adam.

"I was Penitent Chassis." Can Hu opened and closed a hand. "Now I do not know if I can even survive for more than a few seconds should Shiv use his Inertial Overdrive. Even with the bone adamantine armor as support, even with additional modifications made, I estimate my chances of surviving one of his inertial detonations to be sub-10 percent. I came to serve as armor once more, and now I'm unable to meet that function a mere day later."

"That's fine," Shiv interjected. "I don't care if you can't be my armor. We'll find another way. We'll figure something out for the Necromancy. But you're here with us now, and Adam's right. We want you functional. We don't want you broken. More importantly, we want you to get better. And maybe the Righteous Dawn Prevails might just do that. You want to be useful? You are. Right now."

Can Hu fell silent for a moment. "It has strengthened my existing skills, but it does nothing for those that have been destroyed."

"Then we'll build you from the ground up," Adam said. "We'll see you reforged, despite the damage. Maybe you need armor yourself. An armor for an armor. To aid in your movements."

The Penitent fell silent once more. But when it spoke, it spoke with certainty. "I can perform one more act of synthesis. One more. I ask you to trust in me. I will not strain myself. I will not damage myself. But I have one more in me."

Adam and Shiv looked at each other uneasily, but it was Valor that became the deciding voice of the dilemma. "Let it try. Let it be. If it does not, it will damage its Path. It will wound Can Hu on a level deeper than a broken skill."

The Legendary Pathbearer looked to the Penitent, and slowly Can Hu turned and offered Valor the slightest of bows. "It is important that we all chase after shadows. Shadows of who we were, and shadows of whom we can be. Desperate or delusional, it is yearning that makes us what we can become."

And now, Adam let out a slight, shuddering breath. Finally, his reluctance succumbed. "Fine. One more. And I'll boost you as much as I can this time. But if you cannot do it, just let it collapse. We'd rather lose a few pieces of Equipment than a good crafter and a good Pathbearer."

Can Hu didn't acknowledge Adam's state as it began shaping streams of liquid metal. Shiv pressed the topic. "Can Hu," Shiv said, without any particular rancor in his voice, "if I see you about to fall over, I'm going to make you stop. You are not killing yourself on my behalf. Adam letting you do this was his 'yes'. Well, this is mine. Do not break yourself. I'm not going to accept it. I'm still your pilot. Even if you can't be worn right now."

Can Hu looked at Shiv for a long, hard moment and said for the final time, "I am capable of one more synthesis."

Shiv clenched his jaw. "All right then, Pathbearer, prove it."

"Your components first," Can Hu declared. "I will see the deed done."

Before Shiv could respond, Adam leaned in. "I have two suggestions here. Can Hu mixes a piece of Absence with your new dagger. At the same time, another fragment of Absence's arcanite can go to your cloak when it is merged with Can Hu's Garden of Bountiful Alloy. It should amplify them as well. I will forgo my shard of the arcanite when your kukri is melded into my rapier."

Adam's suggestion caught Shiv entirely off-guard. "How does that work? Can Can Hu even work with them using its Geomancy?"

"There are material aspects to each item," Adam said. Can Hu confirmed that with a beep. "And more importantly, I know Dimensionality, so I'll be able to help Can Hu with this."

Shiv considered that. "So what, I'll be carrying a Category One dimension on my back?"

"Yes! Category One dimension on your back. You'll be able to store a lot more than just a few supplies. More importantly, you'll be able to carry a small garden full of regenerating alloys, and potentially a small group of active combatants on the inside as well."

And what Adam was proposing slowly took shape in his mind. Shiv imagined Adam or Uva hiding within his cloak while he rampaged forward, waiting for the right moment to disembark. Or Can Hu being inside his cloak and constructing new machines on the way. The thought was so absurd it made Shiv laugh.

"Do you get what I'm trying to do?" Adam said, smirking.

"Yeah. You're making me your personal troop carrier or something." Shiv nodded. "Fine, but I'm gonna need that cloak back. And you understand you're going to be sharing space with a lot of bodies and a lot of flayed skin."

"I think after what I've gone through," Adam murmured, "that's probably not going to be the worst of my nightmares."

With that agreed upon, Can Hu merged the final two pieces of Equipment for today. It melded the Skypiercer with a fragment of Absence. Again, two pools of mercury consumed each item. They slid together across the air, spilling as one, and a new glow filled the room. It was a prismatic glow—the glow of hyperconducted magic.

Can Hu let out a mechanical groan from deep within its being. Shiv took a step forward, but Adam held out a hand. He channeled a strong beam of his personal sun into Can Hu and gritted his teeth. "Wait. It has this. As do I."

At the same time, the Young Lord's legs were shaking as well. He was pushing himself as hard as Can Hu was. The beam pouring forth from his azure sun was practically solid by this point. As the spheres of mercury consumed the weapons, so too did the Righteous Dawn Prevails swallow Can Hu, and through it all, Shiv watched, beholding as the bubbling pool of mercury receded, and as the shape of a new blade unveiled itself.

It gleamed the color of a midnight rainbow—dark at the center, simmering with Dimensionality mana, but radiant along its edges. Its shape had changed as well. No longer was it a straight rondel dagger; instead, the blade developed a slight curve and was needle-thin, resembling Confriga's Absence more than ever before. A spike also protruded from the bottom, sharp enough to stab, with hooks on the side to enhance one's effectiveness in grappling. Its hilt became a series of metal petals rather than a simple round ring of metal.

With a loud, mechanical shriek, Can Hu unleashed a final burst of effort, and a spell slammed down upon the reforged item.

"The act is done," Can Hu crackled, nearly falling over. But before Shiv could catch him, Can Hu planted a leg. Its body screamed, but it remained upright. It did not fall. Shiv halted mid-step and just watched Can Hu for another few seconds, ignoring the weapon altogether.

"You're fine?" he asked.

Can Hu remained standing, even if it quivered, even if its body was making all kinds of strange noises. "I am. I have delivered on my promise, Pathbearer."

"So you have, Penitent," Shiv answered with a smile. "So you have."

Slowly, he walked over and picked up the dagger from where it hovered in the air. As soon as he took it out of Can Hu 's grasp, the bot nearly fell over. But Valor held Can Hu up, and they both retreated closer to Adam, closer to the azure dawn. The Young Lord's face was also bathed in a sheen of sweat. Both he and Can Hu had spent themselves substantially.

Equipment Obtained: [Skysplitter]

Tier: Master

Condition: Perfect

Composition: Arcanite; Adamantine

Enchantments > Spatially-Anchored; Size-Shifting; Master Self-Mending; Mass-Stealing; Binding; Master Magic Amplification

As Shiv clutched the weapon, he felt a flood of Awareness enter him. He suddenly gained an appreciation for how wide the world was, for the relative positioning and distances between objects.

Space was a form of magic, and on a subtle level, he could feel brushing against his personal Chronomancy skill as well.

Then he commanded his dagger to grow larger, and it did. Rather than becoming the lance, it extended first, materializing into something that resembled Absence for a moment, if more like a machete than a longsword. And then, as it continued growing, it became a glorious, thin needle, reaching eight meters, then nine. Then it was pressing up against the edges of the teleportation anchor. And he stopped it before it could go any further. But this was only the tip of the iceberg.

The weapon could grow larger. A lot larger.

He could also feel how his Biomancy clung to the material. His mana was being pulled into it. Every mana field he had was drawn to its edge. And that was why it was rainbow-bright. That was why its color shifted like an animated prism. It was literally a singularity for magic.

"I have not managed to breach the Heroic-Tier threshold for this synthesis," Can Hu said apologetically.

"No," Shiv replied, "this is pretty awesome. Besides, you'll get to try again when it breaks. I can't wait to field-test this. In fact," he looked at Adam, "when do you want to go on this scouting run exactly, because I'm—"

"We have a problem." They were interrupted by Uva appearing at the front door. Her face was impassive, but he read the storm clouds behind her eyes.

"Perhaps it would be more accurate, in fact, to say I and Shiv have a problem," Uva continued. "The Weaveress in charge of the expeditionary detail, Exalted Mother Null Mont, has commanded that I

report back to Weave for an in-depth debriefing, along with..." Uva paused, "...along with an interrogation session at Elaboration to ensure I am free of undue influences."

"What do you mean by 'interrogation session'?" Shiv said, his voice dropping to a low growl.

"I informed them of the Dreamtaker," Uva explained. "And the Stranger. Exalted Mother Null Mont has ordered me to depart immediately." And then she shuffled uncomfortably. "Also, she wishes to take your... Court Leviathan and the rogue vampire back with her as well. She has gone off to secure the packages. Against my recommendation."

"Oh, has she?" Shiv said. A slow, simmering pressure built up inside him. Shiv glared at his new knife, but slowly, his scowl turned to a smile as the radiant edges inspired an idea in him. "Hey, Adam. How big do you think this knife can get?"

The Gate Lord looked briefly confused, but then a look of amusement blossomed on his face as he understood. "I don't know. I think we should find out. In fact, I think as many people should find out as possible."

Uva's head swung between them, and the slightest hint of worry leaked from her mind. "Shiv. What do you mean by that?"

Shiv grunted with amusement. "Oh, you'll see, Uva. You'll see."

Chapter 105 (I) Persuasion

Sometimes, you don't need to actually kill or hurt someone to get what you want. Sometimes, a few threats, a bit of charm, and some bribery can go a long way...

-Memoirs of a Master-Tier War Mage

Exalted Mother Null Mont stared at the Court Leviathan hovering just over the Abyssal Gateway. A crackle of Aeromantic lightning danced along the metallic strips jutting free from her body. It did that when she was focused. It did that when she was excited. And right now, she was extremely excited. A Court Leviathan captured for Weave, as an offering to the Composer. This would be the offering of the decade, and more importantly, it would allow Elaboration a deeper insight into their greatest adversary.

Pair that with the unconfirmed turncoat vampire that remained aboard the Court Leviathan, and Null Mont had a bit more than just a significant offering. She might have a way to strike deep into the First Blood itself, if he could be properly adjusted...

Of course, it wasn't just good news. As Cherished Sister Uva Mettabon reported, there had been traitor Weaveresses here as well. Traitors Weaveresses who defected from Elaboration of all places. The Cherished Sister said they were part of an illegal weaver breeding operation and would have delivered them into custody, but the traitor Weaveresses unfortunately perished when the eldritch entity revealed itself.

And that led into the lamentable part of things.

Despite all the good work she had done, Sister Uva tragically allowed herself to be compromised in the process. The Sister recounted what happened in the gate, how things became so dire. As Null Mont listened, her disappointment grew. She expected more of a Sister of the Arachnae Order than to turn away from the Composer's song and seek power from a most unholy and unnatural source.

Outsiders, creatures beyond the System's purview or perhaps barely in it, were unworthy divines. And now one such unholy being had struck an accord with Sister Uva. More than an accord, it had infested the Sister's very eyes and imbued in her an Eldritch Skill. And Sister Uva had taken it into herself willingly.

Instead of being rewarded, she would likely need to undergo a lengthy interrogation and observation process at Elaboration. It seemed unjust, but alas, it was absolutely necessary. They couldn't let down their guard against the Outside. Or any unknown adversary for that matter. Weave only endured due to constant vigilance and the actions of Weaveresses like Exalted Mother Null Mont.

As she leaped across another chasm and landed atop a sloping half-collapsed wall that used to be the outside of a building, she stared at the great Court Leviathan and let out a light laugh. She stood at the very edge and gazed into the distance, as if an explorer standing atop a mountain. A mountain of ruin.

"Quite the windfall, isn't it?" she said to Brother Urad, one of the few male Umbrals who had joined the Arachnae Order. He gave the Exalted Mother a bow, yet there was something in it that seemed uneasy, and the unease in his body language was given voice by one Still Water.

"Exalted Mother," Still Water said, "I'm going to strongly suggest this again, I believe you should talk to Gate Lord Adam or Exalted Guest Shiv before making any decisions."

"What is there to speak of?" Exalted Mother Null Mont asked. "They are but guests. They have offered great deeds in service to Weave, but guests are all they are. This is a matter of the Composer's honor. This is for the defense of her, Lady Arachnae, for the defense of our city. In fact, they should be honored. Honored that I will mention their name in this service. If you are so concerned that they will be offended, then be off, Operative Still Water. Seek out the Gate Lord and Hero Shiv, and inform them of my decision. I had this conversation with Cherished Sister Uva already. I don't think I need to have it again with you."

Still Water held back a twitch of her palp, the closest thing a Weaveress could offer in place of a sigh. But then she adjusted her bandana and slowly turned to walk away instead of saying anything. Midstep, she paused as she noticed something. Still Water looked up into the air and let out a loud hiss of surprise as she almost tripped.

Exalted Mother Null Mont shook her head in disapproval. How a Heroic-Tier Trapdoor Weaveress could be so careless was beyond her. In fact, Null Mont was going to mention Still Water's lacking attention during the overall debriefing—

And then a shadow passed over Null Mont. A shadow passed over everyone. There came a heavy rush of wind, and Null Mont's Aeromancy sensed what felt like a heavy gale washing over her. Suddenly she turned, and she saw what looked to be a small mountain tumbling in her direction. Her Umbral escorts froze. She froze. Still Water threw her invisible cloak around her body and vanished from sight.

The colossal shape descended, and Null Mont quickly updated her description of the object. It didn't look like a small mountain. No, it was a tower. A tower the shape of a wickedly curved blade. It was thin and absurdly long at the top, and its edges radiated with a rainbow hue, while the flat sides of the blade pulsed with the darkness and distortion of Dimensionality.

As it fell, something clicked in Null Mont's head. She summoned a burst of Aeromancy and flung herself out of the way.

Just herself. The members of her escort would know how to handle themselves.

Null Mont landed on something fragile, something that shattered beneath her. It felt like porcelain. But to her surprise, she realized dodging was not necessary. The blade continued tumbling along, sailing far through the air until it crashed hard into the ground in the distance, just beneath the Abyssal Gateway.

There, a column of dust and debris rose into the sky from where the massive, tower-sized blade hilted itself.

And even still, it grew, swelling larger and grander until it was at least three hundred meters long before it finally stopped.

Through a haze of dust and a rain of descending shrapnel, Exalted Mother Null Mont stared at the colossal weapon, and it radiated with prismatic brightness. Suddenly, atop the hilt, came a pulse. A pocket of space opened, and a figure emerged. A figure clad in skeletal armor. Null Mont recognized the figure immediately. It was Exalted Guest Shiv, the Deathless Surfacers; the one that Cherished Sister Uva had also unwisely chosen to start an intimate relation with.

Exalted Mother Null Mont's mind whirled. Had he just thrown that tower at her? A... knife tower? A knife that he was now standing on, that he was... And there came an ungodly noise. A terrible noise as Shiv hovered across the sky, dragging the knife behind him with his left hand.

The ground parted. Things broke and split. More dust, more debris, more shrapnel filled the air. But what shook Null Mont the most was how easily he dragged that long blade behind him, as if it weighed nothing at all. As if he wasn't cleaving an entire section of the landscape apart as he got closer and closer to her.

Null Mont was also technically a Heroic-Tier Pathbearer—except her Heroic-Tier Skill was in Physics. Her Toughness and Aeromancy were a fused Master-Tier, but throwing that thing at her like that was...

What kind of skill allows one to casually drag something of that weight behind them? Could he truly have Gravitic Wrestler? I saw his profile, but...

Then, faintly, over the clatter of falling detritus, she heard something. She heard him whistling. His head was swinging from side to side, and the actions he performed were dramatic and exaggerated. Then, finally, he paused and then he looked down at Null Mont. He looked down at her Umbrals. He brought a dramatic hand up to his face and let out a very loud and obviously acted gasp. "Oh, no," Shiv cried. He planted a hand on his head. "Exalted Mother. Sisters. Uhh... Brother? Sorry. Can't tell with some of you. I did not see you there. I am so terribly sorry. I was just testing out this newly reforged knife I got. It is a very good knife. I was trying to see how far I could throw it once it reached its full size. Unfortunately, I was both stronger than I remember being, and this thing was larger than I expected. Whoops."

Null Mont's palps reared back in fury. Part of her mind screamed at her to be outraged, to rise into the air and to demand why the surfer had done this. But another part of her warned her that this might not be the wisest course of action with someone dragging a 300-meter-long building-sized dagger along the ground. That, and the other detail about how he couldn't quite stay dead...

That... that skill couldn't possibly work as had been described... Could it?

Beside Null Mont, Still Water suddenly unveiled herself again. "Well," Still Water said, a hint of mirth in the other Weaveress's voice, "looks like I don't need to go looking for them after all. They came looking for us. How convenient. Well, I'll leave you to it, Exalted Mother. I believe this is your duty now as the highest-ranking Weaveress present."

The Trapdoor Weaveress threw her cloak over herself and vanished once more.

"Wait, Still Water? Still Water!" Null Mont shouted.

And again, a shadow rose over Null Mont. Slowly, she turned to face the massive, looming blade...

"Shiv, Shiv, Shiv," Uva repeated again and again through her telepathic link. "Do not hurt her. Do not kill her. Do you understand me? Do not—absolutely do not—even touch her!"

"I'm not going to kill her," Shiv replied, his mind perfectly calm. "I'm just going to talk to her. I'm just going to cook some food for her. I just want to talk to her, you know? I like talking to people. I find people interesting. I find everyone interesting. I especially find it interesting when they try to steal my Court Leviathan from me, take a guest I invited into this gate prisoner, and demand that my girlfriend submit herself to some kind of questionable interrogation process after she nearly broke herself for me and the other survivors. So interesting."

Uva was about to issue her complaints again, but then she paused. "Shiv. Why am I last on your list?"

"Because between you, Angelo, and Courtney, only one of you could fry the mind of this poor, mentally challenged Weaveress."

"I cannot fry the mind of an Exalted Mother!" Uva's voice was filled with absolute revulsion.

Right, the Umbrals had that complex about the Weaveresses. Well, here was the worst outcome.

"Yes, but that's more of a personal decision rather than you not being able to do it. Angelo's too traumatized to put up much of a fight against anyone. Courtney's about as smart as a snail. So comparatively, you're the one I'm least worried about."

The temperature of Uva's mind fell by a few degrees.

"It's a compliment," Shiv replied.

Her mind got even colder.

Shit, I'm going to have to cook her something really felling nice after this.

"Listen, I'm not going to hurt her, okay? I just want to talk to her," he repeated.

"Adam," Uva spoke across their link. "Do not let Shiv hurt Exalted Mother Null Mont."

"What are you calling me for?" Adam replied. "I want to talk to her too."

Despite everything, an incredulous snort escaped the Umbral. And she sailed through the air, flying atop her shield as she blasted towards Shiv's current position. She could directly jump into his mind, but Shiv had a feeling that part of her wanted to see this. Part of her wanted to watch what might transpire when he had his little conversation with the Exalted Mother. And Shiv would oblige her.

In fact, he wasn't lying at all. He wasn't going to kill the Weaveress. Frankly, he wasn't going to hurt her at all. From what he could tell, and from what Uva described, Exalted Mother Null Mont was mostly a narcissistic glory hound. An asshole, in other words.

That didn't mean she had to die. But that was a good thing. Because he needed to train his Dread Aura some more.

But then again, if Shiv had to kill all the assholes in the world just for being assholes, there might not be that many Pathbearers left. Hell, there wouldn't be that many people left for that matter. "And I'll absolutely not do that, because it'll end with me stabbing Georges too," Shiv grumbled to himself. "No, I'll just be convincing. Real persuasive. Use reason and argumentation and all that, just like I wasn't taught at school."

There came a series of loud shouts from the Exalted Mother. She sounded kinda pissed, but the winds and the noise Shiv made as he continued pulling his new Skysplitter through the ground really made it hard to hear.

"How's the knife?" Adam asked telepathically, more curious about the weapon for now.

"Pretty good," Shiv replied. "Gets up to 300 long, but that's about it. Anymore and it starts shaking uncontrollably. I think I'll end up breaking after that."

"And the mass?"

"Mass is stable," Shiv replied. "Right now, it feels... I don't know, maybe a fourth as heavy as the Jealousy. I think it can still draw in more weight, but it'll make moving it around harder."

"A fourth as heavy as a massive Greater Demon. Sounds pretty impressive to me," Adam replied. "It will come in useful if you need to weigh someone down or potentially smash a large group of people to death."

"Or just one very annoying spider." As Shiv thought those words, he narrowed his eyes at the Exalted Mother. Again he wasn't going to kill her. He absolutely wasn't. But it was very, very unkind of her to just try taking what was his.

"Hero Shiv!" Null Mont shouted. This time, he was close enough to hear her. She was flying through the air, lightning crackling across the many metal extensions jetting out from her body. Shiv wondered again what kind of Skill Evolution that was. Aeromancy and Physicality? Toughness?

"I guess I can ask her in a minute," Shiv muttered to himself.

"Have you gone completely mad?" Null Mont asked, her tone clearly extremely pissed. "What is the meaning of this?"

Shiv pulled off his helmet and gave the approaching Weaveress a wide grin. "What? What's wrong?"

"You!" she cried again. She stuck one of her long limbs in his face. And just then, Shiv realized she was a pointer. She liked to point. She pointed the same way at Uva's eyes. He eyed the small humanoid finger sticking out from her forelimb, ignoring the intrusive thought to bite it. "What has possessed you, surfer? Was this deliberate? Do you have any idea what you have just done?"

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry," Shiv apologized again, putting his hand on his chest. "I didn't realize you were there. You see, I was testing my knife."

"Testing your knife?" Null Mont asked, incredulous. "Your... your knife? This?"

"Yeah, it's my knife." He ripped the enormous Skysplitter out of the ground, casually lifting it over his head. He bit back a slight grunt of exertion as he forced himself to not topple over backwards. Yeah, this wasn't that practical for most combat scenarios. He needed speed more than mass. Frankly, what might be more useful was injecting doses of mass into an enemy or stealing mass from them, if that was possible. It was something he was going to have to discover in the field.

The Weaveress's palps flared back. A few strings of lightning went off course, whipping into the wind rather than traveling along the many metal extensions sticking out from her arms. "You—" the Weaveress choked. Shiv lifted the blade high, rearing it back. He felt her courage crack down to its foundations. "No! Do not—The Composer will—"

Then, with a casual swing, Shiv slashed out with his knife.

Chapter 105 (II) Persuasion

A blast of wind washed over both of them, and before Null Mont could be sent flying, he reached out and caught her with his left hand. "Shit, sorry. Didn't think I cut that hard" The tip of his blade severed a small piece from Courtney, the Court Leviathan. A piece of the tentacle fell. The leviathan didn't even notice, for the wound filled a half second later.

Shiv shifted his new blade and caught the piece of Leviathan flesh along its flat side.

"Shiv!" Uva hissed across their link. "Do not hurt her in creative ways, either! No Bowel-Breakers or—"

"Relax." Shiv grinned at Null Month. "This is just going to be a conversation about personal property, what constitutes a prisoner, and also respecting a certain Cherished Sister of Weave. I know some of what she wants isn't entirely unreasonable, but she can't just take my stuff without even asking. And more importantly, she can't just take you. Not now and not on a whim. We have extremely pressing issues. These things need to be discussed. And if she's not going to respect us, I'm going to have to cook for her."

The Skysplitter began to shrink. The blade retracted, and in seconds the massive, tower-sized blade drew closer to Shiv's body, bringing the piece of leviathan flesh with it. But when the blade reached forty meters, Shiv stopped shrinking it. Instead, he descended, and found two nice pieces of rubble to place his Skysplitter upon.

We'll be able to start up a nice fire below...

"What are you doing?" Null Mont cried. She pried at her arm, and Shiv released her before this could truly turn into an actual struggle.

"Are you hungry?"

She froze. "What? What are you—"

"Let me cook a piece of a Court Leviathan for you. Did you have any earlier?"

"I... No! No! I refuse! I refuse to eat this... It is a plague-beast of the enemy. How you managed to convince the others to indulge in such a foul act, I will never understand, but—"

"Come on, I insist," Shiv said. "I really do." He gave her his most earnest stare as he started channeling a stream of his own Pyromancy across the blade. Despite his fire magic being relatively underdeveloped, the edge of the blade ignited like a burning rainbow, amplifying the power of the magic substantially. Soon, the first sounds of cooking flesh sizzled upon the blade. "You won't regret it. And, I'll tell you what. If you don't like what I cook for you, I'll let you have the Court Leviathan."

"Let me?" Her voice was somewhere between confusion and absolute fury. "I am the Exalted Mother in charge of this expedition, and I will not be talked down to like some kind of weaverling! You—"

But just then, Adam appeared beside her, coming to an uncanny halt as his Vectors of the Eternal Ascent stopped their acceleration. "Shiv," the Gate Lord cried out, his voice nasally and high with exaggeration. "I told you to watch where you are throwing that thing, you silly goose!!"

Adam zipped beside the Weaveress. "I am so terribly sorry!" he said, gripping Null Mont by another one of her arms and pulling her down even faster alongside Shiv. "Please, let Shiv apologise for this grave transgression to you by cooking you a meal."

"What?" she said, her anger losing the fight to naked confusion. Across their mental links, Shiv and Adam could feel each other struggling not to crack up.

"Do not make me laugh, you shit," Shiv said, his right eye twitching.

"Focus on yourself, you bastard. And stop making that expression at me." Adam shuddered, clenching his teeth as hard as he could.

"Cooking food," Adam said, "is something surfacers do as an apology to each other all the time. We must insist. If you reject us, Shiv will be required to commit an honor suicide to redeem his shame."

"A what?" Null Mont gasped.

Shiv shook his head. "It is a thing of honor."

"Honor is extremely important to us," Adam said, staring intently at the Weaveress.

"Honor and respect," Shiv added, spiking his Dread Aura ever so slightly. "So, please. Take a bite. Just a tiny little bit. Let's talk about what just happened between us. You know. Start off on a new foot. Turn the page."

The Weaveress's head swung between them. "I..."

But by now they were grounded, standing upon a field of rubble. A field of rubble further displaced by Shiv dragging a massive blade across the ground.

Null Mont was placed before the Skysplitter as Shiv pulled out his chef's knife and cut the leviathan into several smaller pieces. Briefly, he dosed it with a puff of moisture using his Hydromancy and shaped a Biomancy spell as he started kneading them into five dense spheres of meat. Then, he pressed the meatballs back against the blade, and they sizzled before Null Mont very eyes.

Her courage started trembling. But a burst of lightning flashed out from her body. "This... I do not know what trick this is. But you cannot force me to eat flesh rich with viruses and plagues."

"I think I can," Shiv said. "I'll take a bite first if you're worried."

"I'll eat one right after to show that it's safe," Adam continued.

"I do not care if you eat the entire Leviathan!" Null Mont snarled. "There is no way you can make me devour a piece of that... that creature. No one but Her Lady Arachnae, the Composer herself, could compel me to... to..."

And now Null Mont noticed a certain Legendary Pathbearer hovering beside her. "Young one," Valor began. "You should cherish every bit of food you get. Every flavor. For you never know when you might lose the opportunity to indulge in the finer things in life."

"G-Great Valor," Null Mont squeaked. "I—I thought you were... You are still damaged. I think you should—" She then finally noticed how her Umbrals were getting called away by Can Hu, leaving her here entirely alone.

“Eat,” Valor said. “Taste it. Taste it on my behalf. I insist. I want you to describe how it tastes to me. Every detail. It will be an honor to hear such a thing from you. More importantly, I will offer a good word to the Composer about your bravery and willingness to experiment when I next greet her in person.”

“I...” Null Mont flinched as Shiv held out a small piece of leviathan meatball impaled on the end of his chef’s knife.

“Come on,” Shiv whispered. “It’s just a bit. I gotta make you feel better. I gotta apologize. I have to. I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself if, say, this was your last meal. If you somehow got ambushed and then torn apart by the First Blood while trying to get back to Weave with my Court Leviathan, I would consider it a great regret of my life.”

“He would be honor-bound to raise your shadow and make your Necromantic remnant eat the food instead,” Adam whispered. He added a shudder at the end.

“I don’t want to,” Shiv said. “But traditions demand it. Honor and respect.”

“Honor and respect,” Adam repeated.

“Take the bite,” Valor said, leaning in. “Do it. Do it now.”

Null Mont's courage shuddered and cracked as she looked between all three Pathbearer's pressuring her to take a bite. "I—I... Oh, Composer preserve—"

"Oh, Composer..." Null Mont looked between them, and slowly she stared down at the prismatic edge of the Skysplitter. Her body language betrayed just how forlorn she was that there was not more food. But more than that, it betrayed how confused she felt. "How?"

Shiv snorted as he shook his head. His arms were folded, and he had watched her squirm throughout. Squirm, until she took her first bite.

Then, the ugly part was all over. Everyone else regarded her with a similar level of amusement.

Now that the Weaveress was appropriately sedated, Shiv intended to deal with the issue properly.

Shiv walked off to the side and pulled a piece of rubble over. He sat on it and stared at Null Mont for a moment. "Look, Exalted Mother, can I be very honest with you for a second?" She looked away from her food and stared at him. There wasn't so much anger, terror, or annoyance in her anymore. It was mostly just faint astonishment and incredulity.

You could control a lot about how someone acted if you had something they wanted. If they were happy, if they were influenced, if they wanted something from you. That's what Shiv realized. That was what he learned from watching Georges deal with people over the years.

And this was the main reason why he told Uva that he wasn't going to hurt Null Mont, why he knew it was going to be the absolute truth. Because day after day, month after month, year after year, Georges would get into fights with Pathbearers, soldiers who frequented the Swan-Eating Toad.

And after the fight, after intense exchanges of curses, and sometimes the involvement of guards, the same Pathbearers would come back to the Swan-Eating Toad and eat there like nothing had ever happened. Because they wanted the food there. Because the fight was a momentary lapse in self-control, usually on their part. Georges just got very mad. But there was nowhere like the Swan-Eating Toad. And feelings were things that changed with proper incentivization.

Null Mont was a glory-seeking narcissist that was about to negatively affect the group's cohesion. But she ultimately wasn't a lethal threat, just a social one. And social threats were just another thing Shiv needed more practice in dealing with.

"What do you mean by honest?" Null Mont replied, sounding uncertain and dubious.

"Yeah," Shiv said. "I like being honest. Look, you trying to take the Court Leviathan from me was kind of a shitbag thing to do." He looked at Courtney. "I spent quite some time clearing it out. In fact, I died a good few times taking that. Now, if you wanted to buy it from me, or potentially if you wanted to explain how useful it would be for Weave and why I should give it to you, I would have dealt with you honestly. The answer would have been no, but I would have been straight. And I wouldn't need to do this whole threaten you with a knife then cook food on it shit to get you to speak with me like an actual adult."

Null Mont's palps reared back in near-outrage. "I—"

“And Angelo, the vampire you want to take prisoner, you understand that he was going to get his heart cut out by the others, right? He was just trying to set up a village. You don’t even seem to care about why I brought him back. You know how many vampires I’ve killed in the past two days alone? A hell of a lot. Think about that. And think about why I left him alive.”

“It... He is of the First Blood. He has a Lineage Core.”

Shiv frowned. “Yeah. I guess he can be useful. Have you tried talking to him? Asking if he can help you? Did you even speak with him once at all? No. He’s still on the Leviathan, last I checked.

“He hasn’t even touched his food yet,” Adam confirmed. “He’s just staring into the bowl.”

“Shit,” Shiv muttered. “I probably should go talk with him myself. But back to you, Null Mont. The fuck’s your problem? What are you trying to do? What? You think bringing back a Court Leviathan is going to get you accolades and glory? Null. How the hells did you get sent here? Because you didn’t think this through. You didn’t think a lot of things through. Why do you think I would have just let that go? Why do you think the Composer would have rewarded you for slighting people she considers heroes just for bringing back... What? A Court Leviathan? Yeah. Nice. Useful. But you think it’s more valuable than the Jealousy?”

“Slightly less,” Null Mont said.

“What?”

“It’s useful because it regenerates.” She let out a sigh. “It’s a partial solution to the population problem. Weaveress eggs... You know how our life cycles work?”

Adam and Shiv shared a look as both of them understood.

“You're using them as breeding material?” Shiv said.

“Yes. And they are good incubators at that. Good stock. But we still need more.”

“And so you just tried to take it from me?” Shiv asked.

“I just...” Null Mont paused. “I assumed you wouldn't fight me over it.”

“Because you're a Weaveress?” Shiv asked. “And I'm not?”

A long pause followed. In the end, Null Mont didn't say anything.

Shiv considered several options then. He decided to exercise a bit of charisma for once. To see if he could make use of her instead of just terrifying her into submission. She wanted glory? She wanted to indulge in pride? Fine. He'd give her those opportunities. But she would need to play along and learn about respect.

“Exalted Weaveress, I am not an Umbral. I am not of your culture. Your social advantages don’t mean anything to me. So. You’re going to have to deal with me like I’m a person. You’re worried about Uva being compromised by the Outsiders. Fine. Valid fear. But sending her back to Weave on a whim immediately is stupid. Do you think we can hold the gate without her? What other Heroic-Tier Psychomancers do you have?”

“There is a risk she might be compromised,” Null Mont said.

“Yeah. But did she tell you everything? About the Dreamtaker? Her new skills.”

Null Mont looked away. “Yes.”

“And you think an Outsider would let her do that? Just give all that away? The suspicion I get. The rest of the shit you decided is half-assed. This is not the time to take her out of the field. We can’t afford it. You can’t afford it. And the Abyss can’t afford it.”

“The... Abyss?” Null Mont replied.

“Yeah. We’re here to stop another war between the surface and the Abyss from happening. And you were about to get in the way of that.”

Once more, her courage fissured. “I... I—”

“She might be more of an arrogant, unthinking idiot than a narcissist,” Adam muttered.

“Yeah. How the hells did she find herself in charge of this expedition anyway?” Shiv asked.

“Well. Weaveresses are overly favored... And with the right connections...”

“You think that’s how it is?” Shiv asked.

“That’s how it is everywhere,” Adam replied.

“Listen, I see that you’re still thinking about Weave, so. I’m going to help you. And you’re going to help me. How does that sound?”

“How?” Null Mont asked.

“Instead of you just walking around and making a bunch of executive decisions, why don’t you come along with us, and we can figure some things out together. Think about it. Would it be more glorious for you to take part in an operation that stops Vicar Sullain from getting a whole lot more people killed than whatever you were planning?”

Null Mont considered it. And then she regarded him once more. "Perhaps... Maybe... We can discuss a few more things over a meal? One you make? To further the honor and respect between us."

Shiv smiled. "Yeah. Honor and respect. Sounds like we reached an understanding."

"Shiv," Adam said. "I think I might just take you up on some cooking lessons."