

## Deathless 106

### Chapter 106 (I) Peace

You will not become a true Pathbearer if you're afraid of taking risks, if you're afraid of doing new things, if you're afraid of developing yourself. You cannot let yourself go stagnant. But part of that is recovery. Part of that is having new experiences. Part of that is learning new things.

Talk to people. Sink into the world. Immerse yourself. Open your mind to new encounters. Let your understanding of the world be varied and develop more than one skill.

It is a common thing for Pathbearers to over-focus, to over-commit to a singular aspect of themselves, like a warrior who commits only to be a frontline warrior, prideful of their Physicality, Toughness, and Mace Proficiency, but nothing else. Perhaps they will find themselves accomplished in the use of a shield as well. But what worth is that in times of peace? To live is to war. War does not just mean struggling against an adversary. It means to struggle against progress, against yourself, to build up your communities, and to forge a kingdom worth living in.

If all you are worth is the weapon in your hand, then what worth will you find of yourself when there are no adversaries to slay? Perhaps you will throw yourself time and time again into the fray until you truly find yourself favored by the System. But that is unlikely. It is more likely that death will find you first instead.

Become rich. Become broad. Once you establish a foothold with one skill, use it to expand your other choices as well. Breadth is choice, students, and choice is life. Choice is vitality. Choice is hope for the future. And choice is how you advance beyond your bottlenecks.

Become more. Don't just fight to hold and build up what you have right now. This is not a time of scarcity. This is a time for eternal growth.

-Master-Instructor Hercule Attano, Phoenix Academy GEN-PREP 101

After dealing with their “Idiot Weaveress Commander” problem, Courtney, the Court Leviathan, remained where it was; Angelo was allowed to remain aboard Courtney and stare catatonically into his soup, and Uva was allowed to remain in place at her current post, provided that a few other Umbrals kept an eye on her in case she exhibited any eldritch symptoms.

All in all, this was the most optimal outcome. Null Mont was annoying, troublesome, and frankly kind of an asshole, but Shiv had dealt with assholes before. She wasn't any more special than a customer demanding special treatment or some noble who thought himself better than everyone else.

And I can't exactly kill all of my problems, Shiv thought to himself. Well, I could. I could definitely kill Null Mont. I could probably definitely eventually kill anyone, I think, but it's not that useful. Frankly, it'll make me more enemies than allies. The System is already gunning for my head. I need to be a little bit careful and subtle.

He snapped his fingers. Finesse was the word he was looking for. Finesse gave him more options and kept things from getting messier. He'd killed enough people to populate a small town recently. A bit of a pause was due. If he kept going like he did before, Shiv worried that he might slip closer to the state he was in when he was affected by the Orcish Skill—not a place he wanted to be.

As a moment of calm followed, he observed two dozen Umbral Geomancers supported by Can Hu lifting sections of the fallen gate back into place. Massive stone supports sprouted out from the ground, forming rows of pillars that led from the Surface Gateway to the Abyssal Gateway. Between them, the gateway to Vulketh was sealed twice over, once by spell and once again by a layer of dense alloy.

For now, the Vultegs and Lord Scorn hadn't even done anything, but Shiv was sure the peace wouldn't last. Lord Scorn was quite offended that his gate had been taken and that his Lesser Marshal and forces had been butchered. Shiv expected another fight on that front sooner or later.

Preferably later right now, though. Right now, Shiv and the others could really use a moment to recover. They had to build up their arms and prepare for the ugliness to come. And there was going to be a great deal of ugliness coming down the way. Especially with Lord Scorn's Quest hanging over their heads.

And that's another asshole trying to kill us, he thought to himself. Oh, there's nothing for it. If they're gonna come, I'm gonna have to break them. But if he wanted to break them, he needed to prepare, just like everyone else.

Adam used the opportunity to get some much-needed respite. Right now, he was watching the city from on high. His vector wings sprouted wide, each of the pyramid-like shards glistening in the air. He hovered beside his mana core, and Valor was there with him, gesturing, talking. Shiv found it amusing how Valor and Adam's relationship had developed.

At first, Valor demanded that Shiv stick him in the Young Lord's eye during the incident at Cradle. Now? Now they were talking about all sorts of things. They're practically spending more time together than I am with either of them, Shiv thought. Then again, he'd had a busy few weeks too.

Every now and again, Shiv would see one of Uva's mana strands flick across the city, probably scouting down leads or trying to make sure no one was plotting any devious schemes. Her priority assignment right now remained the Owl, figuring out what Aviary was planning, why they were in league with the Educator, and, more importantly, discovering what the Educator exactly was. She also asked for her eldritch book earlier. Shiv was slightly reluctant to give it to her, but then again, he did have the Odes as well, and she needed to understand her new skill. To understand her increasingly Eldritch...

His mind trailed off.

He wasn't sure what the Dreamtaker exactly was. The Outsider had come in and assisted Uva when things got desperate. It reached out to her through the Eldritch Insight skill, and attached part of itself to her—or infused its eldritch domain to her eyes somehow—after she connected her mind to the eldritch tome.

That changed Uva's Eldritch Insight Skill into something else altogether. The tome they'd taken from Confriga's vault was aptly named *The Colors Beyond*. At times, the book murmured, but it spoke with a myriad of dissonant voices calling out still to the dead Gate Lord, not responding when either Shiv or Uva spoke to it in return.

And there was another mystery they had to deal with. The second book-based mystery, they had, actually. There was still the Educator's Tome of the Forgotten Artist they had to work through. Shiv had taken a glance at that a few moments ago. It was badly burned throughout, but some pictures were still somewhat intact, mostly depicting people or locations from the past. Most of the pictures were utterly ruined, but Valor had said he might be able to restore some of them and uncover some more details regarding the forgotten Ascendant.

As for Shiv himself, he retreated to his personal quarters aboard the Court Leviathan. He suspected these quarters once belonged to the captain of this Leviathan, the one who probably died when Shiv's Inertial Overdrive went off time and time again. But with the interior of the beast so badly demolished, and Shiv uninterested in the vampiric aesthetic of blood and torture anyway, some redecorating was in order.

But that was for later.

His first focus for now was meal preparation. While everyone else worked on their personal tasks for the gate, Shiv pursued his own art form—his own primary non-combat contribution to his team and the gate. He was thankful that the System allowed him this moment of calmness to further focus on his cooking. At some point, either he or a group of Umbrals and Weaveresses would need to move out to survey the surroundings again.

Frankly, he preferred it to be himself. He suspected that the First Blood would likely launch counterattacks or at least scouting teams, and the difference between Compact and Weave's defensive powers was substantial. Weave, increasingly, seemed the weakest of the Five Faiths to Shiv. They were careful, they moved in the dark, and they operated using small teams to survey their enemies and strike strategically, doing everything they could to avoid battles of attrition.

Shiv had also noticed a distinct lack of high-powered martial Pathbearers among the Weaveresses and Umbrals. Still Water was one of the major Heroes, and her specialty was in Stealth. Her Reflexes were Master-Tier, as was her Physicality, but aside from that, Shiv wasn't sure about her other skills. There was also Dven back at Cradle. However, it, like many of the Heroes or higher at Weave, was more along the lines of utility Pathbearers, people who offered logistical or structural advancements for their society.

I wonder if it's all being held together by the Composer herself.

Shiv considered that. He considered how accessible the Composer was, how easy it was for her to interact with her people. Her song was always playing, and she had her own place at the heart of her dimension. Compared to that, the Challenger seemed of a higher nature altogether, a fundamental force of existence, a natural disaster of cosmic scale lurking behind a veil. The System supposedly kept gods at bay, but the Composer seemed to have fewer restrictions than all the other ones. Maybe that's her special nature, he considered. He recalled her saying something like that. Maybe that's because she's more of a demigod than a full one. She was born from the Great One, whatever that means for her.

These were some of the passing thoughts he experienced as he worked on making more food. An Umbral Cryomancer and several Weaveress engineers dropped by to help him set up a few storage silos, large cylindrical structures made from alloy and infused with Cryomancy that were built beneath the Court Leviathan. Furthermore, not far away, Shiv had a "cooking arena" set up for himself.

He didn't exactly have a full kitchen set available to him, but after using his Biomancy to clean the meat a bit and using his Skysplitter's Master Magical Amplification to heat his massive pan via Pyromancy—or to fill cauldrons with boosted Hydromancy, he started preparing meat by the tons.

## The Chef Unwavering 55 > 57

They still needed a self-sufficient water treatment plant along with a waste plant and functional sewage. So far, the survivors of the gate were out of the most critical circumstances, and a great many of them were weak. Many were young, and some had problems with their bodies from long before. Shiv's regeneration had given them a brief surge of vitality. Their organs were rejuvenated, their lesser diseases were obliterated outright, but more complicated difficulties still remained, some far beyond Shiv's current capabilities to help.

And that made Shiv wonder. When my Biomancy fused with my Cooking earlier, I could see the effects of... Well, if I just cannibalized someone using my Biomancy, if I absorbed them into myself... I think that's what the skill fusion lets me do. But it also listed out the exact benefits, so I don't need to just taste them blindly to find out. This will be good for me to come up with a book of recipes. In fact, I should, yeah, I definitely should start writing something like this. Take down the details and list out what I can do.

Then, he paused as he considered his Plaguefueled skill.

But not only ingredients, not only dishes. I can absorb plagues now. Hell, I can absorb diseases. Anything that destabilizes my functional organic state should count as a disease. So if I inflict more of those on myself and absorb them, well, that's like another layer of Berserk on top of Berserk. Frankly, it's better than Berserk. It makes me feel a little bit drunk, but I function better with it. They can probably also go together. I should test that out sometime. If I use my Plaguefueled skill on myself and then follow up with Berserk, how powerful will I get?

The prospects of that made him feel a little giddy, but Shiv centered himself before he got a little too deep into the fantasy. He needed to learn more about diseases, about viruses, about nerve agents, and all the things that could compromise a physical body's structure.

Within the Court Leviathan, he died many times. He'd had absolutely no answer to the complexity of the viruses flooding into him. Any other Pathbearer—well, any other organic Pathbearer—would have fallen then, slain by the Biomantic plagues and sicknesses of the First Blood. He was a different case. He could learn in a way no one else could. He could experiment in a way no one else could. And with this Court Leviathan, he had more than just a steady supply of meat. He had something of a biological playground: a perfect test subject.

As long as I can keep it alive. It has a Biomancy Core, but I think it still needs to eat. It looks smaller than it did before. Also feels a little bit sluggish, maybe? And then Shiv recalled the prisoner containment pods on the underside of its body, and how it could assimilate biomass. It consumed a few of his bodies as well, directly through its brain. That would be a useful capability for Shiv to learn, wielding biomass directly and potently like that. But also, that might be the cost of sustaining the Court Leviathan. It might be able to regenerate, but its metabolism still ran off a substantial amount of calories, even magically reduced to a minimum.

"Maybe I'm gonna need to go out and hunt down some cave biters for you anyway, huh, girl?" He didn't really know if the Court Leviathan was a girl, but he was already calling it Courtney. So. It was a girl to him. A large, monstrous, plague-infused girl.

At present, Uva said it was mostly in a docile state because it was passive, bred to be so, biomantically and psychomantically altered to be this way. If they wanted to spur it to violence, they needed to control both its body and its mind. She said she doubted she could do it alone since a lot of its biological structures were complicated, requiring more than a few Biomancers to integrate and direct its bodily functions.

Right now, Shiv was barely tapping into any of its proper capabilities. The regeneration it was capable of was simply a passive thing. The beast was capable of shapeshifting, of modifying its biological architecture within and without. It could grow those large maggots that fired out and detonated themselves in spreads of parasitic acid. Shiv had destroyed all those creatures, but the Court Leviathan was definitely capable of growing more of them as well as more varied bio-organisms. It had those wounds within it as well, places for the vampires to conduct whatever foul blood or flesh rituals they did to shape Blood Horrors and other monsters.

Or maybe even themselves, Shiv thought. Maybe even myself. He remembered how some of the vampires could shapeshift and adjust the nature of their flesh on the fly. Shiv was doing a very rudimentary version of that with his bone armor, but he needed to think further, and if he wanted to get to that point, he needed to advance his Practical Metabiology.

As he finished preparing the bulk of the meat, he made a few easy-to-eat military rations for his allies as well. He stored some of the Court Leviathan flesh in small packages, ones that could fit in a pouch or slot on someone's armor. With the amount of regeneration the Court Leviathan provided, it would be useful for Adam, Uva, or any of the Umbrals and Weaveresses to bring this on a battlefield.

Shiv couldn't always be there with his Woundeaters, and allied Biomancers might be missing as well. If he could cook, if he could continue providing such powerful boosts in combat thanks to The Chef Unwavering, then he was going to do so. Frankly, that was another avenue of advancement for everyone: varied ingredient boosts.

He wanted to see just how many boosts he could offer someone through a combination of different dishes. Right now, it seemed like it furthered someone's existing skills or amplified their physical and mental condition in some way. He hadn't cooked anything that affected magic, though. That was what he wanted to figure out next. Could he make magic better? Could he make someone learn faster if he just cooked the right meal or used the right ingredients?



Yeah, definitely starting that recipe book. He had an easy way of making functional health potions for everyone in the form of well-cooked Court Leviathan meat. Mixing in Mendules and some of the river weeds—what were they called again? Whatever it was called, it dramatically boosted that effect as well.

But there were many creatures across the Abyss, many creatures Shiv had yet to sample. Why am I just thinking about the Abyss, either? The Surface is also filled with creatures I haven't sampled yet. If I can do this with the Court Leviathan or the Jealousy, what might I be able to get from something like... Shiv considered a hawk, a rat. Do those offer bonuses as well? More than a recipe book, he was likely going to need to open something of an experimental slaughterhouse for himself. And a farm.

After a few hours, Shiv finished his preparations and stored a good supply of meat for the coming days in a few of his silos. This would go a long way to maintaining the gate's stability and keep the weakest people fed and hale. He would need to go out and harvest more things in time, but for once, he felt like he had time.

Right now, the System was suspiciously merciful. There were no problems coming from the mercenaries, no fires started, no bombs triggered, no eldritch beings invaded.

Shiv decided he would have time for a moment for himself as he landed upon Courtney, taking a seat on the beast's massive, sloped head.

He watched as half of a district was being connected to the surface district, offering the survivors more room to expand. Soon, they wouldn't need to be so cramped anymore. The surface district also no longer had any buildings either. Most of their foundations had been compromised, and with how unstable they were, they had to be knocked down anyway, reused as material.

District Gained: [Unspecified District]

Chapter 106 (II) Peace

Shiv blinked as the notification appeared. Unspecific district. Yeah, the gate could gain skills and grow like a Pathbearer in some ways thanks to its mana core. He guessed this was something everyone in the gate saw when a major development was reached.

Regardless, the best thing happening right now was that the bulldozing of the buildings in the surfacer district allowed for full, temporary encampments to be built up. The first was for the automata. Can Hu had gone there after finishing with today's reconstruction efforts to start building up something of a makeshift power station. He also constructed some maintenance drones that actively worked around the clock to keep the other automata functional.

Aside from them, there were the biological slaves and dignitaries. The slaves required more attention from the Umbrals and the Weaveresses. Many of them were weak of body, traumatized of mind, and had other afflictions as well. Shiv's Court Leviathan tentacle soup supercharged their regeneration for a while, rejuvenated their organs, and helped them deal with some of their lesser diseases, like lingering dysentery resulting from the Bowel-Breaker, but they still had many other problems. Some of them had complicated afflictions that went beyond lingering food poisoning or even metabolic dysfunction. Others had Curses that necessitated non-physical treatments, and that was just the thing.

There was more than one way to hurt someone in this world, and the sickness of a soul ran deeper than the sickness afflicted on the body.

It was an ugly thing, being Pathless. But having the Path of the Slave? You were just pliable clay for someone else to abuse, clay that couldn't fight back because your Path didn't allow you to have the proper skills. The System was a cold piece of shit. All one needed to do was focus, and they would see so much ugliness even in existence itself.

Shiv had known that ugliness his entire life. He'd lived some of it, but now he wasn't going back. He wasn't backing down. The System could throw whatever it wanted at him. He wasn't going back. He wasn't going to be broken. He would die for good before he let himself break.

But that was just how he thought.

Increasingly, he was noticing that he was different, dramatically different from all the other people. Valor wanted to talk to him about his mind earlier, about how it had been altered. Uva just needed to stitch some of his broken cognition back together before he started healing on his own accord, before he could re-enter the fight.

Even now, though he didn't like thinking about it, the scars left over from the torture he endured at the hands of the Recollector were fading fast, and it barely traumatized him at all. He enjoyed that. He enjoyed feeling untouched by the world in some ways, being untouched by damage even after it was inflicted on him. But there was something deeply off about his nature just for being able to do this. Harlon and Vera, he thought to himself, my parents. My parents are the cause behind this. My parents and... Udraal. Did he help them with the ritual? Valor keeps bringing his name up. Was talking about my mind earlier. But the stories just say he was killed by Roland...

Udraal Thann, Rose whispered, responding after a long lull of silence. I remember him. I remember facing him. A treacherous enemy, a dangerous foe. He was capable of so many things. And his expression was the saddest I have ever seen on a man.

"And you said that you killed him."

I'm sure of it, Rose breathed. Roland, he fired an arrow, one blessed by the Starhawk himself. It struck the Abyssal Lord. It ignited his very soul, burned him to cinders at the foundations of his being. But here this Valor is, talking about how his son still seems to be alive.

No one seems to think this guy is dead except for you, Shiv noted.

I watched as his soul came ablaze. I saw, I... And then Rose's voice trailed off as a whimper entered her breath. I saw so much, and I can't remember. Why can't I remember? Why am I trapped here? Why am I bound to you? Did you...

"Rose," he said. He had no more taste for avoiding this. He'd ignored her long enough, felt uncomfortable about her long enough, but he was going to deal with some of this right now, if he could. "Listen to me. I told you before I'm going to try to get you out, but I need you to tell me something in return. I need you to tell me about my parents, about why they might have done this ritual, about... Rose. Try to remember. Is it possible that my parents had any contact with Udraal Thann before you and Roland killed him?"

Before... At any point... Rose whispered. I think... I think... A long silence dragged on, and Rose let out a sigh. I don't know. I think I'm just a shadow of what I used to be.

"Yeah," Shiv said, letting out a breath of his own. "I think I see a lot of people who are shadows of what they used to be. I'm beginning to suspect that the System's trying to tell me something. I just can't quite figure out what."

No, no, wait, Rose suddenly said. Shiv's attention shifted back inward.

"What? What is it?"

I think... I remember... I remember him... leading us away.

"Leading you away? Where?"

There was... There was a moment, a moment of truce or understanding, a parley. He was leading us somewhere. He was... he spoke to us. He spoke to Roland, and Harlon was there, and Vera, and... and they were... I'm sorry.

"No, it's fine. It's just..." He gritted his teeth. "I'm sorry this happened to you. I'm sorry my parents did all this. I'm... I'm not sorry for existing, though. I don't hate myself. I want to live. I want... I want a lot of things. I'm... Despite everything I suffered recently, I... This is a great life. I love being a Pathbearer. I love cooking for people. I love going from place to place, doing what I can, getting more skills. I can't be sorry about that. I won't lie to you."

Rose just listened. She didn't reply with anger or fury, but she did let out the slightest sob.

"But I am sorry that this is what it took to make me. I am sorry if..." He tried to put together the words. The more he talked about this, the more chaotic his mind felt. "I am sorry that my parents were... Shit. Whatever they did, I don't understand it either. Right? I... I didn't need to be deathless. Maybe. I could have been just... just a normal Pathbearer. And I... I would have been capable of living that way. I would have done great that way anyway. I would have fought. I would have done everything I did now. Maybe... maybe it would have taken longer. Maybe it would have been harder. Maybe I would have died even, but I would have been happy. I would have been happy with just that. But now it's all done, and I can't take any of it back. Do you understand? I can't do anything but try to make things right. To be someone who my parents weren't. And that someone is going to do everything he can to help you. If you do what you can to help me."

Do you care about him? Truly? Rose's voice came fragile but filled with yearning.

Shiv paused. "Care about who?"

Adam. Adam, my son. Do you really care about him?

Shiv's mouth fell open. It took a moment for him to reply to that. "Yeah. He's my... Well, I thought he was an asshole at first. And then I kind of felt like he was my responsibility. And I also felt responsible for Blackhedge, and we're supposed to go back. But after all that, after some of the stuff we've been through, I remembered after bleeding by his side, watching him nearly die, watching him saving my life, me saving his... It's... This isn't just friendship anymore. I think we skipped that part altogether. There are still problems between us. I'm sure that exists, but after everything we've done..."

After everything Roland and Harlon went through, Harlon and Vera still killed me. They still cut my daughter out of me.

"What?" he gasped.

What? That is the thing I remember most. The blade going in, and her... her... She was about to be born, she was screaming, and...

A screen formed before Shiv. His parents' faces were blurred, but he watched the scene through Rose's eyes, and—

Shiv's eyes widened as bile rose up in his throat. "Fuck—Stop! STOP IT!"

Rose didn't. It was like she was in a trance.

Shiv squeezed his eyes shut, but that didn't stop the sounds. He could hear Rose's agonizing screams even as he clamped his hands down on his ears.

Then, finally, Shiv opened his eyes and saw his... The scene played from Rose's perspective, so Shiv only saw his own mother from her backside. She was shaking. Shuddering as Harlon—Shiv's father—held a small body and placed it against his wife.

Then, he drove a blade through both of them.

Then came red and a scream from Rose that Shiv would never forget.

The screen went dark.

Rose stopped screaming. But Shiv's mind was reeling violently. A flood of nausea swept through him. He swallowed hard, drinking down sour spit as he commanded himself, begged himself to stay composed, to not throw up. He always knew his parents were monsters. All of the stories indicated they were monsters, but to do that, to cut a child out of someone was...

I asked her. I asked Vera why, through it all. She was my friend too. Harlon was like my... Was like an older brother. Why? Why? They never told me. Harlon was crying. Vera... There was no expression. They just cut and cut, and she was pregnant too. You were there, in a way...

Then, she started sobbing incoherently again. Shiv shuttered. This was a mistake. He should never have talked to her. He didn't want to know this. But then his crumbling terror met the bedrock of who he was. He couldn't avoid talking to her. He couldn't avoid knowing this. He couldn't avoid his past anymore. If he wanted to face the future, he would need to know what had happened before.

To better understand what he was, so that he could shape who he would be. To be more than just an atrocity, a mistake, a monster in the making.

"Rose. Rose. Rose!" Shiv practically shouted the final word. She finally stopped. "Listen to me. I... That's... I don't want..." Shiv let out a growl. "Godsdamn it. Godsdamn it! Why do they have to be monsters? Why do they have to do this? I can't fix that. But I can... Yes, I do care about Adam. Yes, I'm going to do everything I possibly can to keep him alive. If it takes dying for good to keep him alive, then..." Shiv winced. "I don't want to die for good. I don't want to go away, not after everything I got to taste. But I'll do it. I'll do it. But I'll give a hell of a lot more than just my own life, if it means keeping Adam alive."

And finally, both quieted. Rose listened to him. You are not very much like him.

"Like who?" Shiv asked.

Harlon. He complained. He was such a whining bitch all the time; it got on my nerves. You are Vera's son, truly. I can see her in you. Hear her in you. Her more than him. And I hope you don't become her. I hope your words are true. Rose let out a final, shuddering breath. Please don't hurt my boy. Please.



Shiv shook his head. "If anyone tries to hurt Adam, I'll felling kill them. You got more than my word on that."

And she said no more in response, lapsing back to silence, to the coldness of his vitae. Shiv sighed. "Well, that was a horrifying godsdamn conversation," he said, speaking more to himself than anyone else. A gust of wind rushed over him, and in the distance, he noticed Adam was no longer staring at his mana core, but directly at him. Shiv nodded. Adam probably saw that too.

"Yeah, I did talk to her just now," Shiv said. "I'll tell you about it later, if you want. You're going to hate this. I hated this. Right now, I think I'm going to read. I'm gonna need a moment. Tell Uva I'll be back over in a few hours. For now, I think I'm gonna do some reading... Long overdue reading, to—to cool off. I need a moment, Adam. Just give me a moment."

And when no Veilpiercers zipped by, when no mana strands arrived to sink through his mind, Shiv knew that he was going to get a moment to himself at last. Shiv gathered his Biomancy books and prepared to continue his education for the first time in a while.

At least, he thought that was what he was going to get, until a voice came from behind him. "You were not lying about your ghost."

For a moment, Shiv tensed, and then he turned to see Angelo standing there, staring at him from the bridge. The azure brightness of the mana core painted the vampire's face in a half-shadow, and he stared at Shiv with his eyes of faintest red. Shiv knew better than to let his gaze linger on the vampire's face for long. His Charm Skill was just too potent.

"So, how do you like the soup?" Shiv asked, barely holding back a sigh. He really didn't want to talk to anyone right now.

"I was surprised," the vampire replied. "It was among the better dishes I've tasted."

"Among the better dishes?" Shiv asked, surprised rather than offended.

The vampire nodded. "You have skill. But I suspect you are more dedicated to the fundamentals of cooking, to making sure nothing is wrong, rather than creative expression or pushing new thresholds of flavor. There is no mistake in the way you make your food. It's perfectly cooked, perfectly prepared. Except, there is no..." Angelo made a gesture with his hand, a twirling of the fingers. "You need more expression. Not everyone will like it, but to truly go to the next stage, you need more expression." Angelo pressed his lips together. "That is what one of my masters once told me."

Now, Shiv's attention was entirely on Angelo. "You can cook?"

"I can do many things," Angelo replied. "To be honest, I was not a good cook. My mind drifted to other things. I was easily distracted. And I often lost track of many things. The steps. The ingredients. Myself. But I have known brilliant cooks. I have known brilliant chefs. I have known food the likes of which few will ever taste."

"And that's not mine," Shiv said.

"Not quite," Angelo replied. There was almost something of a smile pulling at his face, but it never quite made it on. A stronghold of sadness had taken up residence in Angelo's eyes.

"Well, I hope I meet some of these brilliant cooks and chefs you talked about someday," Shiv replied. "I think my education still has a long way to go."

"Yes, but I think it might be difficult. You do have a propensity for killing vampires. They will likely sooner die facing you than indulge in small talk."

Shiv bowed his head slightly, acknowledging the point.

"I must ask," Angelo said, gesturing to the book in Shiv's hand. "You know what that is, right?"

"Yeah. Odes. Damn good book. Why?"

"I have gone through it fully. What chapter are you on? I am curious. Most people are repulsed by it."

"Sculptor Ekkihurst is a vile sonabitch," Shiv grunted. "But he's also an artist of the flesh. I'm here to learn. I'm here to get better. And someday, I might even use what I discovered here to put an end to him."

Angelo turned his head slightly, and there was a certain look in his eyes. "Which chapter are you on?" he asked again.

"I'm going through the section about diseases at the moment. I'm planning on infecting myself. I tried the Bowel-Breaker a few times earlier, but my body's already adapted to that. It's not strong enough—

not infectious enough, maybe. I barely feel a buzz anymore when I use it on myself. The damnedest thing about my Plaguefueled skill is that it treats diseases like they're alcohol. And my tolerance is spiking up quickly."

Rather than responding with surprise or astonishment about the nature of Shiv's Disease Resistance Skill Evolution, the vampire nodded along. "Then what you need is a small variety. Small changes every time, just like with your cooking: novelty. Find the most basic of the viruses and just change it. Learn the foundations and change them ever so slightly every time. See how your body reacts to that. That is all I can offer."

Shiv blinked. "Yeah, I think... Yeah, I think I'm gonna try that. Thanks."

The quiet between them dragged. Angelo lowered his head. "I wish to thank you as well. For not letting the Umbrals take me. I heard one of the Weaveresses was talking about using me as a prisoner. Or worse. I have... no desire to be used by anyone anymore. You have done me a kindness twice over now, and I have nothing to offer."

"It doesn't matter if you have nothing to offer," Shiv replied. "I help people because it's a sign. A sign of strength, a sign of what I want to do. It's the point of being a Pathbearer. It's not to take from the world. It's to do things in it. I don't want to help you because I was going to get something out of it. I helped you because I wanted to. And because the world can't stop me."

Angelo's eyes widened a little bit, but then he bowed his head, and slowly he retreated back into the Court Leviathan, away from the light, where he languished alone once more.

"And there goes another mystery," Shiv muttered to himself. But Angelo's recommendation still echoed in his mind. "Novelty, huh? Alright, let's see if I can make some novel viruses that my body can't quite

keep up with. Wait. Some of the viruses and stuff are still lodged inside the Court Leviathan. The Biomancer just turned them off earlier.”

Shiv looked down at Courtney. “Alright. Let’s see if I can transplant some of your blood into me and trigger some of these diseases. Make it like a... implanted plague dispenser.”

Chapter 107 (I) Open

Scouts are the eyes, nose, tongue, ears, mouth, skin—everything that relates to the senses—of an army.

No scouts means that you're fighting blind, that you're just a mass of firepower stumbling around in the general direction in which you're supposed to march. No scouts means that someone's going to slit your arteries while you sleep, that someone's going to burn and butcher your supply train while you aren't looking. That someone's going to loot your tent and camp clean, is going to poison your food, your water, and is going to start cutting throats while you sleep at night.

Scouts are essential. Shadows, Assassins, Thieves—they're essential. They might not be the single most important component of an army, but without them, you're almost certain to lose.

Before every battle begins, there's the skirmish. There are the knife fights in the dark. There are Pathbearers with Stealth skills, with high levels of Awareness, blinking through shadows, scouring out paths for the rest of their forces to travel, and figuring out where the opposition lies in ambush. You need scouts to counter other scouts. You need scouts to figure out where things are.

And you need scouts most of all if you are the inferior army, if you don't have the necessary force projection to match someone else head-on. That's when scouts, infiltrators, and saboteurs shine: when they're crippling the enemy and bringing them down from the inside.

Hell, I wouldn't be here if it weren't for our scouts. My wife wouldn't be here. All of us would be sleeping with the worms had their lengths of steel passed through our backs or been dragged across our necks. And because your enemy has scouts, you're gonna need scouts.

Because if not... Well, you ever wander into the jungle at night alone, without any equipment? You see eyes looking at you from the dark, but you don't know what exactly's staring at you? Yeah, it's kinda like that.

Except, you likely won't know what kills you. Or worse, what carries you off and takes you as a prisoner.

-Memoirs of a Master-Tier War Mage

A single, hair-thin strand of Psychomancy mana slipped into the Court Leviathan, seeking a certain Deathless. The string of translucent mana scoured the creature, sliding through each of its many brains, trying to pinpoint the exact location of Shiv's whereabouts.

Uva could have asked Adam, but she'd found Gate Lord slumped over and asleep within the Garden of Bountiful Alloy. Nearby, Valor and Can Hu watched over him while going through the Educator's burned tome.

Hence, Uva sought Shiv out herself. She was done with interrogating the Owl for now, and with the Null Mont situation temporarily resolved, she wanted to see how Shiv was doing.

Even with the battle over, they were constantly pressed with tasks and things to do. There was hardly a moment for all of them to talk and figure things out—or to just exist.

Well, the strands briefly stopped as they examined a certain Angelo. The man's mind was awash with trauma, wailing and weeping. To describe him as something physical, he was a brutally infected wound, leaking pus and foul ichor out every passing second. He was still sane, but just barely. Right now, his mind was pointed inwards, the current of his thoughts cascading inversely. A sign that he was holding to the past, unable to emerge from the shadows lining his memories.

Uva considered slipping her Psychomancy thread through the vampire once more, examining him, learning what he was actually thinking about right now. She decided against it. Usually, the only things Uva contemplated regarding the bloodsuckers were how to kill them, how to break their minds, how to destroy their culture and bring down their Faith. But this one... There wasn't much left to break, and frankly, she didn't think there was much she could inflict upon him that his own kind hadn't already, and worse.

She continued on, a single strand circling through hallways, partially destroyed and reclaimed by spreading masses of flesh. She glanced into rooms, mostly obliterated by Shiv's inertial detonations, with little more than shards and debris embedded within the body of the Court Leviathan remaining. The insides of the creature were about as ruined as the gate. There would need to be a substantial rebuilding effort before it could serve as a troop carrier, or frankly, whatever Shiv wanted it to be, aside from a provider of flesh—a dedicated and ethical supply of meat.

But that was up to him. And only him. He made sure of that when he “convinced” Exalted Mother Null Mont she'd made a stupid mistake with some help from Adam and Valor.

It was good that he didn't actually hurt the Weaveress, but still, the way he treated her made Uva uncomfortable, extremely uncomfortable. On some level, Uva understood the Exalted Mother was taking advantage of the Honored Guests and was being foolish and impulsive in ordering Uva away from the gate. Even if her suspicions about the Dreamtaker's eldritch influence, about Uva's potential subversion, were correct, there was a way of doing things, a way to be efficient and effective while also ensuring a Cherished Sister wasn't compromised.

Null Mont thought of none of that. Null Mont was short-sighted, and Null Mont was narcissistic. But Null Mont was not suicidal. And ultimately, after some threats and a meal, Null Mont was pacified, at least for now.

In part, Uva was grateful for that, but the developments also troubled her. She wondered if she could have solved the problem herself, convinced Exalted Mother Null Mont to allow her to remain at the Gate, to have her see the folly in her actions, the blindness in her choices.

The answer was a culturally-engineered no.

Shiv was right. Uva could have done a number of things to Null Mont. The Weaveress had a few Master-Tier skills, but she was no Psychomancer, and she was relatively unblooded in combat. Uva could taste the inexperience on her. But even so, something rooted deep in her psyche screamed at her every time she thought lowly or poorly of the Weaveress. It was sacrilege. Unthinkable. Wrong. Just like doubting the Composer was wrong. Just like how every vampire was supposed to be a slaving monster that indulged in cruelty and bloodlust in equal measure. Yet here was Angelo. Yet, here was Null Mont. Yet here Uva was, lost in her own growing doubts as she searched for Shiv.

Two months ago, such wrongthink would have been immediately repressed. Yes, there were problems at Weave, but they were inflicted by outside agents, by agitators, by enemies. The surface was the land that harbored her mother's murderer and the ones who inflicted so much damage on the Abyss.

The Composer was the only reason Weave was protected, the only reason Weave was at all. And it was the Umbrals, and to a lesser extent her Weaveresses, that failed to uphold her glory. But increasingly, whispers of doubt began to surface in Uva's mind. No more were they like sediment at the bottom of her thoughts and memories. They were rising now, like buoyant pieces of driftwood breaking free from wreckages long lost.



"You cling," the Dreamtaker sang out to Uva. "Clinging hurts you deeply, cripples your development, blinds you."

"I am not blind," Uva shot back, a slow, aching feeling turning to reflexive outrage. "I am... I am merely ruminating. My thoughts are slightly in disarray. This is not blindness, this is just..."

"This is you trying to come up with a reason, trying to process the flaws of those you thought were better."

Uva considered how she was to reply to that. The Dreamtaker, as strange as she was, seemed a relatively benign entity, despite the harm she inflicted upon her mind and the minds of other people around her.

"I pity you. You fear the colors you cannot see. You do not wish to perceive them. I pity you. And envy you. You have a journey, a journey away from the limitations of consciousness."

"What?" Uva replied.

"Consciousness. It is like a cage. There are boundaries to where you end, boundaries where the world begins and you don't reach. You are... like a foreign body drifting through the vastness. No wonder you all feel so alone. No wonder you cling to each other. No wonder your thoughts turn so malformed. You are searching for consciousness. It is a terrible thing. I regret the System infesting me with it. But I adore the fact that I can see it now."

Slowly, Uva closed in on the signature of thought hidden deep within the lower middle of the Court Leviathan. Considering that no one else should be aboard the massive creature, she expected that was where she'd find Shiv.

"You truly think consciousness is a negative thing?" Uva asked.

"I think the way you think is broken. You are shaped by belief, for there is a pattern engraved inside of you, patterns from your culture, from your society. Because you cannot be of the world, you are not of the world. You start inside a vessel, your own flesh, but your colors, they don't intermingle. Not like me, not like me at all, not yet. A shame, a pity, a wonder, a journey, a mystery for you to uncover, to seek, to become, if you so choose."

It was hard to decipher what the Dreamtaker was saying sometimes, but Uva thought she got the gist. The Dreamtaker was closer to being a dimension unto itself rather than a singular being. But she might also be a singular being now that the System had infested her with mana.

Infested with mana, Uva thought to herself. The very concept made her shudder. Was the System some kind of infection as well? Some kind of disease that spread across souls? Was it a disease that composed souls? Another unnerving thing that intruded into Uva's mind when she already had so many to face.

"There. Another flaw. Another misshape in your mind. In your way. You find things horrifying, terrible, because you don't know, because you don't understand. But I don't know what it is like to not know, to not understand. Things are, and they are not. They are expressed, or they do not exist."

"Is there nothing you fear?" Uva asked. "Not the Stranger, not another Eldritch?"

The Dreamtaker was silent for a while, but then it responded. "Does the sunrise fear your broken moon? Does the sea fear the land, or the way the wind dances, carrying gravel in its wake?" There was something strangely alluring in the way the Dreamtaker described things.

"No," the Dreamtaker answered its own question. "There is no capacity for fear. It does not exist. Not yet. We are infested. We are bearing tumors of self-awareness, but we are not fully self-aware. The System's metastasization is not complete. We are still more Outside, a concept animated, rather than a mind uncovering. A mind like you."

Uva felt a traitorous desire slip through her, much like the thoughts she had before. The thoughts doubting the Composer, the Weaveresses, doubting even the fundamentals of her own culture. She suppressed it, but the Dreamtaker let out something as close to a sigh as it could possibly make. It was a broken sound, this discordant melody that sawed at Uva's very psychology.

"Again, again, why? Why do you mutilate yourself? Why do you mutilate the colors that spring from you, Seeker? You have the capacity, so much capacity to reshape your own mind, to face what is. Why turn away?" The Dreamtaker paused.

"Go further. Even if you blind yourself, it is not protection. Denial is not a defense. Open yourself more. Open yourself to everything, everything there is. Do not fear being infected. You are already infected. Not by me, but your culture. Not by me, but existing patterns, beliefs crawling like viruses. Twisting your mind away from what is, what actually is. The Fundament of the thing."

"The Fundament?" Uva echoed.

"You see things, but then you mask them with signs. With an illusion of your perception. But you are a mind-dancer. You are a Psychomancer. Break the illusion you have drunk so deeply. You alone, among many, have limbs of heart and mind. You alone are the shaper of personal meaning. And you alone can dissolve meaning and simply see things for what they are."

Uva felt something shiver within her, something shift and dance behind her eyes. Colors she couldn't describe, but colors that painted new possibilities. Colors there if she just reached out for them.

"There is a reason you delved deep inside we of the Outside and returned whole. Changed. But unbroken. Mutated. But not deviant. Not twisted. Think. Open yourself. Open..."

And finally, Uva drew near to Shiv. Her Psychomancy thread flipped through a final set of walls, and she found herself in a rank chamber. It was a little bit like one of the chambers in Elaboration, an observation room overlooking an experimental cell of some kind. Or perhaps a containment unit. Through a reinforced window was another chamber. Its walls were furrowed with slick substances and countless glistening pores.

It seemed like some kind of malformed womb, and a feeling of revulsion went through her immediately. But standing at the center of the room was Shiv. He was stripped down to nothing, and a look of absolute focus painted his expression. He constantly drew in lungfuls of air, and Uva wondered what he was doing. But then she saw it. A bubbling of pustules bursting across his chest and abdomen, only to fade a moment later. Shiv blinked, shaking his head. His thoughts swayed slightly, and Uva recognized the patterns of those movements. The way his focus shook—like that of a drunk.

Wait, he wasn't like a drunk—Shiv was drunk.

And then she recalled how his Plaguefueled skill worked. Ah, she thought to herself with a dry exasperation, alloyed with the faintest bits of astonishment. Her dear brute was nothing if not stubborn, and nothing if not enduring. It expressed itself in his skills, and it expressed itself in his every action. She guessed that he was in this chamber because he was infecting himself with plague after plague, malady after malady.

But was he doing it to improve a skill? Or just for the pleasure of imbibing diseases? Uva didn't know. And thus, she finally dipped the tip of her Psychomancy thread into his mind, and he responded, looking in the thread's general direction.

"Oh, hey, Uva," he replied. He let out a slight cough, but then that affliction faded as well, burned away by his hypercharged immune system. She regarded him through his own eyes, observing his body, and Uva felt a rush of heat inside of her.

"Do diseases make you larger?" Uva asked. "Because you seem... bigger somehow."

He let out a low chuckle. "Yeah, something like that. And not just like alcohol for me, it's like a steroid too. I feel all kinds of drunk, but also, it doesn't just make my muscles bigger, it makes me harder, it makes me faster, and... it feels pretty good."

"It's addicting," Uva said, sensing the enjoyment ingrained within Shiv. Absorbing the diseases lined his mind in layers of pleasure, the same kind of pleasure one might feel when gambling or doing substances meant to spike the neurochemistry.

The same way Uva's neurochemistry was being affected right now, with what she could see. "So," she said, trying to distract herself. "Have you made some progress regarding your Practical Metabiology? I trust this is more than just an exercise in pseudo-alcoholism."

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"A bit," he replied. "I think I'm getting some understanding of how a virus and a few other diseases work. I've been reviewing the most common disease types, along with the most infectious. I have to go

with infectious because my plague field burns through most things too fast. So far, none of the diseases I managed to inflict on myself lasted that long, but then again, I am making pretty amateurish ones."

He let out a laugh. "That vampire bastard's all kinds of messed up, but his bio-molecular control is something else. It's like he's some kind of disease chef. Down to the last detail, he's got it all figured out. But it's more than just that. He can put his own spin on things. He sees connections that aren't even there, or at least that I can't grasp. I feel like an alley kid looking at Georges again. I guess that's how things always are when you don't have the experience."

Uva hummed in agreement. She knew the feeling. As a child, she was a diligent student, but still, she remembered times where she was utterly lost as well, where she marveled at someone else's skill. Frankly, she still marveled at Fel's understanding of how fabrics worked. Uva, comparatively, was just a dabbler. It was one of her unspoken regrets.

Her father, supposedly, had been a tailor before one of the blood-plagues took him, and while a few of her sisters veered closer to him in spirit, Uva merely touched on her father's skills and went no deeper. She didn't have a true talent there. Only an interest. A dabbler's touch.

But it can be more than that, Uva thought. I can be more than just a Psychomancer. A lot more...

## Chapter 107 (II) Open

"I think I'm going to try something when I get the chance," Shiv said. "I'm going to try doing this beneath the light of the mana core. I tried to have my skills fuse, but I think it doesn't work without direct exposure, or maybe Adam focusing it on me. Like he has to do with his Righteous Dawn Prevails. I don't know. I'll ask him later."

"What are you thinking?" Uva asked.

"I want to mix The Chef Unwavering with my Practical Metabiology if I can. See if they even come together. I mean, I think some parts of biology can be like a recipe or something."

Uva tried to imagine what that was like, but psychology, and frankly, Psychomancy, were far softer disciplines and far more insidious in certain ways than the complex but more rooted realities inherent to Biomancy and biology. She didn't have much insight to offer him here.

Shiv shook his head awkwardly. "Speaking of which, uh, you know, Uva, are you good at writing?"

"Writing?" she said, slightly taken aback. "I am good at reports. I do not do much personal writing, but I would say my skill is well into Adept."

"Yeah, of course there's a skill for writing too..." He gave an awkward sigh. "I've been trying to start writing a journal of some kind, a book documenting ingredients and dishes and creatures you can hunt in the Abyss."

"Oh," Uva said, her curiosity piqued. "You want to make a cookbook? That is... That would be quite useful, I think, especially with your capabilities. Are you trying to document what your The Chef Wavering can do as well?"

"Yeah, something like that. There's just... I got a lot of stuff I'm trying to cover, and I can't just keep track of them all in my mind. Not yet, anyway. Is there a Memorization Skill too?"

"There is, in fact," Uva replied.

"I wonder why I never got that one. I try to remember a lot of things. I can practically name all the Swan-Eating Frog's set lists from a couple of years back."

Uva shook her head. "No, that's not sufficient. Think of how much effort it takes for you to gain a level in Gravitic Wrestler. Do you strain your mind to the same capacity?"

Shiv paused. "Yeah, I get your point. You need to be doing it constantly, driving it to the very limit."

"To the very limit," she repeated for emphasis.

"Right." Shiv pressed his lips together. "I'm not that good at writing right now. I just... I find it hard to focus. I tried earlier and got a bit frustrated. I've looked through plenty of books from spending the colder days sitting around in the library in Blackedge, but actually putting words together feels like I'm wrestling with my own brain. My mind jumps a hell of a lot too."

"I know. I've been in your mind long enough to suspect your mental template to be hyperactive. A lifetime of conflict and constant anxiety or paranoia can cause that in a person. But I suspect there's also bloodline dispositions as well."

"Is that adjustable?" he asked. "Or is it really bad?"



"It's..." Uva considered her reply. "I potentially could, but the effort of sculpting one's cognition on such a level is... How should I put this?" Uva might have the skill to do it, but her expertise in Psychomancy was originally focused on shrouding. Something that made it harder for other Psychomancers to affect her and those around her. Something that made it easier for her to engage, even against those who would have the advantage in a direct Psychomantic confrontation. She was, in a word, a Psychomancer dedicated to hunting other Psychomancers. Such was the natural outcome when your adversary was the First Blood.

To reshape one's cognition, though, that was more in the domains of a psycho-healer, and frankly, a psycho-architect. Weave was desperately short on those. Uva had known one psycho-architect in her generation of the Arachnae Order, and she remained an Adept even now, bottlenecked by the complexity of her path.

"I'm not scared," Shiv said. "Even if it does damage to my mind, I should just be able to come back together, so I think you can experiment a little on me too if that's what it takes. I'm open to doing anything for some more improvements."

Open. There was that word again.

"No," Uva said. "And for multiple reasons. First, for most people, there is a significant risk in altering their minds. Doing so poorly inflicts mental issues like psychosis or schizophrenia. More importantly, it might break their minds entirely and ruin their sense of self. For you, I think the effects will not take. Your mind will revert to its original, stable state. You are, in essence, locked to your current mental template. That's why you heal so well. And there is nothing wrong with the way you think. It might even be beneficial for active combat."

Shiv considered that for a moment and grunted. "Yeah, might be for the best. Strain," he muttered to himself. "Yeah, strain everything. Alright, thanks, Uva. I'll try to get the skills fused. I just need to find a

way to stress both of them at the same time, maybe. Anyway, I'm going to try to trigger the neurotoxin inside me this time instead of one of the many bacteria-strains. At least I think they're bacteria..."

"Inside you?" Uva said. Her mind went blank for a moment. "You're storing dormant sicknesses inside of yourself? How?"

Shiv let out a slight grunt as he opened his left arm. Through the open wound, Uva could see a small piece of Leviathan tissue fused into his flesh. "I managed to figure out how to pull some of the dormant sicknesses from where they're hidden inside the Court Leviathan. I also managed to successfully transplant its flesh unto mine without getting it to reject it this time. Something about how the Court Leviathan is designed makes that easy. Right now, I got a steady source of dormant sickness to trigger. Only managed to figure out how to activate a few of them, though. And my body burns them out pretty quick.

"This is..." Uva wasn't sure how to describe this. For anyone else, it would be stark-raving mad. Suicidal. For Shiv, this was just another moment in his life. It was even logical. If he didn't have the technical understanding to create his own viruses or pathogens, he could trigger dormant sicknesses embedded within the Court Leviathan to boost himself in a fight. "...very creative," she finished.

"Thanks. So far, I managed to get what I think is a fungal infection to spread across me. That usually triggers a pretty bad allergic reaction across my skin, but it doesn't last long. Frankly, I'm getting used to it already. I'm trying to study how my body reacts to it. But even with my Chronomancy, there's a..." Shiv let out a breath. "There's a lot going on. I might need a notebook for this too. I think I can learn to cast these as spells as well. Frankly, a dedicated Biomancer might be able to make some of these viruses without having anything close to Master-Tier Biomancy. The problem here isn't power, it's understanding. And it's hard to level missing understanding through death. I tried with Metabiology, but the System seems reluctant to just give me knowledge. Power, sure. But not knowledge."

Once more, Uva noted how inverted Shiv's development as a Pathbearer was. Usually, someone was trained in the softer skills first, prepared in writing, memorization, and all other informational disciplines before any of their physical and practical skills reached Adept-tier. He was the opposite way 'round, in the extreme. And so, he handled things brutally because his skill set was brutally underdeveloped. Aside from his cooking, his technical and intellectual development had been severely hampered.

Uva felt a surge of annoyance towards Adam's father, Roland Arrow. For someone who feared the child of your enemy might turn into a monster

, she thought to herself, you certainly did everything you could to make him develop like one.

Uva considered what she would be like without any proper training, without years of instruction and refined practice. Instinct. Instinct and intuition were her answers. And they weren't pretty answers, at that. It was probably part of the reason why he was developing skills the way he was. I might also need to start shaping his personal curriculum more than just teaching him Psychomancy, Uva thought. If there was one benefit to Shiv having little to no experience, it was the fact that he didn't have any bad habits yet. Well, none intellectually. Physically, his combat and tactics were for Adam to handle.

Just then, another swath of inflammation glided down Shiv's chest. Red boils appeared, rising from the skin in bulges, but they only held their place for around five seconds before they broke, lost color, and flattened. Shiv's muscles bulged and swelled. He grew another few centimeters taller as well. His movements happened in blurring jerks. He let out a drunken laugh and worked to keep himself steady. "Woo, okay. That's not too bad. I think I'll use this one when I get into a fight next."

"You know, you can contain some of that drunkenness," Uva said.

"How?" Shiv slurred slightly.

"Your Psychomancy."

"It's not very powerful yet," Shiv replied.

"That's fine. It's the exact same thing as with your Biomancy. You don't need a lot of power to affect yourself. Think of how much Biomancy you needed to stop your own heart."

Shiv considered that. "Not much at all."

"Yes, and Psychomancy even less so. It's simply about finding the right pieces in yourself. Follow my strand. Follow where I'm going and what I'm doing. Let your skills work in tandem. Like they're pillars for each other."

"Pillars," Shiv muttered. And that somehow sobered him immediately. "Yeah. Yeah, I think I can do that."

His Psychomancy field flowed inward as he chased after her strands. Uva noted how awkward his intent was, and how unfocused and indelicate his control. But these were all things of inexperience. He could be cured of these weaknesses through proper instruction, and on this day, she would show him the true beginnings of Psychomancy.

"Here," Uva said. She seized the parts of him that enjoyed the feeling of digesting the diseases, but she didn't do anything. Instead, she highlighted how this sensation was passing through him. How it consumed his thoughts. "The feelings you're experiencing are more physiological than psychological. But there is a psychological component. And there is a way for you to 'pilot' yourself. To exert mind over sensation."

"Huh. So, can this help with my attentiveness too?"

“Absolutely. But it is paradoxical. You must be focused to infuse focus in yourself. So. Seize this. Grip the parts of you consumed by pleasure, by distraction and intoxication, and layer over them.”

“Layer? With what?”

“Another memory. A moment of extreme focus. Like when you are cooking. Or when you are trying to do something that requires a great amount of attention. This is the simplest method of establishing control over yourself. As you have transplanted a piece of the Court Leviathan into your body, now you can transplant part of your memories, your past sensations, over your present. Mind over matter.”

“And... this can be done at any time?”

“If you have the focus. If you have the control. If you strain and stop yourself from being distracted.”

Shiv reached out for a moment, but his first attempts slipped as another buzzing rush swept through him. Unfettered, he tried again. Again. Uva control was fine and reached deep. Her strands were near-solid constructs of mana. Shiv, meanwhile, was directing something that was fainter than a breeze and capable of even less force or control. He tried harder and harder, pitting his intent and will against his own mind, doing all he could to clutch specific memories the same way Uva did.

But hardness wasn't the way here. Focus. Control. Directing the currents of his mana was the true path. Uva could have told him that. But it was best for him to learn directly. For him to understand the lesson himself.

His struggle went on. Seconds turned to minutes. Then, Shiv pressed on for nearly an hour. Through all that time, Uva observed his habits, studied how he approached her discipline.

He needs more flexibility of thought and an understanding of psychology to be a good Psychomancer. But there is no issue with his will or intent. I suspect he is beyond that in some ways. I suspect—ah, he has it.

Finally, Shiv twisted his Psychomancy mana around the memories Uva highlighted for him using her strand. He stole a method from her. She spiraled herself around the memories, arranging his mana into cyclones that consumed each section of memory and sensation.

“Good,” she said. “You have it. Now. Move a copy of the memories over.”

Shiv’s brows furrowed. Sweat poured from his forehead, but he infused his cyclones into his mental architecture and began to move parts of himself. Soon, a memory from his past crossed the gulf of his mind, a memory of a scowling man with a large, messy puff of hair gesticulating and screaming at him, demanding he cut faster.

Uva was taken aback. Such a memory filled her with instinctual stress, but Shiv found it to be calming. Even reassuring. More than anything, it was focusing.

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“Why? Why this memory?” she asked, unable to contain her own curiosity.

Shiv chuckled as he fastened his desired memory into place. At once, his movements became more refined, more coherent. "Because that's when I knew Georges wasn't going to get rid of me. I made a mistake. A bad one. I expected him to throw me out. He made me peel a thousand potatoes that day instead. His punishment was to yell and make me better. And you don't do that for someone you don't care about. It was more than anyone ever did for me before."

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"I see," Uva breathed. What seemed so unpleasant to her took on new dimensions. Open. I should be open to all manner of perspectives. All ways of understanding things. This lesson isn't just for Shiv. This should be for me as well. What lies beyond the surface? What is the actual truth of the matter?

She contemplated that while she instructed him further, and he sank deeper into knowledge, and she opened her mind more and more to other possibilities. To things she hadn't considered before as well.

Chapter 108 (I) Briefing

Deathstalker Perspicacity Pricelles 2 reporting to Siege Force Main. Observation post SC102 at Old Santabarb reports no abnormal activity. However, the Gate Theborn surface portal remains inactive. It has been approximately a full day since anyone has entered or exited said portal.

Additionally, a wing of aerial patrol Pathbearers of the Yellowstone Republic was spotted some 50 kilometers away from the combat zone. They were diverted before they drew into engagement range. We detected telepathic communication between them and an unknown source. We suspect that the Inquisition has interceded.

The situation on that front remains stable for now.

However, ob-posts 493 and 222 have reported a massing of forces in the distance. Inquisition forces are moving fast across the land, using active mirages to veil themselves from being seen from above. We anticipate that they will be joining the fray in approximately three to five days, depending on pace of movement and factoring in unexpected circumstances. That is the report so fa—

Wait. The Surface Gateway is activating.

Please hold. Additional details forthcoming...

-Deathstalker Perspicacity Pricelles, Scout-Captain of SC102 for Vicar Sullain's Retribution Crusade

"Shiv, Uva, are you two... Is this a good time?"

"Yes, Adam. It's, uh..." Uva paused as Shiv let out a loud groan.

A swell of horror and embarrassment came from the Gate Lord. "I... I can check in later—"

"No, It's not that. It's—"

"I... I am the potato?" Shiv mumbled, mimicking slicing motions in the air.



Uva winced slightly. "No, Shiv, you are not a potato. You are misremembering. Your memories have mingled. You have overdrawn and over-focused on the wrong part of your mind. This happens in Psychomancy sometimes. I will mend you in a moment."

"I'm... not a potato?"

"No, Shiv, you are not a potato."

"What's going on?" Adam asked, genuinely concerned. "Is Shiv alright? He sounds more unhinged than usually."

"He's just temporarily confused. We're doing some Psychomancy training to adjust for his new Disease Resistance Skill Evolution. It's important to attune both the body and the mind at the same time."

Psychomancy 11 > 12

Psychology 2 > 5

Practical Metabiology 36 > 37

Plaguefueled 61 > 62

"I peel... me?"

"No, Shiv, no. Put down the knife. Put down the knife you made from your own rib. No flaying yourself. I'll help you fix your mind in a moment. Anyway, Adam, what's wrong? What do you need? Is there something with the mercenaries? Has there been another assassination attempt?"

"No, no, it's just I'm planning to conduct a general briefing in a few hours. I've invited all the Exalted Mothers and Cherished Sisters to be in attendance. It'll be at the half-finished obsidian tower. I'm trying to think of a name for the building. And the gate, too. Well, anyway, I think it would be best if you and Shiv were there. There are a lot of details and problems we have to go over."

"Of course," Uva replied. "We'll be over as soon as possible. As soon as I help Shiv remember who he actually is."

"Am I... a cabbage?"

"No, Shiv, you are not a cabbage either."

"Is he truly all right?" Adam asked.

"He'll be fine," Uva replied. "It's not any worse than what he usually does to himself."

The Young Lord considered that for a moment and let out a snort of agreement. "You're right. Hey, Uva, how much would it take for you to briefly make him think he's my dull-witted manservant?"

"We will be there in a while, Adam," Uva said with a scoff. She pulled her mana strand away from the Gate Lord and focused entirely on Shiv. "Alright, let's see how you did this to yourself."

"Meat-shaped..."

"Yes, Shiv, you are made of meat. No, that does not mean you can eat yourself. Please stop biting your arm. Thank you."

\*\*\*

After Uva rearranged Shiv's sanity and fixed his badly knotted psyche, he made a reminder for himself never to overly fixate on the food, rather to focus more on what he was doing in those memories, on his determination and focus.

"I am not the meat," he repeated to himself as he sailed through the air, approaching the only skyscraper left in the gate. "I am not the meat, I am Shiv. I am the Deathless, I am a Pathbearer. I am also not a cabbage."

"Do not be over-worried," Uva cast her thoughts at him. "These things happen sometimes." She paused, and he felt a shudder of discomfort pass over from her. "Though I am impressed with how you so utterly

and totally rewrote your own perception of yourself. It takes a substantial amount of focus and obsession to do such a thing."

"Yeah, I was just trying to hold onto the moment. The moment of... just easy, constant focus of me peeling potato after potato."

"Yes, you were trying to cling to a flow state. Effortless focus. Tragically, your effortless focus caused you to hallucinate that you were, in fact, the potato. Again, lessons learned. This is good. You have made good progress." She laughed. "Of course, it helps that you do not break for good."

"Hey, Uva," Shiv said.

"Yes?"

"Would you still love me if I was a potato?"

"Enough to eat you, probably," she replied wryly. "I prefer fish, or maybe something green. But I suppose I'd make an exception for a potato if you became one. But if potato-you can still cook, well... I suspect I would prefer to keep you alive instead."

"I guess that's all a man can ask," he replied.

The obsidian tower was still half-finished, but it looked far more intact than it had been a mere few hours ago. The surrounding ruins had also been cleared up, with a great amount of the material scavenged and repurposed by the geomancers and architects for the general rebuilding effort.

Supplies and additional items of utility had also been scavenged. Shiv could see numerous household appliances, those that could be repaired or still were in a functional state, stacked high nearby. Several object and item groupings were tied together by bundles of rope or were placed within zones outlined with chalk.

In the distance, Shiv could see additional supports going up from the ground to bear the weight of the newly built district. It was a little more than a large platform, and there were also several layers beneath it. However, he could already see people there, dashing about the barren platform. Most of them seemed like mercenaries running laps, trying to keep themselves conditioned even in such cramped circumstances.

As he drew closer to the midpoint of the gate, Shiv noticed something about the obsidian tower. Rather than being a structure of pure volcanic rock, there were additional struts running along the outside; lengths of reinforced metal keeping it bolted to the ground, or perhaps holding the entire thing stable. Shiv guessed that the Geomancers were likely going to have to reshape it on the inside as well, and thus, should any destabilization occur, they needed to do everything they could to avoid a collapse.

Then, at the top of the tower, Shiv noticed something particular. Rather than just ending as a spire, there was a glistening glass dome that radiated a spectrum of light. Most times it glowed azure due to the falling radiance bestowed by the mana core. However, every now and then there would come an accretion of twilight that danced around its edges, sparkling across the land. Shiv guessed that was probably because of Adam's Unique skill. More importantly, it was clearly designed this way in mimicry of Starhawk's Perch.

He really is Roland's son, Shiv thought to himself, slightly dourly. Despite everything, Shiv wasn't looking forward to seeing Roland in some ways. In some other ways, he struggled not to clench his fist. He was very much looking forward to seeing his old Town Lord once more. There's a lot of stuff we're going to have to talk about, Roland. A lot of stuff, not just about you and me, but your family, about Udrael, about everything. You haven't been entirely honest, not even with your own boy.

As Shiv reached the base of the tower, he saw Adam there, already speaking to Uva. They led him inside, and he found the interior of the tower substantially different from a few hours ago as well. Beyond the naked supports, which were mostly covered, there were a few bridges running from place to place.

There were also actual floors placed in on the upper levels, making the tower seem more like an actual building rather than a hollow tube rendered so by the devastation it experienced while Shiv fought the Recollector. At the center of the tower was an additional pillar that was actually hollow. Shiv suspected it was for a mana elevator that hadn't been put in yet. This pillar was shaped from reinforced titanium, and judging from a particular dent left on it, Shiv suspected some of it was harvested from the various teleportation anchors scattered across the city ruins, probably even the Jealousy's personal teleportation anchor.

In front of this central pillar was a massive whiteboard, gleaming pale in the light. There was already a series of markings on it, along with a list of items discussed. Adam had spent some time putting this briefing together. The Gate Lord's Academy experiences were showing once more, and that triggered a strange feeling of envy in Shiv.

It had been a while since he'd envied Adam's life, but despite all the mockery he sent in Adam's direction for being a part of "Burning Chicken Academy," Shiv would have really liked to go himself.

Some kids hated the pre-academies, but it sure as shit was a better place than some alleyway.

His recent training with Uva showed him just how much actual knowledge he lacked. There was so much he didn't know, so much that she learned about when she was but a child. And while she did that, while Adam was preparing, while countless other Pathbearers were already taking the first steps toward achieving Adept Skills—and knowledge-based Adept Skills at that—Shiv was languishing as a Pathless chef and moonlighting as a monster slayer. While that gave him some specific experiences as well, the

truth of the matter was that there was no substitute for proper practice, for proper training, for proper preparation.

It's a miracle I didn't die hunting lesser vampires over the three years, Shiv thought to himself. That might have colored his initial experiences once he became a Pathbearer. Shiv did prepare, he did plan, but when things went wrong, he usually defaulted to sorting things the most direct and brutal way possible. This worked out sometimes. It worked out especially for him, since he couldn't die. But he couldn't use it as a crutch, not forever, and definitely not against a Legendary Pathbearer like Sullain.

As Shiv stared at the board, Adam went over a few things with Uva. From their conversation, Shiv heard Adam telling Uva about how she had two pieces of equipment to try on and test later, once Can Hu recovered enough to put them through a reforging process.

Her armor had been destroyed during the final fight at the gate, and frankly, a magical amplification provided by Absence's arcanite fragments and the Focus Crystal armor were probably going to be major boons for her. All three of them were varying degrees of mage, but between the three, she was the most dedicated spellcaster, focused primarily on subversive Psychomancy, and now some eldritch powers as well.

The last part made Shiv worry more than a bit. The influence the Dreamtaker had on Uva was one of the few things Shiv thought Null Mont was justifiably worried about. He didn't know if Uva showed Adam her Aberrant Fractals yet, but it might not be the best idea. He'd give her time and space to show it to Adam in the best way.

The Outsiders did terrible things to Adam's mind. There was just something about Diviners that made them more vulnerable to the eldritch.

"Alright, Shiv," Adam said, stepping away from Uva. "We need to talk."

Shiv grunted and turned to face Adam. This was a while coming. "Listen, I don't know how much you heard, but when I was speaking to your mother, I learned about a few things."

"We'll deal with that in a while, after we finish the scouting mission. I don't want anything distracting us."

Shiv stared at Adam. "You sure about that?"

"Yes. And if we talk about my mother and all the messed-up felling shit related to the ritual, I'm definitely not going to be able to focus, so we're not going to do that. Not yet. Not until we're both in better condition and ready."

Shiv blinked. "Yeah, that sounds pretty wise."

"Good, wonderful. Now, to distract myself from this horrible, horrible topic, Can Hu should be able to reforge your cloak and its Garden of Bountiful Alloy in the next few hours or so. Once that's done, we will commence final preparations and embark on an initial scouting run. Barring extraneous circumstances, we will be out at the end of the day, at the latest. So be ready and make what preparations you need to."

And that reminded Shiv of something else. The Deathless opened a section of his bone armor. From there, he pulled out two packets, and he held them out to Uva and Adam.



"What's this?" Adam asked.

Uva picked it up and arched an eyebrow at the strange gift.

"This is Court Leviathan meat, ready to eat, military ration style. It's not too complicated. It's just basically like a fried chunk. But if you eat it, it should give you regeneration. I think it'll function like a healing potion or a lesser healing potion, at least. It should keep you alive for a while if you get hurt. Let you recover from minor injuries pretty fast. It's not exactly a Woundeater, but..."

And then he saw the genuine smile on Adam's face, and Shiv felt a surge of pride. He folded his arms. "Yeah, you know, I thought it was a good idea to start distributing some of this. I'll get some of it ready for the Umbrals and Weaveresses as well. They're probably going to need it too."

"Yes, very, very good thinking, Shiv. Also, it's probably going to be better-tasting than any military ration I ever had before." Adam wiggled his nose. "Captain Irons, he let us taste some of his old rations." He shook his head, and a look of absolute disgust crawled over him. "It was wretched. He said it was the worst part of being a soldier, aside from all the other worst parts."

"Is there any good part?" Shiv asked. "Captain Irons sounds pretty cynical."

"Not cynical. He's just honest and realistic. In some ways, you remind me of him. In others, well, I think he would have liked you a great deal. I told you this before."

"I guess I'll find out someday if I ever meet him."

"Considering how things are going, you just might. Hopefully not on the battlefield, though..."

And by then, the first of the Weaveresses and Umbrals started filtering in. Null Mont slipped in with the group, and she made eye contact with Shiv for a moment before looking away.

Unfortunately for her, Shiv wasn't the evasive kind. He didn't care about social awkwardness. He didn't care about discomfort. He found a problem, and he handled it. He attacked it head-on. He didn't let things languish. So he went after her immediately, and he pulled out another pack of Courtney Rations.

"What's this?" Null Mont said, staring more at the pack than at him.

"Leviathan meat," he said. "If you're hurt, bite it. It should get you to heal relatively quickly from injuries, like a healing potion. I'll be handing it out to the others, but this one's for you. I'll prepare more when I have time as well."

"Yes, thank you, most honored... Exalted Guest." She still sounded uncomfortable and gave a quiet hiss as he briefly patted her on the back.

His Dread Aura vibrated softly when he stood near her, but she wasn't absolutely terrified anymore, and frankly, Shiv thought he could continue conditioning her until she became a functional asset rather than an asshat.

"Please come up with a better quality of pun, Shiv," Uva begged.

"Why," Shiv said, "I thought it was kind of funny."

She gave him a pitying look. "I think we should add some cultural reading to your practice as well. It will go far in enhancing your writing and intellectual capabilities."

Shiv wasn't against that. Tables, chairs, and more bodies stuffed the room, a few Umbral Hydromancers filled cups, and soon the briefing was called to order. Standing right before the board with a list of details was Gate Lord Adam Arrow, flanked by Can Hu, Shiv, and Uva on one side and Valor with Null Mont on the other.

#### Chapter 108 (II) Briefing

Adam went over a few things everyone already knew about, or at least that Shiv already knew about. How their initial infiltration and destabilization of Gate Theborn was highly successful. How they managed to establish contact with Leu, find a safe house, and continue their subversive efforts. How everything was going well until they ran into the Educator. Then, details were given about the chaos that followed. Everyone agreed that the System was demented for letting them be attacked by what was functionally a vessel for a deity.

Then, they covered the First Blood and Aviary assault that came after and just made everything worse. That wasn't even touching too deeply on the ugliest surprise of all: the Recollector, and the destruction that followed.

"And that concludes the general and overall summary," Adam finished. Then he took a step to the side, and he pointed at the item at the top of his board. It was titled Enigma One: Educator, and there were several other items below it as well. Items related to her tome, her sacred phylactery specifically, and her association with the Agents of Aviary. This item was connected to item two.

However, a line was drawn between the Educator and Aviary, rather than the Educator and the First Blood. And those two items remained disconnected altogether from the third issue they had to deal with: the Inquisition. So far, the Inquisition, from what Adam could glean, was directing the Educator, but it seemed that they didn't really know her true nature either. As such, things were getting confusing, not only for Shiv and company, but likely for the Inquisition and the other Ascendants as well.

Schemes and politics, Shiv said to himself. Just makes me want to kill everyone who's a bastard and call it a day. What a mess.

"Thus far, we know very little about the Educator, aside from a few critical facts. First," Adam said, "is that she is effectively some kind of vessel or anchoring organism for a forgotten Ascendant, so she claims. Whatever it is, it was godlike, and it nearly trapped us within her tome."

At that, Valor placed the badly burnt book on one of the tables. To Shiv's relief and interest, they didn't specifically talk about how the tome got burned.

"Within this tome are recordings and paintings, illustrations of the past. I believe that the Ascendants have done something to affect the collective memory of those who live in the Republic, or perhaps even the surface as a whole." Saying this made Adam swallow. It was like he was drinking bitter medicine. Shiv knew that the Gate Lord was still a patriot at heart, but with all the things he'd uncovered, it was likely shaking his confidence in the Republic itself. How could it not? A City Lord, his fiancée's father no less, was a major player in the plot to betray and murder both Roland Arrow and the Starhawk's, along with a Council member themselves.

"With the tome destroyed," Adam continued, "the Educator was eliminated. However, I do not think that she, or whatever it actually is, has been removed from the field entirely. I suspect she will return in the near future, and we will have to deal with her again."

This wasn't so much for the Umbrals or Weaveresses in the room. He was looking at Shiv and then turned to Uva when he finished speaking. Shiv still felt an itch on the left side of his body. Thanks to Adam's light, he was healing much faster than before, but still, soul wounds were a bitch to get rid of.

"A second critical fact is her association with Aviary itself," Uva said. She had her arms behind her back and briefly looked at Null Mont. "From the information provided by the Owl we captured, it seemed that this alliance between the Educator and Aviary was formed nearly three full years ago. This has been in the planning for quite some time. More importantly, something had been promised to Aviary: Starhawk's Perch."

Not for the first time, Shiv's Biomancy felt Adam's body tense dramatically. The Gate Lord's muscles were bunched up and on the verge of bursting into action. Starhawk's Perch was more than just some Sacred Phylactery; it was his home. And it was the main reason why Blackedge was truly still standing. It allowed his father to commune with and channel the Starhawk's power.

Losing it to Aviary wouldn't just be catastrophic for the Republic as a whole, but also for Adam personally. "Additionally, connected to that, we've also discovered that other sacred relics had been collected and stored at Starhawk's Perch." Uva paused. "We don't know exactly what sacred relics these are. However, what is certain is that there may be a grander conflict brewing within the Republic itself."

A Weaveress held up a single finger, and Adam nodded at her, letting her speak. "This is all troubling, but what do the internal matters of surface nation conflict have to do with us?"

"It has to do with you because Aviary is in league with the First Blood as well," Adam said, and that led him into the second point. "As the Educator has connections to Aviary and was using them to further her own ends, Aviary is using the First Blood as their primary vehicle in the Abyss, at least for this operation. They came raiding the gate, expecting to take it easily. I suspect that the Educator was meant to subdue and secure Confriga, along with the Outsider hidden in his sword, to make their conquest a quick and easy one."

Valor flipped through the Educator's tome, and on one of the pages, though badly burned, everyone could see an entity with a hand for a head and many eyes trailing across its body. It resembled the Recollector close enough to demonstrate that the Educator likely had the capability to capture an Eldritch entity as well.

"However, there was one thing they did not account for," Adam said. He straightened his back as he spoke his final word, "Us. We arrived, and we intercepted the Educator first."

Shiv coughed loudly at the Gate Lord's faulty memory, and Adam paused. "Well, technically, we were spying on her, and then she engaged with us. We went over this in detail, but due to special circumstances, we managed to eliminate her and break her binds to this material dimension. We suspect that the First Blood, meanwhile, was also promised something substantial for their service. Perhaps a Sacred Phylactery of their own. To openly try to seize a gate this way holds significant risks, risks that aren't worth taking without a significant reward. And that leads to what I suspect to be their target destination: Blackedge."

"The Quest reward the vampires would have gotten would have allowed them to besiege Blackedge on the side of Vicar Sullain. Additionally," Adam drew a new line between the First Blood and the Inquisition, finally, "this would place them on the same side as the Inquisition, for at least rogue aspects within the Inquisition are en route to aid and assist the vicar's forces in seizing Blackedge. Originally, they were due to receive an Animancy Core as well."

Adam held up Master-Adviser Oldsmith's sync letters in front of everyone. "I have been exchanging communications under the guise of Master-Adviser Oldsmith. Inquisitor Sijik is en route to Blackedge, and they are expected to arrive in three to five days."

Shiv did a double-take at that. This was new information for him as well.

Adam's expression was grave, but he also looked determined. "He brings with him a rapid response force of one hundred thousand Pathbearers, supported by mercenary contingents. They are not coming from the capital. Rather, they are going to take a route into Lone Star border territory before coming back over through the south. We suspect this is to confuse and divert attention from their exact actions. We don't know how deep the compromise in the Republic goes, but I do suspect that there is a reason why they are keeping their actions circumspect. Even so, we are unsure about the exact nature of the conflict between the Ascendants."

Part of that sounded like hope on Adam's part, and Shiv got it. Fighting one god was already a pretty miserable experience. Fighting twelve or so? Yeah, he thought to himself, that's gonna be an ugly struggle. I don't know if I even have enough vitality to burn.

"And with these three priority threats established, our first goal now is to reach and survey the situation around Blackedge." Adam paused as he processed his own thoughts for a moment, gathering himself. "I do not know what the condition of my hometown is. When I was saved by the Starhawk, he said my father was still fighting, but that he was flagging. For weeks, he has endured the siege, but I do not know just how dire their circumstances are. I tell you this now because, should we be able to establish a logistical or even a spatial route to Blackedge, I intend to evacuate those wounded or incapable of fighting to this gate. But aside from that, we also have a secondary objective that might become a priority in a short time, depending on what I receive from these letters."

"The Inquisition?" Uva asked.

"They must be delayed," Adam replied. "Blackedge is already pressed to its limits by Sullain alone. Starhawk's Perch has many defenses, but should even more forces join the fray, and forces from the Republic that might understand how the intricacies of the Perch work no less..." Adam didn't finish that. He shook his head. "We cannot allow it. It's too grave a risk."

He walked over to the other side of the board and pointed to the next list of items. "We have our two current priority objectives. The first is a scouting run that will be conducted by me and Shiv later." He looked through the room. Before they could respond or voice any doubts, Adam held up a hand. "I will

remain close to the gate. I will not depart far. This run will mainly be conducted by Shiv. I will monitor him and I will see what gets lured out along his path."

"But," Null Mount said, sounding slightly uneasy, "would that not lead certain threats back in our direction? Or worse, risk Pathbearer Shiv being captured by the adversary?" Shiv frowned slightly. Was Null Mount trying to express care for him in thanks for what he offered her just now?

"There are risks to all actions," Adam said, "especially inaction. Choosing to do nothing is also a choice. However," Adam let out a slight breath, "I do concede the point. There are dangers involved, and that's why I'm warning you now. However, I think we are past the point of avoiding danger."

He briefly pointed far below the Inquisition item. And there at the very bottom was where the words 'Lord Scorn' were written, with several question marks behind them. "We still have an issue with the Vulketh Gateway. I'm trying to find a way to shift its dimensionality and potentially connect it to some other place. Should I be unable to do so, however, in a month, I expect to face an invasion of Vulketh as well."

"Yeah, and I think that we're going to have vampire problems soon too," Shiv added. "The First Blood was invading Compact territory. There are no active Compact patrols with Gate Theborn basically destroyed. The only reason why we probably don't have more vampires here right now is because I stole a Court Leviathan from them and basically butchered the remainder of an entire court after their main army died trying to take this place. But this isn't going to last. We're going to be attacked sooner or later."

But then Shiv balled his hands into fists. "Unless we hit them first. That's my recommendation. We give them more problems and raid their territory before they can organize anything and come here."



"I concur," Uva said. Shiv was surprised at that. But she kept going. "We don't have the forces or resources to endure an active struggle. So it would be best for us to stun the enemy further, however we can. Aggressive raids and skirmishes will buy us some more time to recover and build up."

"Right," Shiv said. "But in the meantime, if you're going to be moving out, don't expect to be moving in safe and secure territory. Use stealth, move in groups, and..." Shiv paused. "Defend. Building up defenses like Uva said. We need an actual force here..."

The Challenger is watching.

No. I am not hiring any orcs, Shiv snarled internally.

The Challenger is chuckling.

Yeah, laugh it up, asshole.

"And that is another priority, though secondary," Adam said, pointing at the board. "We've inherited something of a small treasury from raiding Confriga's personal vault, but it will not be enough. Between rebuilding this gate, trying to find support for Blackedge, potentially through hired mercenaries and whatnot, we will be stretched for funds and resources. So that will be something else we have to face. But forces and defenses are a necessity. Make no mistake, we are extremely System-favored. Shiv, more than any of us, and so long as you are with him, you will experience conflict the likes of which you can't imagine."

Shiv gave a grunt of affirmation. Some of the Umbrals and Weaveresses looked uneasy, but none of them raised any true complaints.

"Still, this gate is the closest thing to a reliable sanctuary we have. Aside from Weave, that is, but Weave is also under threat. Should we have failed to contain the vampire invasion, another result would have been them launching a counter-attack on Weave in retribution for your raid a few weeks ago. I suspect they will try doing that at some point anyway, though their position might be worse now with an entire court lost." And so, Adam moved back over to his action items. "We have a list of immediate operations and situations to resolve. First is the scouting run. This will happen in the next few hours once Penitent Can Hu finishes a final act of reforging."

Can Hu let out a chirp. "I will be ready by the end of this briefing."

"Make sure that you don't rush," Adam said. "Remember, we want effectiveness, not strain. This needs to work. It needs to work well, especially for the future."

"Affirmative," Can Hu replied, adamant.

"Furthermore," Adam continued, "we will need to find a way to stall the Inquisition. We will have a little bit of time for this, but not long."

"I suspect this operation is more suited to someone of my capabilities," Uva said. "However, the Light-Curse poses a severe problem. We might need to find a way to circumvent that. I understand that there is a day-night cycle on the surface, but even so..."

"I've thought of this in advance," Adam said. "There is a set of boots you need to try later." Uva narrowed her eyes, and that got her a grin from Adam. "You might find them most useful for avoiding the sun's ugly glare." Uva paused, and then she nodded. Shiv could read and notice satisfaction in her features. "But aside from that, this is another reason why I wanted to fuse the Garden of Bountiful Alloy with Shiv's Cloak of Midnight Kindred—to make it a mobile forward operating base."

"Huh?" Shiv said. "That's what we're trying to do?"

"Ultimately, I intend to make a teleportation anchor as well," Adam said. "Something that will allow us to easily transition from point to point, but there will be," Adam paused, "complexities related to that task. For now, it can probably carry a few people, a good amount of equipment, and an ever-regrowing supply of material resources."

"I can see an active machine workshop constructed there as well," Can Hu added. It looked at Shiv and paused. "I might no longer be useful as armor. But I can still build. And I can guard you without while I am within."

Shiv nodded at that. This might just work...

"That will be a more long-term project. Something that progresses with building up our defenses, hiring forces." Adam sighed.

And that made Shiv ponder a certain possibility. "We have a Court Leviathan," Shiv replied. "We could try growing our own Blood Horrors—"

And immediately there came an uproar.

"We cannot do this!" one of the Umbrals cried. "It's wrong! It's unholy! The Composer would never allow us to be tainted by such an act!"

Shiv winced. "It was just an idea."

"Quiet!" Adam cried out. "Quiet! I understand," Adam said diplomatically. "I understand that you are repulsed and offended by the nature of the First Blood. I am too. As is Shiv." He looked at Shiv. "Shiv likely has killed more vampires than most of us in this room."

"Probably," Shiv replied.

"His mistake was saying 'Blood Horrors' rather than... Well, potentially, Biomantically-constructed golems or something. Ultimately, we need to consider all means of force-generation."

Uva suddenly went very still. Her eyes flickered between several colors, and Shiv suspected she had an idea she wasn't voicing. An idea that might see them granted aid from the Outside.

Adam let out a breath as he looked at the gathered Cherished Sisters and Exalted Mothers. "I appreciate you for being here. I appreciate you for all the aid you have rendered and provided. However, you are an expeditionary force, and I cannot possibly expect a few hundred of you and a few of us to hold the gate against a proper army. The gate itself is also not ready. It has undergone substantial decay. Its districts are mostly destroyed. And the population..."

Adam trailed off at that. He shook his head and pinched his brow. "That's another issue. Priority item four is sorting out what I wish to do with the population. Some of the mercenaries and dignitaries can likely be offered back for ransom." Shiv remembered the Lone Star mercenary that Adam told him about. "We might be able to get some resources for that, but that will take time. Time we likely do not have. What's more, we have to solve some problems with the slaves. And should a good portion of the population leave, well..." Adam let out a breath. "There is a likelihood of further mana decay."

"We can request more support from Weave," one of the Umbrals suggested.

"Unlikely," an especially tall Weaveress responded immediately. "Per orders of her Lady Arachnae, our greatest martial Heroes and Legends are still held in reserve against the First Blood. And with those we lost during the raid, we are all the Composer can offer."

"And I cannot ask for much more in good faith," Adam said. "So, we will need to find alternative solutions."

The Challenger is chuckling louder.

The Challenger has an offer for you.

Godsdammit, Shiv spat. He really didn't want to have an army of orcs holding the gate. It's more likely they'll butcher the gate clean, even if they succeed in fighting off the bloodsuckers. Then, Shiv paused as he noticed Uva staring at him.

"You too?" he asked.

“Quite,” she said, uneasily. “We need to talk about this.”

“Is it bad that I’m leaning more toward the orcs than the Eldritch if we have to choose?” Adam said, slipping into the conversation.

“Yeah,” Shiv growled. “It’s downright felling terrible.”

“Such are the primary items of concern listed,” Adam said aloud. “I will leave this board here. If you have noticed there are wide spaces between, that’s because I invite you all to come in and write down your ideas for potential solutions. Please remember to return the markers and brushes. If you lose them, I will find them, and then I will find you. For now, I announce the primary briefing adjourned. I understand some of you have internal gate-related matters to discuss. I’ll come find you personally once I return from the scouting mission. For everyone else, you are free to return to your duties. Thank you again for your attendance.” Adam paused. “Steel yourselves. I fear there may yet be greater storms ahead.”

As Adam finished his summation, he immediately made for Uva and Shiv. “Uva. Armor. Boots. Shiv. Cloak. Can Hu? Ready?”

The Penitent’s body screeched as it trailed after the group. “At your command, Gate Lord.”

“Good. Valor. You can tell Shiv how his mind is weird along the way. Shiv. Uva. Orcs. Outsiders. And mercenaries.”

“We’re really mixing the sweet of new equipment and the shit of the other stuff,” Shiv mumbled.

“I suspect that’s the best way to eat shit, Shiv,” Adam said wryly. “By coating it in candy first.”

Chapter 109(I) Surface [I]

—Confidential—

[Ambient Mana Recognized — Incoming Message from Inquisitor-Master Sijik]

Oldsmith. If the situation at Gate Theborn is truly as dire as you claim, then you have my full authority and permission to extract. Make sure the other Inquisitors are aware of this as well—and make sure they are with you when you greet me in person.

There will be questions. I trust that you are wise and have full control over your senses. I trust that your claims about the Educator falling in battle against the Gate Lord and his “unnatural powers” are verifiably true and not an active deception—an active deception told to facilitate your escape from the gate due to cowardice.

I also trust that you have recovered the Animancy core and will be offering it to me and City Lord Stormhalt in person. Because that might be the only thing stopping him from smiting you on the spot.

...

What happened within the gate is unacceptable, Oldsmith. Absolutely unacceptable. You should know this. You should be ashamed of letting this reach such a stage and not keeping me abreast of these developments—of the risks.

There is no excuse for having this happen. None. Not a single one.

Pray to your favored Ascendant and turn your efforts to faithful service. Perhaps by Halsur's mercy, you will be spared from any true punishment. But for your incompetence, I will see your political aspirations ended.

I have suffered you enough.

Make sure you are ready and prepared to receive us at Mobile Fortress Diego within a week.

No more excuses. No more mistakes. No more clemency.

-Spell Sealed Sync-Letter from Inquisitor Sijik of the Yellowstone Republic

Strands of glistening mercury connected Shiv's Cloak of Midnight Kindred to the dormant seed that held Can Hu's garden bountiful alloy. Once more, Can Hu strained itself, weaving strands born of its Geomancy and Crafting Skill fusion.

Now, Shiv's cloak was about to undergo an upgrade.



Shiv couldn't lie; he was really looking forward to how this might turn out. It also made him very excited. However, that excitement was diminished as Adam brought up the topic of reinforcements—namely, scouring reinforcements from any and all available sources.

"Shiv," Adam said, "you said that the Challenger has an offer for you. Does that actually mean he's willing to offer some orcs?"

"Maybe," Shiv grunted. "Doesn't say it outright. But even if he is, we're not doing it. Having orcs defend this place is like trying to have a wolf defend a hen house. Sure, they'll fight Sullain, they'll fight the vampires, but in between, they're going to be gutting people just for the pleasure of seeing them bleed and scream. Sooner or later—probably sooner for that matter—we'll be fighting the orcs inside the gate. It's a bad idea."

"Perhaps not," Uva replied. She slipped on the new arcanite boots Can Hu had forged earlier on. Her focus crystal armor still needed more modifications due to it lacking some very rudimentary size-adjusting capabilities, but Can Hu said it could be made to fit her person upon being merged with the arcanite. "I think there are ways of managing them and keeping them under control. We can try to obtain an agreement from the Challenger if such a thing is possible. Or I can bend them to our control should they try to break from service."

Shiv drew in a breath and tried to control his frustration. "Uva, I fought one orc. One. That orc saw through my Perfect Semblance. He killed a child deliberately to provoke me and started a fight with me that caused who knows how much collateral damage. Then, he proceeded to curse me with his love

and infect me with an Orcish Skill. And then I got Challenger's attention. So, yeah, I'm trying to imagine what it would be like for an entire army of orcs like him. And the answer is they're not going to be on our side. No, they're going to be waiting. Waiting for the moment when they can drag their knives across our necks. It won't end any other way. They're orcs. Listen to me. They. Are. Orcs. This ends in blood."

"I think I can ingrain in them a means of... compliance," Uva considered. She stomped down with her boot, and the ground shook. The metal at their feet quivered, and Uva sank entirely down through the ground, then rose up again a second later. "Hm. Not bad. Not bad at all. No air, though. I'll have to hold my breath or shape an opening."

But she didn't get it. She thought she was facing a stupid beast, but Shiv knew better. "The Challenger isn't just going to throw us vulnerable orcs just to be killed. No, it's going to be a fight. It's always a fight with him. If anything, I'm putting you both at risk. I'm putting everyone in the gate at risk if I agree to hear out his offer. I don't want to know what an orc Psychomancer is like, and I don't want to find out what kind of Orcish Skill you two are going to develop if you get orcs to fall in love with you."

"Well, you managed to fuse it to your cooking, didn't you? That's how you got your Master-Tier Cooking, isn't it?" Adam assessed. "Perhaps we could do the same."

Shiv clenched his jaw. "Adam, before I fused that, I nearly tortured Tran and Heather. I did torture one of the Inquisitors. I cut her up over and over again, and then I healed her, and so on. I can barely remember it, but..." he looked down at his hands, and for a moment, he recalled the rage consuming him, "I definitely did it. I could feel the weight. I could hear the screams. And I liked it. I was always mad. There was this itch inside me that wouldn't go away. It kept demanding that I hurt people to feed it. So, yeah, I did fuse it, Adam. But it nearly drove me insane. Hell, it did drive me a bit insane. So, now I'm going to ask you a question. Are you like me?"

Adam blinked. His mouth opened, but he didn't say anything

Shiv shook his head. "I thought not. You're a good guy, Adam. A real Pathbearer. But this is not something you can easily resist. I'm going to give it to you very plainly. If the skill infests you, there are a few ways to get rid of it. You probably already know. Nonviolence is one of them, but that's not really a choice for us now, is it? Since we're about to go save Blackedge. And if that doesn't work, well, you can try fusing that skill. But then, what skill are you going to fuse it with? Frankly, you don't know what skill it's going to infect anyway, either. So, if every time you shoot one of your Veilpiercers, and you kill someone, and that makes your skill stronger, what do you think is going to happen? I'm not doubting

your resolve. But we can't afford this, not now. I'm putting my foot down here. My answer is no. Not unless we absolutely have no other options left."

Adam briefly looked like he wanted to argue, but then he clenched his teeth and looked over at Uva instead. "Well, Sister Uva, is the Dreamtaker offering something as well?"

"Not quite an army," Uva said. "More like a release."

"A release?" Adam repeated.

"Yes, she can potentially gather some of the more dangerous entities, her New-Dreamt, and I can use my gaze to release them into the Umbral Wilderness, have them serve as a bulwark against the First Blood."

And that was when Uva started getting uneasy. "But, there's a consequence to this. I cannot... Perhaps..." Uva stuttered briefly. It wasn't like her. "Adam, I have another skill," she said. "It's the skill I told you about briefly. Another Eldritch Skill. It feeds on madness and does things to the geometries of the world. It will affect your sanity if you look upon them. Your Divination sensitivity leaves you vulnerable to these creatures. They're pattern-deviant. And you are pattern hyper-aware. I worry about your sanity if we do this."

She breathed in deeply. "I worry about everyone's sanity when it comes to this option. I have only touched the surface of understanding the Outsiders. I cannot control them as I do a person or even a beast. And furthermore, they might just spread across the wilderness, killing indiscriminately or inflicting harm in other ways I can't predict."

She looked at Shiv for a moment. "At least with the orcs, they are somewhat consistent. There's a mind there, a sort of twisted, cruel rationality that's at least loosely comparable to ours. I can contend with that. I can face that. With the New-Dreamt and the other eldritch entities, I'm not so sure."

Adam stared at the stacks of mithril ingots and other treasures they had amassed within the teleportation anchor. "This will be enough to hire a few groups of mercenaries, but that won't be nearly sufficient, and they likely won't be able to respond quickly either. There will be negotiations, arguments, and travel time... Which is what we do not have at all right now."

Adam looked between Shiv and Uva. "I don't know how to solve this. I don't. But without an army, without a sufficient concentration of force, I don't know how we can hold this gate. I don't know how we can protect ourselves from Lord Scorn, the First Blood, Aviary, and whatever Sullain is doing at the same time. It's just not possible."

"What about Sir Marikos?" Shiv suddenly asked. "The Descendants Union. Could we ask them to offer some aid?"

"He will not reside here so long as I remain in your presence," Valor said, his tone slightly dour. "His hate is that great, his grudge is that true."

"And more importantly, I asked about this already," Adam continued. He scowled deeply. "According to Null Mont, Marikos might be very well willing to start this fight immediately on his own accord. However, the rest of the Five Faiths and the Descenders Union itself are busy trying to come together to set up a conference. A meeting to discuss what is to be done about Vicar Sullain. We don't have time for a grand conference; we don't have time for politics. Blackedge does not have that long. With the Inquisition coming, with them already under siege for so many days, how much longer do you think they can endure?"

The room fell silent. Shiv barely held back a sigh. The System seemed intent on forcing him to make an ugly choice, both him and Uva. Even when they were offered options for an easy army, it wasn't really their army, whichever one they chose. And frankly, it was something that would probably cast them into a deeper pit of struggle in the aftermath. Uva couldn't control the New-Dreamt.

Comparatively, Shiv absolutely did not trust the orcs. Worse than that, the orcs were almost guaranteed to turn on them, to start a fight with him the moment they got the chance. But he could kill them. Uva could contend with them. Adam could watch them.

Shit. I can't believe I'm actually starting to consider this. But it might be our best choice...

He didn't exactly know how skill-binding rituals worked, or how someone kept someone else locked to a promise. But with that many orcs, and with their intelligence, 811 was right about one thing. Shiv remembered him, and he remembered the orc well. Most of all, he remembered the creature's cruel, perceptive intellect.

Shiv wasn't stupid, but he was too raw and undertrained an intellectual to contend with an orc. Physically, he could treat it like a slugging match, could kill one of the creatures, assuming they weren't High Heroic-Tier. But mentally, intellectually? No, that wasn't a fight he was ready for. And neither Adam nor Uva knew how dangerous the gray-skinned bastards were.

"We're going to need to find a solution, and soon," Adam said. His heart was pounding fast; stress was building on the Gate Lord. Too much stress.

And right then, Shiv suspected that he was probably damned to at least speak to the Challenger.

Godsdamn you, System, Shiv cursed. Godsdamn you too, you big bastard.

The Challenger awaits your formal response.

Shiv closed his eyes and tried not to grit his teeth in frustration. If this went wrong, there were more than good odds that the gate would be drenched ankle-deep in blood and death.

Just then, a flicker of pulsing force washed over them. The room groaned, the ground shook. Can Hu let out a piercing noise.

"Can Hu," Shiv said, "you alright?" He really didn't like the sounds that were coming from the Penitent's body.

"I am well, Pathbearer Shiv," Can Hu groaned.

"You don't sound alright," Shiv growled. Beside Shiv, Adam's azure dawn grew brighter. He channeled more power into the Penitent. And now, Adam let out a groan from the strain he started to bear. Then, slowly, the pool of mercury came into shape before Can Hu began to quiver and pulse. Faster and faster, the mercury spun, churning as if a whirlpool, as if something was about to hatch from within.

Chapter 109 (II) Surface [I]

Shiv reactively took a step back. He placed himself in front of Uva and Valor, just in case something went wrong. Sparks flew out from the Penitent's joints. Can Hu's eyes flickered, like two light bulbs on the verge of bursting and burning out. The howling sounds coming from within Can Hu's body were now getting louder and louder as well. It was like metal being dragged against itself.

It was more than Shiv could bear.

"Alright, that's it. I'm putting a stop to this," Shiv said.

But Valor caught him by the shoulder. The Legendary Pathbearer's grip wasn't strong in his diminished state, but it was firm and certain. "No," Valor said.

Shiv stared at Valor, his eyes widened. "Valor, it's gonna kill itself."

"No, it will not," Valor replied. "Trust that it knows its limits now. Trust that its promise to you was true. For if you cannot trust your allies in times of peace, then how can you do so in moments of war?"

The sound coming from inside Can Hu was absolutely deafening now. And one of Can Hu's eyes actually went out. Valor kept holding Shiv, however, and when Shiv looked to Uva to decide how he was going to act, she looked as lost as him. But it was Can Hu itself who decided its fate.

"Pathbearer," it called out to Shiv, "I have this. I have this." It spoke with such conviction that Shiv stayed in place. He stayed despite every fiber of his being telling him to intervene, to stop this. System, I hope I don't regret this.

The mercury pool began to compress inward, and then, with a violent pulse, it widened and spread out. Can Hu's hands came together, both its humanoid manipulator limbs and its massive industrial claws. With a resounding clang, the reforging concluded. A spell flashed above Can Hu and came slamming down on the item born of the merger.

But the moment it was done, Can Hu slumped. Adam fell to one knee. Uva sent fragments of her shield to help Can Hu stay standing, while Shiv strode right past the billowing black mass of his newly reforged cloak to see how the Penitent was doing.

Meanwhile, Adam gaffed on his hands and knees and slowly began to crawl towards Can Hu as well.

"Can Hu, Can Hu!" Shiv cried urgently. He held the machine gently, trying not to do any more damage.

But Can Hu turned, aiming its one good eye at Shiv. Its half skull was partially cracked. This reforging had strained it substantially. He should never have allowed it to do this. He should have...

"I told you," Can Hu said. There was a hint of pride in its voice. "I told you I could. I fulfilled the promise." Can Hu held up a shaking hand and pointed at the reforged item.

Only then did Shiv gaze upon the newly merged cloak in detail. And only then did he realize it was more than a cloak now. No, it was vast and billowing, something between a cape and a long coat, capable of shrouding Shiv's entire body. Previously, it had primarily been a mass of dimensional shadows—that dimensional space between Passage held together by clumps of Weaveress silk. The silk was overlaid now by an interweaving lattice of various alloys. They glistened in the light, shimmering brilliantly, and lining the great cloak. Again, a metallic outline. Motes of shadow dripped out from the grand cape as well, bits of Dimensionality peeling free.

Shiv reached out and took the cape in his hands. Once he did, a notification loaded.



Equipment Obtained: [Cape of Innermost Depth]

Tier: Heroic

Condition: Stable

Composition: Spatial Magic; Varied Alloys

Enchantments > Dimensional Pocket; Portomancy 10; Shadowsense 50; Category One Dimension Core; Forest of Alloy; Adaptive Environment; Binding

Shiv's eyes widened. Heroic-Tier. Heroic. Can Hu shot past the threshold. It managed to advance the quality of both its Garden Bountiful Alloy and Shiv's Cloak of Midnight Kindred. It was more than just a minor dimensional pocket now, and the Shadowsense skill had increased as well.

Forest of Alloy too... I guess Can Hu will be getting a lot more materials as well.

Shiv could feel the forest residing within his cape. But the garden was like a small patch of stable space at its center, a space he could move or shift into place over the cape. As he did that, it was like an entrance appearing upon the great cape. The portal to the forest of alloy drew closer and revealed itself to him. Shiv could see vines of copper and trees made from all manner of metals and materials. And all that was revealed upon a canvas that functionally still felt like an article of silk. Stepping into the garden would be like pushing oneself into a curtain and entering a new dimension.

"Damn good work, Penitent," Shiv said, staring at Can Hu. The Penitent staggered on its feet but managed to stand.

"It is my aim to serve, my pride to serve, and it's my pleasure to receive," Can Hu crackled weakly.

"Well done, indeed," Adam said in response, a chuckle escaping from the Gate Lord as he stared at Can Hu. "Now we'll be able to start stuffing even more things in Shiv's pockets." Adam licked his lips. "And to get the rest of us some dimensional pockets as well."

As Shiv equipped his cloak, he threw a few leviathan rations inside of it. A second later, he pulled them back out just to see if he could.

"Alright," Shiv said, "time to get the rest of my inventory back where it belongs."

"Before you do that," Valor said, "there is something we need to discuss. It concerns you as well, Adam."

Whatever amusement lit upon Adam's face was extinguished in a moment.

"Udraal?" Shiv asked. "Yeah, I kind of figured." He hesitated for a moment, but as soon as he met Adam's eyes, he knew he had to let Adam know. Maybe not the rest of the horror story he watched, but the part about their parents meeting Udraal.

"Adam, your mother, she told me something earlier. She said that she, your father, and my parents had contact with Udraal. They didn't just fight him. There was apparently a moment of truce or something, and he led them somewhere. And I think... My parents probably figured out how to do the ritual from him, or something."

"That is likely accurate." Valor sounded apprehensive for once. "I think you deserve to know that both my son and I were trying to create something." Valor hesitated before continuing. "Before a great many things happened, we were aligned in our work. Our main goal was to create something that went beyond the bounds of the System. Something that could usurp it entirely, in its finished form."

A silence fell over the room.

"We wanted to create something from the Great One's legacy. Something that couldn't be so easily controlled. Something that was beyond the confines of strife, that wasn't forced to struggle for its existence. Something beyond the System's capacity to challenge in any way. And during the attempt..." Valo released a ragged hiss that held a great deal of pain.

"During the attempt, I lost my love. And Udraal lost his mother. After that, there is a missing piece in my memories. But I think I gave up on the project after that, while my son committed himself fully. He gave himself entirely to the goal. But rather than just surpassing the System, he now also wanted to make something that could take someone back from the System. Take someone back from the clutches of death. Something deathless."

Shiv paused. "Like me?"

"It's likely. Your mind isn't quite like that of a Tarrasque's, but it is likely built upon the framework of one. And there is a reason for this. It's not just so that you have a cognitive template as durable as your soul and vitality. A Tarrasque is a unique creature in Integrated reality. And a Cursed Tarasque is injured

even against Necromancy. From my research, I believe they are unique monsters meant to destroy worlds, that they were born from concentrations of severe conflict, forged by the System's own hand. Their minds are capable of fixing themselves even after being broken, just like their bodies can be restored if only a single piece remains. Udraal was inspired to use them in certain ways, specifically as some kind of incubator or regenerator to restore the complete soul of another person. To regrow someone from the remains of their own being, their own skills..."

As Valor trailed off, Shiv sank into his own mind. As he thought, only one individual came to his mind. And it wasn't Udraal, but Rose. Rose, who spawned from his Foreshadowing Skill. Rose, who was now tethered to his Unique Skill. Rose, who was caged by, trapped in, and bound to his vitae.

"Rose Van Erren," Valor said, echoing Shiv's very thoughts. "You said she emerged after you hit a skill evolution. You said she is now tied to your Unique Skill. That was clearly not a thing of freak circumstance. To regrow another Pathbearer from a fragment of their own soul, from a skill they had, is a resurrection. But skills are only part of a person. Vitality and mind, those are necessary as well. And since your mind can regenerate, and your vitality is bound to your soul..."

"Are you saying that resurrecting Rose was what I was designed to do? That that's what I'm for? An incubator of resurrections?" he asked.

"Perhaps," Valor replied.

Adam looked on, and his expression was absolutely shell-shocked. But, rather than despair, there were glowing embers of hope behind his eyes. While Shiv and Valor were lost and wrestling with the nature of Shiv's ontology, Adam was likely only hearing one thing: His mother could be resurrected.

"But..." Adam paused. "But my mother—she wasn't the only one who was killed during the ritual. I had an unborn sister."

Shiv had to put in significant effort to keep the horror from showing on his face. He swallowed. "I saw her in the vision. I know what happened to her."

And suddenly, Adam's hope shrank. What replaced it was fear, but also a desire to know. "Can... can she be brought back as well?"

Shiv shook his head. "I don't..." As he tried to think of a way to describe it without hurting Adam more, the images kept flashing through his mind; his father thrusting the blade through the baby and Shiv's own mother. Shiv swallowed. "My father sacrificed her—"

But before he could go further, Adam held up a hand and turned away. "No," he rasped.

Shiv paused, letting Adam process the moment. "Just... Don't say anything anymore. I'll... Later. Later. But my mother... She could still be restored. Is that what you're saying? That she could be brought back to life?"

"I do not know, Adam," Valor admitted. "But it is possible. If what my son was trying to do succeeded—and it sounds like it did, at least partially—then it is very much possible." Valor looked at his right arm, the one that allowed him to conduct Necromancy. "To gain any potential insight into this, we need a Master Animancer, at the very least."

"And the easiest way to do so is finding another of your fragments," Adam surmised. "Alright, the moment we get a chance, I will do that. We'll find another piece of you. We will get as many pieces as possible, and we will assemble you, Valor. We will give you everything you need. And then you can look into Shiv. You can look into what... just what has been done to his very soul. And... and..."

Adam almost didn't dare say the next part. A shiver ran through his body. "...and then we can think about potentially... saving my mother," he finally managed. The statement sounded absolutely insane. And Adam sounded like he didn't want to believe it either. But something in him did, and the traitorous noise of hope leaked into his voice.

"Of course, Adam," Valor said. "You have my word. And this is my responsibility as well. I should have... There are things unfinished between me and my son.

"Things are unfinished between me and my father as well." Adam shook his head. "We all have many things to ask. But right now, we have a task at hand." As he spoke, he walked over to the table and picked up the Hydromancy wand before strapping it to his belt. "I'm taking this one as it is. It's time to move. We have established a solid foothold here. And we are finally ready to return to the surface. Finally. Godsdammit. We're so close."

And with the possibility of his mother being savable, Adam looked at everyone with a new surge of motivation flooding his being. Mirroring his rising mood, his sun grew brighter as well. "There are problems ahead of us, but we can see them solved. There are enemies around us, but we can see them slain." Adam swallowed. He tried to contain his rising excitement, his building hope. "Shiv, how much time do you need?"

"For what?"

"To prepare. To head out."

"I've already done my cooking, Adam," Shiv said. He cracked his neck. "I'm just gonna go get my stuff, and then I'll be ready to head out through the gate."

"Good man. Before that, I need to draw you a map. There are several landmarks you need to remember, and you need to understand the general directions. I don't want you getting lost. I don't want there to be any problems on the way. We're going to do this fast and proper. Go. Fill your cape. When you get back, I need to talk with you about how we're going to do this."

#### Chapter 109 (III) Surface [I]

The world was incredibly vast, and Shiv had seen less than a small part of it. That was what he learned as Adam drew him a general map of what to expect. However, when one was high enough in the air and could see enough of their surroundings, a few landmarks would immediately make themselves known.

The first was the Grand Pacific, a massive body of water that lined the boundaries of the Yellowstone Republic, and thus, that of the former Lost Angeles sprawl. Depending on where the surface gateway led, if Shiv was lost, the first thing he needed to do was go up until he saw the nearest large body of water.

After that, he was to look for the massive, looming plate that enshadowed large parts of the former city. The Grand Pacific was a turbulent sea, one where waves over a kilometer high were known to dance across the horizon. The great slab of uprooted tectonic plating prevented the ocean from washing over the land, while also serving as a major, naturally occurring ward that kept the Sea Titans dwelling in the Grand Pacific's depths at bay.

It was called the Tidewall, and if Shiv ever wanted to find Lost Angeles, he just needed to follow it first. Once there, the sprawl itself shouldn't be hard to locate at all. It was a massive stretch of ruins, spreading hundreds of kilometers, running from the chasm to Old Santabar to the hard north, where gale-force blizzards tore chunks out of the land and froze the very air as they traveled down from the ruins of Torontus.

For this scouting run, Shiv's main job was to stay on the move and make a complete lap around Blackedge, gathering as much information as possible. The town should still have wardings against Portomancy and Chronomancy active, so if he got too close, his Strider of the Unbending Path would likely be affected as well.

He was to stay beyond the area of effect to get as much information about the town situation as possible and, hopefully, bait out some attacks, exposing as many of Vicar Sullain's hidden scouts as he could.

After that, Adam would mark down their locations, and he would also preferably ambush a few to take as prisoners. That was part of why he wanted the wand. Its Hydromancy allowed him to pin someone else by clutching them with controllable water. He could also easily summon a dimensional of animated water along with turning himself into water for a while. It sounded like a Hydromancy-Physicality Skill Fusion.

No wonder Adam thought the wand was good on its own and didn't need to be fused. Shiv thought the Enchantments were awesome.

As they strode closer to the Surface Gateway, mercenaries cleared out ahead of them. The encampments had been removed, and the mercenaries taken to somewhere else. But some of them still lingered here, talking, exchanging pleasantries, or just staring off the side of the bridge. Siggy was there, and she saw Shiv and Adam approaching together.

As she looked at Shiv, he gave her the slightest of nods, and she clenched her jaw and returned it. There was still fear, but there was also a growing understanding on her part. Shiv didn't think much of her, but in the past days, she'd been nothing if not helpful. That meant something. Shiv frowned internally. It was hard not to feel a little bit grateful to the goblin, but still, he didn't have much respect for her. What the hell is the right thing to do in these situations? Shiv wondered to himself.



"Alright, so repeat after me. What is rule one?"

"I got rule one," Shiv said, annoyed.

"Repeat it. I want to hear you say it."

"Keep moving. All the time. Always keep moving, because we might be attacked by people with Necromancy. Yeah, I know. Ass on the line, Adam."

"Yes, but you've been very reckless with your own life so far, and you've been rewarded for that recklessness. You will not be rewarded if you are fighting someone with Necromancy. Instead, an entire section of the world might vanish in a white-hot blast. Don't let that happen."

Shiv nodded. He understood Adam's concern. Then he looked at the Gate Lord. "If it does, you go straight back into the gate. Don't get fried."

Adam nodded. "Yes, I know. But when it's over, I'm coming back for you. Or what's left of you."

Shiv grunted. They were of an understanding on that part, at least. Shiv would leave the gate first. He would trigger his Creeping Void to provide a blanket of cover. It would be useful for him, because it would stop anyone from seeing exactly what was happening when the gate opened, and they were sure it was being observed anyways. It would be useful for Adam, since the Gate Lord's plan was to go straight up into the air.

Once above the clouds. He would use his Seer of Horizons to survey and observe the land from on high. And there, he would fire his Veilpiercers and keep Shiv protected from afar, without straying too far away from the gate himself.

Again, the differences between their skill sets showed themselves. Shiv was going to accelerate, make noise, and act as a traveling avalanche. Adam was going to be a sniper, a scalpel, and a precision raider.

"Once we get the inside of your cape fully set up, we can take Uva out with us. Even now, it's a reliable place for her to hide from the sun, if nothing else," Adam mused. "Her and most of the other Abyssals."

Shiv let out a laugh. "You're really considerate, Adam, you know that?"

"I try to be." Adam gave him a slight smirk. "She's going to need to field test her boots and her armor at some point, as well as learn about the exempt dangers of the Light-Curse."

"Sullain can operate in the light for a while," Shiv said. He remembered seeing Sullain during the eclipse. But then again, that was the eclipse. That was the perfect day to attack, with the sun's rays blunted. Even so, the sun had burned more than a few of the vicar's forces, with how much smoke was rising from their bodies.

"Well, Valor said that the stronger the Pathbearer, the longer it takes for the Light-Curse to fully affect them." Adam paused as he pressed his lips together. "I suspect its effects won't be instantaneous on Uva, but still."

"Best to keep her away," Shiv finished. There was more than a little weight in his voice. He didn't want the sun to touch her. He didn't want to see her hurt at all. But if they were going to fight on the surface, there were going to be risks. Especially for her.

The two of them came to a stop before the gateway, and Uva briefly tapped both of their minds with her mana strands. "Alright, I'll be monitoring the gate while you are gone. Make sure nothing goes wrong." Uva paused. "I will likely have to convene with the Dreamtaker about other options we have for force generation. I'm not going to tell Null Mont about this right now."

"Probably a good idea," Adam said. "But don't decide on anything before we get back."

Uva gave a quiet hum of agreement. "If you two are gone too long, I will come out after you when it's nighttime. You understand this, yes?"

Adam and Shiv looked at each other. "Well, let's endeavor not to be gone too long then, Gate Lord Adam."

"Agreed, Shiv," Adam breathed. "Let's make this run fast and effective." And with a gesture from the Gate Lord and a flicker of the mana core above, the gateway before them tremored to life. With a flash of brilliant shadow lining with distortion, the path to the surface opened. Adam gestured. "After you, Deathless."

"My pleasure, Gate Lord," Shiv replied.

"Remember," Adam said once more, "keep moving."

"Yeah," Shiv said, "I'll always keep moving."

And as he walked, shadows began to leak out from him, shadows darker than that of his new cape. The world was drenched in a dense, black miasma, and most of the bridge, along with a quarter of the surface district, vanished entirely from sight.

Shiv stepped through the portal.

A moment later, and a clenching sensation thereafter, the almost-forgotten air of the surface world washed over him through the slots in his helmet. It was fresh and overwhelming. There was salt in the air, a taste of the sea. The sky was gray and overhung with clouds, but it still felt incredibly welcoming to Shiv after spending weeks underground. Around him, uneven hills of rolling green and strange weeds rose in all directions. As he stared out, he found himself looking at large mountains in the distance, large mountains shadowed by an even larger shape that shrouded most of the horizon.

"Well," Shiv said, "looks like I found one of the landmarks pretty quick. Tidewall... Never bothered learning your name all these years."

But then something else caught his attention. All around him, there were smears on the ground. Paint? And suddenly Shiv made the connection in his mind. There must have been guards out here that ran into the Educator just before she arrived at Theborn.

Shiv grunted. He probably would have had to kill these guards if they were still here. Although maybe he did so anyway when he detonated himself inside the Educator's tome, assuming she had stored them on its pages.

He pushed that thought aside. The whistle of rushing wind passed around Shiv. And with a pull of his gravity field, he shot high into the air.

And as he flung himself high, he saw the horizon yawning towards him, saw the world grow smaller and smaller below him until he was on the same height as the very top of the Tidewall. Then, he rose even further, and his gaze finally slipped past it.

For the first time, Shiv laid eyes on the face of the Grand Pacific. His mouth gaped.

True to Adam's words, there were waves. The scale of the natural forces on display was incredible. Each wave was higher than the last, and they crashed against the Tidewall with incomprehensible force. Casting his gaze out further, he could see the same chaotic display stretch out all the way to the uneven bend of a twilight horizon. More incredible was how, despite it all, the waters were pristine, pure, near-transparent, even.

And beneath the waves, Shiv saw colossal creatures, ones that dwarfed any being he'd seen in his life, wrestling with each other, casting more massive tsunamis on the surface above.

Shiv blinked. All the world was in a struggle. At any given moment, at any given time, there was strife, and no one could avoid it. No one. As he looked around, seeking the sprawl of Lost Angeles, there came a strange feeling in his gut. Something that told him that he shouldn't stay still.

Keep moving, Adam had said, so Shiv did.

And that decision, in that moment, saved his life. Shiv spiked his field left—and something hissed right past his head, almost taking a chunk out of his helmet. Shiv turned, his sudden burst of speed feeding his

inertial sheath with building force. Just then, Shiv noticed something materialize within his Creeping Void. A veil of twisting air dissipated, revealing a glistening arrow. A glistening, green, corrosive arrow. His eyes widened, and before his brain could fully process what he was looking at, another whistle came by just a few centimeters above his head, and three more just below. All of them revealed themselves to be Necromantically-charged arrows, and all of them were followed by more.

The Creeping Void 109 > 110

Shiv turned, just as an arrow nearly struck him in the eye. Even with his Heroic-Tier Reflexes, he wouldn't have been able to avoid that. He didn't even hear them. They were silent, they were fast, and most of all, they were invisible.

But even if Shiv wasn't fast enough to dodge, he was fast enough to command time to halt on his behalf.

A half-centimeter away from his left eye, a Necromancy-tinged arrowhead poured eerie green energy into Shiv's gaze. Immediately, an ugly sneer lit his face. He looked across the land, and he saw... verdant landscape and rolling hills. Vegetation. He saw nothing. Nothing that told him where these arrows were coming from. But they knew exactly where he was.

Shiv let out a sigh. "Shit." He stared down his improved Magebreaker, and a feral smile spread across his face. "Well, time to see how good my minor illusion Enchantment is."

Chapter 110 (I) Surface [II]

I like to think of most Pathbearers as puzzles to solve. It's an effective way of thinking about dealing with enemies that aren't like you. Usually, you win because you're outright more powerful, you got a skill they can't counter, you have a good plan or better strategy, or—and this is my favorite—you learn to use the skills you have against the skills your enemy doesn't.

That lets you turn a bad fight around on itself.

Let me give you an example.

A Lone Star town was getting butchered during a brutal summer. Orcs again... And let me tell you, the big bastards are quiet when they want to be. Anyway, while they were trying to set up a proper fortification, somehow, they just kept getting inside. They slipped through the cracks in the walls at night, and they just keep losing more people. By day, they retreated back down holes in the ground and stayed gone.

One of the stupider mercenary commanders led a team down into their murder-tunnels, and because he didn't use his skills wisely, he got returned to us the following night in installments.

I saw his flayed skin flapping in the wind like a flag when my company and I finally came in.

Command told us to smoke out the orcs, but I knew that wouldn't work. A low level Aero can shift smoke with ease. Poison gas usually doesn't work on orcs that well because of how damned robust they are, and fighting orcs in close quarters is something you do when you want to be included in an elegy.

My solution proved to be relatively simple. See, there's a problem with having Master-Tier Stealth. Even for orcs. Stealth usually keeps you out of fights. That means less damage. That means not so much struggle. That means your Toughness usually isn't that high. And your Physicality usually lags dramatically behind your Reflexes.

So. Instead of doing any of the stupid shit, I started reaching down and collapsing entire sections of the earth below. I started sleeping during the day and started unleashing earthquakes at night. And the parts of the ground I couldn't collapse, I had Lone Star's artillery crews bomb.

In the end, if you get anything from reading my memoirs, it's this: You decide the fight. Make it on your terms. Don't be the dumbshit who jumped down a tunnel with a knife and a dream. Be the bastard that floods them and sends in a special Hydromancer team. Be the earthquake. Knock the board off the table. This isn't chess. Kill the other felling bastard whatever way you can with the least amount of effort possible.

-Memoirs of a Master-Tier Warmage

Alright, you godsdamn bastards, Shiv thought to himself, let's see who's better at Stealth.

He spiked himself down from the sky, slamming back into the ground and creating a massive crater right in front of the gateway. A sphere of destruction emerged around him, but the shockwave and shrapnel remained frozen in stasis by halted time.

He left a temporal anchor there, in case he needed to reset his position, and Shiv assumed that he was going to. At the same time, he drove his Skysplitter into the earth and absorbed a few tons of mass. The ground crumbled away, its composition and integrity compromised by the sudden mass-loss.

Some weight to throw around was good to have in a fight—it would let him throw his dagger at someone without worrying about a shockwave or a casual parry knocking the blade aside. When that was done, Shiv blasted forward toward the distant mountains in a zigzag formation, trying to guess where the shots were coming from.



Against most attacks, Shiv didn't care too much about taking the damage head-on. He could adapt; his Woundeaters could keep him standing; his Magebreaker could let him deflect magic. But Necromancy was a special kind of dangerous for him.

If even one of these arrows glanced him, he'd go off like the mother of all mana bombs.

Hence, Shiv moved with layers of Concealment active. He triggered all his Stealth Skills at once, including the new Enchantments ingrained in his Unseen Magebreaker. The gem on his left shoulder came aglow, projecting out a minor illusion that was a perfect replication of his current form. He stretched the minor illusion outward by over two kilometers so it slipped just beyond his Creeping Void. He wanted to keep it barely beyond the threshold of his darkness. That way, he could lure some shots out without risking himself.

Additionally, he also activated Chameleon, with Silhouette held in reserve, should Creeping Void prove to be more of a liability than a boon. For now, he unleashed more of the miasmic blackness. Adam needed some cover for when he finally emerged.

Shiv trailed across the land in the meantime, observing the Necromantic arrows above him. He flung himself parallel to the ground, his chest just a meter above the rolling hills at all times. There were a few things he could do regarding these arrows, a few things that would allow him to deduce their points of origin.

He flew opposite to where the arrowheads came from, and he accelerated towards another distant mountain. He intended to put as many positions of cover between himself and his surroundings as possible. If he flew along the ground and the shots came right in front of him, that meant he was probably dealing with an unseen enemy at ground level. If the shots started coming from above, then he could guess if it was coming from a mountain or even the sky, depending on the angle. If that were the case, Shiv would adapt his plan: He would dig into the earth and continue traveling by drilling a literal tunnel across the land as concealment and cover from his enemies.

As the first cracks developed on his temporal shell, Shiv let time flow again. And at once, he found himself glad he paused time exactly when he did. A chain of corrosive explosions swept the place he was in a moment ago. A patch of the sky vanished into a growing field of all-withering green. It was like a screen of acid searing the very fabric of reality. Just looking at it made Shiv's stomach plunge.

Damn close to a bad death.

He immediately triggered one of the dormant plagues he had embedded in himself while continuing his acceleration. His inertial sheath roared with thunderous vigor. The horizon lurched toward Shiv as he absorbed the disease. It was a metabolic virus, something meant to damage Shiv's hormones and overheat him from within, effectively causing his body to cook itself. It triggered for around two seconds, and Shiv felt a surge of heat rush through his blood vessels.

But then his Plaguefueled Skill triggered, and he felt a rush of euphoria pass through him. His mind swirled in a whirlpool of relief and pleasure. The sensation of intoxication came over him hard. But Shiv applied some of what he learned earlier with Uva. He grafted a piece of an older memory of him slicing potatoes, but specifically his act of slicing and not the potato itself. Suddenly, it was like he was piloting his own body.

The act took some additional focus, but it stopped him from drifting off into a drunken stupor.

A second passed. Shiv's eyes remained wide. His senses were—

A chain of shots tore through his minor illusion and then detonated around it. Corrosive screens slashed out and splashed upon the land. Stretches of land and air disappeared outright, the ground withering into blackened, rotted patches as the Necromancy spread.

One hundred meters—danger range for each arrow, Shiv thought as he examined the blasts. His Chronomancy saved his life earlier. Even if he could have dodged some attacks, their exploding might have sealed his fate either way. He didn't know just how bad the Necromantic arrows would hurt him compared to Adam's rift, but he did know these wounds would be lasting.

“‘Keep moving’ is right,” Shiv muttered, thinking back to Adam's advice. “Time to get even faster.”

Shiv spiked his gravitic field over fifty times, and only then did he feel the first hints of discomfort. Plaguefueled was like having another Berserk. Just one that was easier to control.

Some of his bones began to fracture. Hairline cracks formed as his muscles tore in tandem, but he was moving fast and faster every passing second. The air ignited around him. A blastwave was drawn just behind him, building into a tsunami of kinetic energy trapped in Shiv's climbing acceleration.

The sheer amount of force he was displacing offered another surprising benefit: The tidal wave of destruction he carried along his wake swept across the world just as more corrosive detonations consumed Shiv's minor illusion. He watched as a few hundred arrows were suddenly flung off course before they could arrive—the exact thing he wanted to avoid with his knife if he had to throw it.

More than flung off course, the once invisible Necromancy arrows were exposed. His shockwaves scattered the winds and peeled away the invisibility shielding the arrows. They were made invisible by air-distortions! And that gave him a clue as to where the shots were coming from.

The volley of arrows was cutting down through his minor illusion at an almost forty-five-degree angle. A river of Necromancy trailed along each arrow, creating a withering stream that cleaved into the ground.

That means the shot's probably not coming from the sky but one of the mountaintops...I have you poor bastards now.

Shiv wasn't going to leave anything to chance. He let out a cry of effort as he started angling himself downward. His Inertial Overdrive was past the point of easy maneuverability, but that wasn't an issue. He was going to drill himself into the base of the mountain like a missile from below the ground. Then, he was going to detonate his sheath again and again until there was nothing but rubble left of the mountain range. Then, if the shots kept coming, he would proceed to the next group of mountains and repeat the same actions.

Three seconds, Shiv thought as he shredded through the earth. He was going so fast that the air friction turned the soil to slag. Around three seconds before I hit the base of the mountain at my current speed... I'll give it everything I got at the end.

He counted the seconds. The pain made each one feel like an eternity.

One...

Something burst within his eyes. Parts of his skin began to unlatch.

Two...

His bone armor began shaking and breaking.

Three... Alright, let's godsdamned do this.

Shiv spiked another twenty times, and darkness crept in from the corners of his vision as his heart ruptured. Blood and clumps of gore oozed out from the cracks of his armor. And then he detonated himself. If he didn't have Plaguefueled actively, he would have died. Even with it, his body came apart. His limbs were mangled. His insides burst apart. And everything around him ceased to be.

A cataclysmic explosion blossomed out from Shiv as the earth and stone around him faded into motes that were smaller than dust. The mountain above him cracked apart like glass, and then it became as if dust as a shroud of force and flame consumed all solid matter within a seven-kilometer radius around Shiv.

Death approached him. But as he looked up, he noticed a shiny shape. It looked like a deformed pot in his agonized mind, but Shiv realized what it was as his blastwaves carried it higher into the air, peeling out from the vanishing sections of the mountain.

Teleportation anchor. And then he saw how it had a slot along its side. A horizontal slot long enough to accommodate a group of archers. No... A warded bunker... built into the mountain. So that's how you were avoiding the Light-Curse. Clever felling bastards.

Despite the wretched state of his body, a feral grin crawled across Shiv's face. Alright. Let's see if I can crack you open.

Shiv cast himself one second back in time and detonated his inertial sheath once more.

And just then, the tidal wave of force he was dragging behind him earlier smashed into them at the same time as Shiv's second detonation.

Adamantine Adaption 155 > 156

Inertial Overdrive 105 >106

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Deathstalker Perspicacity Pricelles slammed against his second as they were flung about within their observation post. Something splattered against his armor. He tried to keep up with the chaos, but the insides of the bunker were turning too fast, constantly just spinning—

His leg struck the wall at an angle. It folded. Perspicacity shrieked—and then bit off his tongue as he slammed into the wall. Blood flooded his mouth, and as he fell toward the firing slot of his armored post, he triggered his Split-Second Master-Tier Reflexes Skill.

Time slowed for a single instant, and Perspicacity tried to regain his bearings—only for despair to take him. The others were little more than sacks of crushed meat seeping free from skeletal armor.

His disciples... His students... All dead.

Beyond the firing port of his protective bunker, he saw two tides of devastation fast approaching. But far off in the corner of his vision, he saw a shape—a shimmering figure. He cast his Farseeing Skill at his murderer, and he felt his mind go blank.

They were clad in the vestiges of death too, though the air around them scintillated as if they were but a mirage. But they weren't another Deathstalker. No. Their armor was the shine of adamantine rather than Grave Iron, and the helmet was misshapen.

And then there were the eyes... Two white irises...

What are you... What... We fired so many—are you just an illusion? Who are—

Time resumed. Perspicacity's Reflex Skill ended. A cold feeling flooded into the Deathstalker as his death approached. He came here to avenge his father, to avenge his mother, his brother, his sisters, to avenge everyone he lost during the siege of Submission.

And now he was going to die here, die within the mountain he hid, die without ever truly seeing the real face of his foe.

Then, twin waves of sundering force smashed into Observation Post SC102, and Perspicacity closed his eyes. He combusted within his armor first as a surge of heat flooded into his bunker. Then, the post itself folded around him, crushing his seared body into paste.

He survived that too, for a few moments. Until his heart finally burst.

Sometimes, having Master-Tier Toughness was a curse rather than a boon.

Rendered a burned, mangled lump of flesh, disfigured and crippled of limbs and senses, all Perspicacity could do was pray.

Pray to the Great One that the other posts noticed. That they would avenge his death.

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“Shit! Fuck! Shit!”

Deathstalker Psychomancer Mendacity Pricelles let out a cry of pain as her mind link to Observation Post SC102 shattered. The Psychomancer she had been connected to was gone. Dead in an instant. And across her field flowed a deluge of panicked cries and exchanged thoughts.

“Great One preserve us... Attack! We’re under attack! Contact!”

“FUCK! AN ENTIRE SECTION OF THE OLD SANTABAR MOUNTAINS JUST VANISHED! MANA BOMB! MANA BOMB!”



“Does anyone have eyes on SC102? Anyone? SC102 is within the blast radius—I can’t reach them!”

“They’re... they’re gone!” Mendacity gasped. She stared out from her observation post, and her fellow Deathstalkers looked on. A tense silence followed. A massive mushroom cloud rose over the horizon, and chunks of an obliterated mountain range began to rain down from above. Meanwhile, a sphere of fire and force swelled past the twenty-kilometer mark. But from within it came an oozing blackness that soon spread past the fire and coated everything within a four kilometer patch of space from visible sight.

Mendacity couldn’t easily see through it, but she still had other means of observation. She cast out a Hyper Echolocation ping, and everything within a twenty-kilometer radius pulsed into shape for a brief moment. “Hold... Hold... I think I see...”

Her mind stopped. A shape briefly vibrated into her awareness—a shape moving fast... Heroic-Tier fast. The ground was cracking behind them. A wall of fire and devastation trailed in their wake. And they were heading for the Tidewall... In the general direction of Lost Angeles.

“Shit!” Mendacity cried out. “Unknown Heroic-Tier Pathbearer detected. Fast approaching. Sub-fifteen seconds. Dynamancers! Shields up! All observation posts! Activate wardings!”

A chain of telepathic confirmations passed through—sans one. Perspicacity... Mendacity suppressed the welling sorrow inside her. She’d grieve her brother’s passing later. Right now, they needed to pin and eliminate the target.

“SC599!” Mendacity cried out, channeling her Adept-Tier Tele-Psionic Skill across the land. “Incoming Heroic-Tier threat. Heroic-Tier speed. Scramble temporal interceptors!”

SC599 responded instantly. "Received SC-Central. Deploying Interceptor Squadron Gold-Primary to your location. Transposition in five seconds. Arrival in ten."

#### Chapter 110 (II) Surface [II]

High above the Old Santabar mountain ranges, a Dimensional gateway activated at the center of a ring-shaped skyship. The Dimensionalists within directed its magical frequencies, connecting the rift to their front-most forward operating base nested near the top of the chasm. A pool of distorted shadows formed thereafter.

For a second, nothing happened.

Then, five golden titanic shapes exploded out from the Dimensional mana. The Dimensionalists held the portal gateway open for another second before they closed it immediately. Even then, they had to scramble and reshape the Dimensionality mana before someone captured and recorded their frequency.

As they did what they could to cover their tracks, ten mind-linked primal dragons of time were directed downward through the clouds. Their bodies were coated in an adamantite barding, and built into the barding was a rider's capsule on their back. Within, the Psychomancer-Riders of Interceptor Squadron Gold-Primary prepared themselves to intercept and eliminate the enemy.

"Gold-01 to Gold-Primary. Prime Necro-Throwers." And from above the capsules emerged a modular weapon that resembled a flamethrower, containing a corrosive crystal instead of fuel tanks or a Pyromancy enchantment.

"Primed!"

“Primed!

“Primed and ready!”

A series of nine other telepathic confirmations followed.

One of the gold-scaled time dragons let out a wild shriek as it nearly triggered its Chronomancy.

“Gold-05, keep that dragon leashed until you receive clearance.”

“Affirmative, Gold-01.”

They burst through a final layer of clouds just as the sun descended past the curve of the horizon. A last glittering of light danced off their scales, and Gold-01 and his squadron muttered a quick prayer to the Great One.

Through the Awareness-boosting Enchantments lining the insides of his capsule, Gold-01 saw the massive ball of destruction in the distance. An entire section of Old Santabar had been cracked to the foundations. The earth was shaking.

“Damn the Dawn, but SC-Central wasn’t bullshitting when she said we were dealing with a Hero,” Gold-03 breathed.

“We’ve killed Heroes before,” Gold-08 whispered. And it was true. They had. And they were going to do it again today.

The squadron fell silent as a cataclysmic avalanche of fire and force crashed over the land. It didn’t look so different from how the tidal waves of the Pacific hammered against the Tidewall. Ahead of the destruction was a mass of crawling darkness. Just looking at it filled Gold-01 with unease.

“Creeping Void,” Gold-01 said, recognizing the skill.

“What?” Gold-02 asked. “Isn’t that a skill common for krakens?”

“Yeah. Krakens. Shadow dragons. And Void-Dwellers.”

Just then, a narrow beam of Psychomancy splashed into Gold-01, and a snapshot of understanding was slotted into his mind. He shared the memory with the others in his squadron, and they recalled seeing a humanoid shape at the heart of the nigh-impenetrable darkness rather than a Kraken.

An uneasy feeling filled Gold-01. It wasn’t impossible for a human to develop certain skills common for monsters, but...

“Gold-Primary, stick close to each other. Watch each other’s backs. We stride in three.”

A series of confirmations greeted Gold-01. He pushed all doubt aside.

The first thing a Psychomancer learned was how to control themselves. Now he didn’t have time for fear. He had a Hero to kill.

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“Godsddammit, Shiv, it’s been less than a minute,” Adam cursed as he climbed higher. He had been launched off his feet by a solid wall of kinetic force just as he emerged from the gate. Shiv’s Creeping Void ensured he couldn’t see anything, but the deafening sounds of distant explosions told the Gate Lord all he needed to know: Shiv had already made contact with the enemy and was in the process of getting to know them better.

Adam came to a stop as he slipped into a layer of clouds. He cast his senses out and winced as he beheld the damage Shiv left in his wake. A massive, five-kilometer-wide scar trailed across the land. Huge fissures parted the earth as well, and dozens of deep craters were imprinted on the ground.

No bloody wonder Gate Theborn got destroyed. He let out a quiet breath. The sheer destruction was unbelievable. But it was also useful. And where Shiv moved like a natural disaster, Adam spotted things like he was borderline omniscient.

He immediately zeroed in on a badly crushed bunker half-buried in the soil. The inhabitants were mostly dead, but only just so. One let out a hoarse whimper, and Adam bit back a grimace of pity. Then, his senses crawled further—shooting past Shiv’s current position, as indicated by his Creeping Void.

There, Adam took in what seemed like open terrain—and started picking out irregularities. He zoomed in on strange, reflective glints and followed them to discover hidden bunkers. No, wait. Observation posts. They were built into the mountains and even the ground. Within were groups of eight to ten Pathbearers. Most of them were armed with bows or some manner of ranged weaponry, and they wore armor that resembled Shiv's. Yet theirs was sleeker, with narrower helmets that had lenses, while the composition of the armor itself was of a darker, colder metal.

Then, there came a shudder from high up in the air, and Adam turned his senses away—to discover ten golden dragons approaching the fray.

“Broken Moon,” Adam breathed. “Where the hells did they get ten primal dragons?” He pushed his senses past the ten golden dragons just then and found something in the air behind them. A flying vessel of some kind. One that had recently opened a Dimensional gateway, if the motes of darkness leaking from its core were any indication.

“Well, well,” Adam said, forming a Veilpiercer. His senses crashed against the ship but couldn't get any further. It was warded. Warded a bit too well. His vambrace crackled to life. He would solve that problem in a moment. Take one of the people aboard prisoner if possible. Meanwhile... “Keep moving, Shiv... Keep kicking the hornet's nest. I think things are about to work out for us perfectly.”

\*\*\*

The shape of Roland's soul was his arrows. The length of Roland's reach ended at the length of his arrows. The depth of Roland's awareness was painted by the trajectory of his arrows. Everything he touched with his projectiles, he sensed, he saw, he killed. And Roland's arrow never missed their mark.

Beyond the reach of the atmosphere, Roland's reserve arrows glistened in the void, far beyond the reach of the enemy. And there they remained, serving more as his eyes and ears than a weapon for him to use.

He studied the encirclement surrounding his town, watching as Sullain's forces were driven back another kilometer from the south side as a swarm of three thousand arrows tore into and detonated within a pocket dimension they thought was hidden.

But there were more enemies to bring down. Many more.

Eighty kilometers away at the Santamon Mountains, some Necrotech Deathstalkers were dragging the remnants of their artillery platforms back. They made it three hundred meters before an arrow the size of Blackedge crashed down on the sky and shattered. Over the horizon, a flash of light rose into the sky. The Solar mana contained within the arrow scoured the land clean for fifty kilometers.

A mere two kilometers below Blackedge, another group of enemies attempted a mad rush. There was a Hero among them this time. A Heroic-Tier vampire whose speed grew with every person nearby. They zipped up toward Blackedge, intending on cracking the town's wards—

And promptly burst apart into ashes as Roland redirected a few of his three thousand arrows to fly over the chasm. They fused together before they speared into the vampire's back, and though getting pierced didn't kill the vampire, getting incinerated by the power of dawn did.

Night was coming. Parts of the battered ruins of Lost Angeles rose as Sullain's Geomancers tried to form their bunkers. A hail of arrows crashed down through the clouds and annihilated every piece of stone the Geomancers were trying to manipulate. A good few hundred slipped into the chasm, crashing against Sullain's wards as well.

Sullain. The vicar hadn't done anything for a while. Roland didn't like that. You didn't give mages time to plot or scheme. That was a critical rule in combat. But with Blackedge pressed from all sides, Roland didn't have a choice but to hold and fight.

Hold and fight as he had been doing for weeks.

By the Starhawk, he was tired...

A warning from Starhawk's Perch pulsed in Roland's mind. Someone tried to halt time. Roland directed a special Chronomantic arrow into them from beyond the atmosphere.

Another time dragon dropped from the clouds in two pieces. And for the first time in years, Roland's Respecification Unique Skill leveled. And his other Unique Skill leveled right after as he regained a Chronomantic arrow from the soul of the dragon he just killed.

Respecification 411 > 412

Quiver of the Slain 354 > 355

With each enemy slain, Roland felt new arrows fill his spiritual quiver. New arrows forged by the remains of his enemies—of their greatest skills. It was also the reason he'd remained at Master-Tier for so long—because a little careful redistribution of one's levels went a long way to hiding just how high they were in total.



And that was the entire point of Roland's existence. He wanted power, not prestige.

But he was starting to tire again. He needed to find a way to level some of his lesser skills some more so he could draw points over from them into his Physicality. At the thought of that, Roland started doing mental math again, pushing his already exhausted mind to its limit to get another few levels. But he couldn't do it. Not alone.

"Chris," Roland said, gritting his teeth. "I need another spike of focus."

"Yes, Lord Arrow,"

Atop the apex of his castle, within a shroud of Divination and Solar mana, Roland Arrow released another shot. Another shot shaped from starstuff. Another shot fated to strike and kill an enemy. Another shot that turned into ten and then a hundred as it traveled through the air. Within Roland's ruined nest were Biomancers, working to keep his body functional at all times, and Chris Evetine, his personal Psychomancer that did everything she could to guard his focus and stop his mind from slipping. There were also Diviners, generals, Slayers, and more here, but most of them were dead on their feet from exhaustion.

Everyone was on the brink after weeks of non-stop combat.

Below, Blackedge was being consumed by desperation, rot, biological plagues, and ones of Psychomantic madness.

Sullain was a dreadful adversary. The vicar was no warrior, and Roland had managed to repel the Abyssal Lord in a direct contest at first. But he was a mage. And the worst thing about a Legendary mage—one who possessed practically every Magical Skill known to Integrated Earth—was how they could strike mind, spirit, and body at once.

Before Roland drove Sullain back to the Abyss, forcing the wretch to retreat, the vicar managed to breach Blackedge's wards once. The spells Sullain left destroyed the agriculture, sickened the people, and withered the metal. It also created monsters that would spawn at night. Monsters that burst free from flesh or even concentrations of darkness.

Roland was his arrows, and his arrows patrolled the streets of Blackedge as well. They strained him to the very limit, and they revealed to him just how many people were dying. Another wail sounded from another house. Another cry was silenced. Another child let out a breath and didn't take another. With every passing second, Roland could feel his town dying.

He could feel this prison-turned-home crumble away. And Roland understood this was Sullain's revenge. Roland had sacked Submission, and now Blackedge was to pay for his sins.

But what could the Town Lord do in the face of despair? What could he do? Kneel? Bend? Break? Beg?

No. Roland had been a Pathbearer from the moment he picked up the bow, from the moment he knew that fighting was a choice. So he fought on. So he killed. So he worked tirelessly, unleashing powers unheard of upon his adversaries, butchering them day after day, minute after minute, second by second. And through it all, he convened with the Starhawk. He plotted. He schemed. If they just had enough time, perhaps the Starhawk could integrate the other sacred phylacteries. If he managed that, the Starhawk could either find a way to create remembrances from his long-lost companions or even draw their power onto himself to better rally for the coming fight.

And despite all the strain Roland was under, this was merely the opening salvo in a coming fight.

I must endure, Roland thought to himself. I must hold. If I do fail... No, I cannot. The Republic... the Republic cannot stand much longer. The lies, deception, twisting of minds, the sapping of faith... The toll has become too great. The Republic won't be able to stand the avarice of the Ascendants any longer, nor survive the ritual they seek to perform...

It was a horrible, nightmarish thing. Something he refused to accept at first, even with the Starhawk showing him the truth. He knew the Ascendants weren't perfect, but what they planned was beyond the pale—was something Roland couldn't accept. And neither could the Starhawk, for that matter.

But now—

One of his arrows saw a massive explosion unfolding over Old Santabar. For a moment, Roland's mind reeled.

Over four hundred kilometers away from Blackedge and Lost Angeles, a trail of building destruction cleaved a line near the coast—and drew the attention of what seemed like one of Sullain's Interceptor Squadrons.

What is this?

A massive war horn sounded. A war cry followed thereafter. Things began to move and crawl within the Chasm. Roland couldn't split his focus now. Another night was about to begin. But Old Santabar... If this was the Inquisition... His gut clenched. He needed to know. He needed to know to prepare himself. Because he couldn't hold against them too.

And he would need to attempt a fighting retreat with Blackedge. Even if it was likely to end in his death and the town's demise.

"ARROW! STARHAWK'S CHAMPION! I COME FORTH ONCE MORE!" Sullain sang in the darkness. "I COME BEARING GIFTS FROM THE OUTSIDE! I COME TO DELIVER YOUR END!"

Roland rolled his eyes. "Not the bloody eldritch bullshit again." He let out a sigh and stared at his comrades. "It's nightmares again, I'm afraid."

"That's alright, Lord Arrow," Guard Captain Koswin Kranos said. "None of us are going to be doing any sleeping for a while. No nightmares that way."

"No nightmares," Roland echoed. He shaped another arrow in response—

But he directed just one arrow to see what was happening in Old Santabar, and thus, a gleaming needle of starstuff fell from the void above.