

## **Deathless 116**

Chapter 116 (I) Vicar

Adept gives you a taste of becoming more than mortal, of evolving beyond the constraints of an ordinary body.

Master lets you experience the flavors of godhood, allowing you to smash through the face of a mountain and challenge storms.

Hero lets you become the storm. The scale of your power becomes destructive beyond mortal belief and encompassing, at times escalating or absolute. Some say that Hero is where one's journey to godhood truly begins. But they are wrong.

Godhood is far different from being a Hero. And most Heroes are merely strong insects who writhe in their cradle, imagining themselves to be powerful because they can break some large stones or cross a long gap.

You remain trapped by the skill.

Legends make their own rules. The difference between a Hero and a Legend is not merely a matter of size or scope.

It is not merely the difference between a mana bomb and a mana storm. No, Heroes are performers. They can stretch their skills further than ever, but that is all.

Legends are more than just performers. Legends are authors. When you become a Legend, you scar the System with your existence. And it scars you in return.

Then, for the first time, you will experience it.

The Delving.

You will descend into your own soul and witness everything that came before.

And with that, you will take a step forward into your future.

A step closer, some might say, to achieving true godhood for yourself.

But it is not the same as godhood, no.

Some gods are merely powerful, but vulgar creatures of force.

To be a Legend is to become an embodiment of something: an idea, a concept, a skill. To be a Legend is to be the captain of your own soul, rather than just an oarsman fighting to right its course.

-Udraal Thann's Animancy Notes

Shiv took a final look at the pooling remains of the orc before he speared through the ground. The brute's body was a misshapen thing as blood and melting armor mingled into a viscous puddle. Shiv would have taken the orc's warding horn if it hadn't been destroyed, but with how all the orc's weapons—and even the dome—were actively turning to slag, that was pointless.

The second Shiv blasted through the earth, the dome above came apart into a downpour. Dense adamantine turned fluid and splashed over the gap he left, coating everything in a metallic sheen. Behind, the only thing that truly remained aside from all the liquefied matter was one of Shiv's corpses.

Deception 9 > 11

The Challenger is chuckling at your triumph.

Shiv scoffed as he gouged his way through the earth. Then, he stopped ripping and started cutting with his Skysplitter. Deepest Edge proved much more efficient as his cuts traveled ahead and split through before him. This allowed Shiv to accelerate without using his fists like piledrivers.

Deepest Edge 63 > 64

He spent a moment reflecting on the fight. It had been more annoying than anything. The orc had demanded he prove himself, but Shiv suspected the cruel monster just wanted to have a bit of a fight.

The orc's ability to shift between his armor and the surrounding metal and turn to wind would have been problematic long-term, but 811 had prepared Shiv well.

Hyper-intelligent or not, all orcs were pointlessly cruel and personally vicious. This one couldn't resist the allure of butchering his bested prey up close. It was practically a compulsion for them. One that could always be exploited.

Predictability is death, Shiv realized. His Deepest Edge finally died, but he performed another slash and extended his travel distance a bit more. Strength and power matter. But if I hadn't fooled the orc just now, this could have been a pretty miserable fight. I couldn't get to him easily. Didn't have the right kind of magic or skills.

But that wasn't entirely correct. His Common-Tier Deception and Psychology Skills had mattered more near the end than all his other skills. Without them, could he have lured the orc out and ended him early? Shiv had the might, but without the strategy at the end, he didn't have the means to unleash it. But that wouldn't have been possible if he hadn't understood the orc.

If I weren't a bit like the orc, Shiv thought. He recalled how he approached his other fights, just going after his enemies over and over again. Part of it was raw instinct and rage, but another part was how he simply enjoyed the feeling of beating someone down. Of hammering them with his fists, of tearing their limbs from their body, of misshaping them.

It wasn't about inflicting pain with him. It was the dominance. It made him feel powerful after a lifetime of struggle and weakness. He could admit that much to himself, though it wasn't a great feeling. The orc had noticed that in him. And Shiv finally turned and faced it in himself now. It had propelled him during his early journey as Pathbearer. It was the source of his boundless drive to grow. But it was rough and raw and brutal.

A bit like he was right now.

And he could be refined.

Raw ingredients rarely tasted good, after all. With the orc, he touched upon being something more. Something deeper. And for all he despised in the orcs, they were clever and skilled; they were cultured and insightful. He didn't need their cruelty, but he wasn't going to accept their intellectual superiority either.

A satisfied smile crawled over Shiv's face. If you're going to be a Pathbearer, then don't half-ass anything anymore, Shiv. Being a brute got us far. But we're more than that. I've always been more than that. I will be no less. And... I want to learn. I want to learn all I can.

Psychology 5 > 6

Philosophy 5 > 6

At that self-declaration, he halted time and slashed upward. He emerged through a cleft lining the earth and shot up into the open air. He was in the middle of the Lost-Angeles ruins once more. About eight kilometers to his right and partially blocked by a wave of bifurcated buildings, he saw the orc's disintegrating adamantine dome.

And the hundreds upon hundreds of Necrotechs that surrounded it. There were dragons in the air—though only a few of them were of the golden variety. Said golden dragons were frozen in temporal stasis as well. Shiv didn't feel the mana resonance of their Chronomancy. He guessed they didn't notice him and failed to activate their temporal shells.

That was something to remember: Stealth was a skeleton key to many different tactics and strategies.

Adam was more than right, suggesting I actually develop my personal Stealth Skill.

He launched himself higher into the air to gather his bearings, and Shiv's pulse quickened as he felt just how many Necrotech Deathstalkers there were all around him. Most were hiding inside buildings, positioned alongside the windows. There were teams on the rooftops as well, setting up what looked to be massive artillery emplacements with long tubes at the front and corrosive crystals on the back.

Shiv felt his insides tighten at the sight of the crystals. Necromancy. The only skill he truly hated right now. But it was an envious hate, a fearful hate. Shiv would have loved to understand how Necromancy worked if he could only interface with it without exploding like a mana bomb. Instead, he was forced to avoid it. And now he was dealing with a rogue splinter faction that specialized in it.

You're a funny motherfucker, System, Shiv thought. Then, he extended his Skysplitter to three hundred meters. Unfortunately for these poor bastards, I can be a funny felling guy too.

A crack formed on his temporal shell. Seven seconds. Shiv didn't so much slash with his size-magnified blade as he did hold it out to one side and accelerate. He blasted through ruined buildings, splitting dozens across their middle. Then, as he got to the densest concentration, he discharged his Inertial Sheath. Just as he took on injuries, he cast himself back in time before he'd amplified his Skysplitter and sailed off in another direction.

He also flung one of his corpses in the direction of the soon-to-collapsed buildings, just for good measure. Here. Figure this riddle out: Who dies a lot and... uh. Shit. I need to work on my riddles. Wonder if there's a skill for that too...

There probably was. Anything someone could struggle with could become a skill. He threw his blade into the air and teleported to it. He let time resume for a beat as he stared into the distance. Beyond his sight, a skull-shaking blast shook the Lost Angeles sprawl as a dozen buildings collapsed thereafter. Normally, he would have taken a second look to bask in the glory of the destruction he inflicted, but something else consumed his attention.

Someone else.

Blackedge was utterly consumed by swarming eldritch entities. Hundreds of worm-like creatures with stacked jaws crowded around the outer layer of the town, gnawing at its defenses. Through the gaps between the Outsiders, Shiv could see flashes of spell patterns. The town's wards were still active, but they were pressed right up against the town. Every passing second, a dense tide of arrows would pass around the many-biters like a whirlwind and obliterate them, but it wasn't enough.

It wasn't enough because high up in the air, a massive serpent of metallic bone had Dimensional rifts opened atop each of his outstretched hands. And the felling bastard had hundreds of hands. From the rifts poured unceasing streams of nightmares and horrors, and even more portals opened behind the vicar thereafter, blocking even the broken moon from sight.

From the Chasm came other enemies too, dragons that lashed at the city with elemental beams and strange magic. These dragons weren't the same as the ones Shiv had fought earlier—these ones were properly armored and bore actual weapons. Dragon-knights. Probably rogue ones, since they were with Sullain.

At least a few of them were golden as well.

That'll be an interesting fight, Shiv thought as he tapped his index finger against his knife.

Then, from all across the city—except for the buildings Shiv just knocked down—missiles of corrosive energy arched through the air as Necromantic artillery was fired at Blackedge.

They didn't get far.

Arrows zipped down from the world above. Arrows that blasted through hundreds of buildings, detonating against protective barriers of Blackedge to fry the eldritch monsters; arrows that bounced off Sullain's unseen wards and splattered Dragon-Knights on impact; arrows that kept falling and falling like a meteor shower.

Roland Arrow delivered a statement, then: the sky belonged to him.

But Vicar Sullain hovered above Blackedge still, and he wove spell after spell with ease, challenging the Starhawk's champion without fear.

And just as fast as buildings collapsed and crumbled, new structures rose from the ruins. They pushed through the glassed ground surrounding Blackedge like teeth would emerge from gums. New reinforcements joined the battlefield. Shiv realized then that Lost Angeles wasn't just getting destroyed, but also rebuilt, and exactly the same way it had been before, at that. The Necrotechs seemed to care much about preserving the shape of old things, and the vicar's deafening proclamation thereafter cemented Shiv's suspicions.

"Enough, Roland Arrow! Enough pain! Enough struggle! Enough death! I come here to punish you and the other butchers that defiled Submission! That burned the holy city of unified faith! I come for you and

no one else. The ignorant and feeble of your town can still be spared. Give yourself unto my charge and face rightful judgment. The ones without sin will be converted to the Great One's love and know peace everlasting. Save them, at the very least. Have you no heart? Have you only a coward's spirit?"

Arrows flashed around Sullain. The burning trails they left in the sky told Shiv they actually traveled down from the void, but his Reflexes just weren't fast enough to perceive them. Hundreds of the searing projectiles detonated one after another then, each blast building on another, every detonation sending a radiant pillar rising high into the sky. Everything vanished into a swelling rush of purest white. Shiv could see nothing, hear nothing, and do nothing as a mountain of force slammed into him.

He spiked against it using his gravitic field. He drove himself against the crushing tide with his Inertial Overdrive. But it was far too much. A few of those arrows had disintegrated Shiv. Now, he was caught within the vicinity of hundreds going off. This had to be beyond even a Hero's power. Even as Shiv was smashed into the ground, his chest shattering through glass and his skin simmering from the spiking heat, he wondered how much of Roland's power was his own.

The Deathless fought the explosion. He forced himself onto one knee and tried to rise. It was like he was carrying the weight of the falling sky. But then, suddenly, all the weight pressing against him vanished

. Shiv blasted into the air as the whiteness faded as well. All of a sudden, the world cleared, and he could hear again as the roaring sound was muted as well.

And his mind went blank at what was revealed in the aftermath.

The scene that played before him was a mirror of his first encounter with the vicar. Then, Blackedge's magi formations had unleashed their collective mana upon the Abyssal Lord. Sullain had stopped time for everyone but himself, then siphoned the fireballs cast at him before shaping the mana into a Biomancy and then a Pyromancy spell.

Right now, strands of a blinding inferno swirled between Sullain's many hands, coalescing into a minor dawn that churned at the massive lich-serpent's mid-section. The Dimensional rifts were closed, but Sullain merely sighed. It wasn't a sigh of exertion, either. He just sounded disappointed.

"Why must you delay what is destined to follow? You cannot win this. I will have your city. And I will have you. I do not hate you, Roland Arrow, but there is no punishment too great or grave for what you have done. For what you have inflicted upon my people, my beautiful city..."

And by the end, Sullain's voice was thick with emotion. Shiv could even feel himself tearing—Son of a bitch, is that a Social Skill? It has to be.

And just then, Shiv realized he couldn't see Sullain's mana fields. It was like they didn't exist, but with how much fire and destruction Sullain was manipulating right now, his Pyromancy must've extended across the horizon. At least. But there was nothing. There was nothing of Biomancy, Chronomancy, Pyromancy, or Hydromancy. There was nothing at all.

Unless... all his Magical Skills are merged into one? Or have they evolved so much that I can't see what they do? That was an awesome thought. Marikos... I think you might be the smaller Legend in my mind now.

A massive arrow exploded, splitting clouds across the horizon. It glowed a bright gold and was infused with so much Pyromancy that—

The arrow vanished into a shroud of gold-lined Dimensionality that formed over Sullain. A veil of blackness hovered behind the colossal serpent. It swayed like a shawl, but then faded from sight. "I can feel you weakening, Arrow. You are spent. And your soul is burning from within. Even a hidden True Legend like yourself cannot endure the unnatural power of the Demiurgos for long. Please. I beg you. I beg you to surrender. You may be willing to drink in the death, but I am not. I feel all who have died

here today. I feel for all that have fallen in the past days. And will pray for them. I pray they will be returned to that blessed paradise residing deep within the Great One. And I pray they forgive you. Because I cannot.”

More arrows fell. Arrows of all colors, of all mana types. But Sullain cast out the small sun he was forging from Roland’s prior barrage, and he channeled a stream of Necromancy into it. The brilliant star turned corrosive.

Shiv's mind went blank.

A Necromantic dawn bathed everything in green.

Everything.

The falling arrows withered and broke apart.

The land rusted and decayed.

Shiv combusted. His vitality exploded. A blast of purest white left him with a roar of absolute agony.

Revenant 42 > 50

Everything kissed by the withered sun's brightness suffered its decaying glare.

Inhuman shrieks escaped Shiv's lungs. The pain was unbearable. The world around him shattered—but the surging blast flowing out from him halted. As did the Necromantic glow. A resonant ripple crashed against Shiv, and even in his incoherent state, he felt his Chronomancy pulse. He manifested his time-armor on instinct as he fell from the air, and he crashed into the ground.

It felt like someone was flaying his soul, like the fire was crawling into his bones and organs. His eyes rolled. But unconsciousness didn't come. The pain kept growing and growing.

Shiv screamed. He screamed like he did when the Recollector tortured him. He tried to fight through the pain, but soul wounds were on another threshold of suffering. Come on... Get your shit together...

He clenched his jaw, and his scream turned to a ragged growl, and then into a whimper. This was completely outside his expectations. He needed to get out of here, he needed to—

"I remember you."

Chapter 116 (II) Vicar

Shiv's blood turned to ice in his veins. Even the soul-rending pain was forgotten.

The skeletal visage of a titanic serpent hovered right above him, the oscillating flames in its eye sockets bathing him in a pale glow. Behind Shiv, a veil of darkness had formed, and the detonation of energy that had left Shiv's body when the wave of Necromancy struck him was slowly being siphoned into a sphere of red and white grasped by eight of the vicar's countless hands. The vicar himself was ethereal. Translucent.

Sullain gave a gasp of effort as he wrestled Shiv's exploding vitae under control. "You are the one who fell from the town. The boy. You have survived. You have changed. And you have returned."

Shiv took a step back, and he barely stopped himself from shrieking as a rush of pain sliced through his body. Fuck... Don't... I need to...

"Your soul is... different. But I have seen something of this composition before. Udraal showed me. The technique of interweaving, the process to create a living soul; an Unfettered Animus... Your soul takes more than just my Animancy to manipulate. I need to focus on your Vitality as well. How harmoniously complicated. It is just like him to create such a thing..."

Vicar Sullain let out a slight laugh as he flicked the now-controlled sphere of vitae up into the air. It hovered beside the kilometer-long serpent as he looked down at Shiv. The face of the Vicar was oddly expressive, despite being mostly made of a black alloy. He somehow looked sorrowful. "Poor child. I heard your cry. But I did not pay attention to you, so committed was I to shattering the town of the Flamebringer. I would have never allowed you harm if I knew. Not until I was certain of who you were."

Shiv tried to reply, but it was all he could do to stop himself from shaking. Holy shit I'm in so much godsdamned pain.

"Yeah, well." Shiv bit back a whimper. "Maybe if you stop sieging the town and just go back down into the Abyss, we can call it even?"

The Vicar stared at him. "I can see your flesh melted into your armor. I can see some of your organs spread around the cracks. Most would be incoherent with pain. But not you. You must have lived a painful life. A torturous life. I'm sorry."

Despite how bad it hurt, Shiv shrugged. "I just... take things as they come."

Cracks formed throughout his temporal shell. But the Vicar made a brief gesture, and a tidal wave of gold splashed through Shiv, restoring the skill's integrity in a flash. Shiv blinked in surprise, but then he let out a gasp as he felt the Vicar's Chronomancy tighten around him.

"Strider of the Unbending Path," the Vicar commented. He slithered down from the air in a smooth, spiraling motion and drew close to Shiv. The dense sphere of Vitae extracted from him bobbed above the serpent like a small star. "That is a skill for dragons, my child. How did you achieve such an evolution?"

"A certain eldritch abomination decided to start hitting me with its past selves."

"Ah. A Recollector."

"A Recollector?" Shiv breathed. "There's more like it?"

"Trillions," the Vicar said, chuckling. "And billions more every day as the Stranger feeds."

Shiv couldn't imagine facing a trillion of anything. He couldn't even imagine how large a trillion was.

"I am Vicar Sullain." The great serpent crossed its many ethereal arms. "I realize I have not greeted you properly. My apologies for such inconsiderate behavior, but to excuse myself, the flame that burst forth from your body would have vaporized my army, this town, most of your Republic, the Tidewall, and a good portion of the Grand Pacific."

Shiv's eyes widened. "That... bad..."

"It likely could have been much worse if I had not contained it in haste," Sullain said, turning to gaze at the Vitae sphere. "May I inquire about your name?"

Shiv tried to jump back in time, to the temporal anchor he had left right outside the Surface Gateway. His Chronomancy moved—and jolted in place as it crashed against the Vicar's magic. A shudder passed through Shiv's soul. Pain exploded inside him—that's how deep the burns went. Against all odds, Shiv didn't collapse. He even held back a scream.

"Your name, please?" Sullain asked again, with a bit more weight this time. "It is impolite to attempt to leave in the middle of a conversation, dear child. Especially when I have been so polite."

"Yeah, you also kind of set me off like a bomb," Shiv hissed. He tested his Biomancy, and when he realized it was unconstrained, he tried to remove it from his body. Only to discover he couldn't separate when his tissues began and his bone armor ended. At that moment, he was glad he didn't have a mirror. His stomach turned. Gods, I must look like a nightmare.

“No,” Sullain said, answering Shiv’s thought. “You are merely wounded. Some might call you disfigured now, but aesthetics are not a thing I cling so desperately to. I know true nightmares. And you are not one.”

He’s in my mind! Shiv gasped internally.

“Only the surface,” Sullain said. “I will not go further. I refuse. It is no different than physically violating someone to me. To take someone’s will from them, to delve into their heart and force your way into their memories, is a disgusting act. Or so it has always seemed to me. In this cruel world, all we have is our sense of self. I do not have the heart to take even that.”

Shiv stared at the Vicar for a moment as he fought to get his mind back under control. When he managed to focus enough, he was going to use Outside Context Problem and see if he could jump back to the Surface Gateway. For now...

Maybe gathering some intelligence wouldn’t be so bad either.

“Yes,” the Vicar agreed. “Details matter. Learning about another person is a sublime joy. But I must tell you that there is no skill that will allow you to leave without my permission. You are strong, dear child. But only for a child. You have not begun to learn the true depths of the soul and the true reaches of one’s skill. Now. Your name, please.”

“Shiv,” he finally said to the Vicar. “I call myself Shiv. It’s the only name I’ll ever accept.”

“Shiv,” the Vicar echoed. “Like the weapon?”

“Yeah.”

“Is it because of the weapon?”

Shiv nodded slowly. “Kept me safe on the streets. Kept people away. I liked that about them. Made me feel safe. Made me feel powerful. So, Shiv.”

Slowly, the Vicar leaned in and stared at Shiv for a long moment. Faint, blue mana gleamed within the Vicar’s glass eyes, and his long, metallic teeth clicked together as he let out a reverberating breath. “I see... And I recognize you... Your face... Your eyes... You are the child of my enemies. Harlon Lowe is your father. Vera Lowe is your mother.” The Vicar held up a hand, and a crimson helix danced upon the palm. Two more sets of helices superimposed themselves over the first, and the Vicar sighed. “I knew there was something about you when I sensed your flesh. But I was so consumed that I didn’t focus. I was so enraged and black of mood on the day of my retribution, I just let you fall.”

“Seems everyone knows more about dear old mom and dad than me,” Shiv ground out.

“A pity. But your woes may be at an end soon. There is someone I should return you to. To show that his project has achieved something of a success... I am curious about how you came to be... Perhaps you can tell me yourself. I would be most obliged.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so,” Shiv said. “And I’m not something to be returned to anyone. I’m my own man.”

“Udraal would disagree. And he will come for you eventually. It is certain. You are the result of his hand. I am sure of it now.”

And Valor pretty much said the same when Shiv left the gate.

“Valor?” Sullain breathed. He was suddenly much closer to Shiv, eyes gleaming. “He Who Still Eternity... He has been freed, then. How troubling.”

Shit, I really need to watch my thoughts around this guy.

“Your language as well,” the Vicar said. “I do not appreciate coarseness when it is not required. However, you arrive as quite the enigma. To appear suddenly... Have you returned to protect your home?”

“Something like that,” Shiv said, not seeing the point in lying about this. “Most people who live on Blackedge are sacks of shit to me. But they don’t deserve to die just for being sacks of shit. There are people I care about there as well. And there’s a certain Town Lord whom I need to punch, and you’re cutting in line.”

“You? You wish to face Roland Arrow?”

“Just wanna hit him in the face a couple times. A couple hundred times. Until some of his teeth are broken, maybe.”

An amused chuckle escaped from the Vicar. "I see. And your grudge, then, is personal."

"And yours isn't?" Shiv asked. He considered his next words, but let his intuition guide him. "I know about Submission. Well. Something about Submission. I want to understand why you're doing all this. What the hells is the point of sacking all of Blackedge? And why have you allied yourself with the Inquisition to do it?"

"Ah, you know of my deplorable associations as well?" Despite his words, the Vicar sounded surprised more than ashamed.

And just then, Shiv realized there was something extremely funny he could do to the Inquisition, just by telling a distorted story. "Know about them? I ran into the Inquisition bastards at Theborn—those idiots lost your Animancy Core."

Silver Tongue 21 > 22

The Vicar went very still. "They WHAT?"

"Yeah. They lost your core. It was supposed to pass through the gate and be delivered to you, right? It's with Lord Scorn now. Well, scattered all over his world, more like. Because it went off on Vulketh."

"WHAT!" Sullain shouted. "HOW! HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?"

Shiv didn't even bother hiding his shit-eating grin. "Because the dumb bastards tried to take it from that neurotic Gate Lord by force, and things went to shit in the process. Although I think they were planning on stealing it from you to begin with. To withhold the core from you as leverage, and leave you without any way to empower your weapon. They want Starhawk's Perch, and they were afraid that you were going to—"

The Vicar let out a rageful cry. An anvil of fire crashed down through his body, knocking Shiv down. The Deathless did black out from the pain that time, but he woke shrieking as his ruined flesh impacted the ground.

Twin voices filled the air in the time-frozen ruins of Lost Angeles. Shiv's throat almost tore from the force of his pained screams, but they were drowned out by the Vicar's wrathful declarations of hatred that he directed at the sky, promising to unmake the Inquisition whole.

Deception 11 > 12

After a few seconds of screaming, Shiv finally managed to master enough of himself to close his mouth and crawl into a sitting position. Okay. I... I don't know how much more I can take before dropping dead. I need to get out—

"No." The Vicar's words smashed into Shiv physically. Blood erupted from his mouth as he blasted across the ground. Shiv slid for a good hundred meters before he finally stilled. It took seconds to stop his agonized wails. As he tried to rise, the Vicar loomed over him. "Speak. What else do you know? Do you lie or spit truth?"

Shiv spat blood up at the ethereal serpent, only for it to splatter back down on his own face. "If you head south, you can ask City Lord Havel yourself. When he finds out the core is lost and he has no leverage on you... They might just decide to wipe you off the board for good measure."

The Legendary Pathbearer stilled.

Shiv snorted, blood spraying from his nostrils. “They want the Perch, and... now that you did most of the work, you're no longer of any use.”

Shiv guessed the Vicar would be able to easily tell if he told him outright nonsense—even with his claims about not wanting to dig deeper into his mind—so he told him what he believed to be the truth. The Inquisition was probably going to do that—just maybe not immediately.

“Hah... I knew this would happen. But not so soon. How shortsighted of me.” The Vicar shook his head. “I was a fool for thinking the surfacers could be trusted, even for a time.”

Shiv winced, then. He was losing track of time. Taunting the Vicar wasn't what he had been intending to do here. He needed to focus. He needed to...

“What else?” When Shiv's focus snapped back, he found the vicar looming directly over him.

“Nothing else,” Shiv growled. “That's all I wanted to tell you—”

He gritted his teeth as the Vicar made a gesture at him. It felt like his soul was twisting inside of him, growing tighter and tighter. Shiv's eyes rolled. It wasn't the worst pain he'd experienced, but it felt incredibly ominous. Like some fundamental part of his being was in someone's grasp. “Piece of shit...” he spat. “What happened to being... polite? Fucking... torturing me as a second resort?”

“I do what I must,” the vicar declared with conviction. “Speak. And the pain ends. Do not make me push into your mind.”

Shiv couldn't help but laugh. Yeah, Vicar Sullain was a piece of shit. That nice and caring bullshit lasted seconds. This is who the big snake really was. A fucking asshole.

“And no more swearing!” Sullain snarled, clenching his hand.

Shiv felt the Vicar trying to break his body physically. He pushed back at the unseen field with his Biomancy. The Vicar scoffed and tore Shiv's Biomancy field like it was nothing but paper. Shiv gagged and vomited from the agony. He started seizing as the Vicar broke all his limbs at once. Compared to even just the pain of his field being ripped apart, however, it didn't hurt particularly badly. The Vicar clearly didn't know much about torturing people.

“I know how to keep you alive, boy. Speak. Speak, and the hurt ends. It fouls my spirit to do this to you, but I will not be denied.”

“F-fuck you,” Shiv wheezed. Someone was screaming at him—screaming from inside of him—Rose!

Sullain reached for him again.

Shiv triggered his Outside Context Problem and plunged into his own Vitae. A badly corroded layer of black and white enveloped Shiv. The Vicar lurched back, confused. Shiv cast his Chronomancy back in time—back to the very first anchor he planted right outside Gate Not-Theborn.

Shiv blinked across existence. It was like he was being reeled back across his personal history by a cord of mana. The pain faded for a moment during the transition. Shiv thought he was going to revert to a point where he wasn't wounded, where he was still whole and hale. The assumption was proven wrong the moment he blinked back into existence. His flesh combusted and melted into his armor immediately.

Every soul-wound he'd suffered moments ago returned to him all at once. His Chronomancy might have been able to revert the wounded state of his body, but when the damage lined his Vitae—

Shiv collapsed and began to shake. He didn't even scream anymore. It was too much. It was all too much. He shook and twitched on the soft soil, but there came no relief. The pain never ended. It just built and built and built and built.

Even as a blue light splashed over him.

Even as he heard Adam screaming his name.

Even when he died.

Revenant 50 > 51 (Skill Evolution Reached)

And it only got worse when Revenant started to evolve.

Chapter 117 (I) Vitaemancer

Because Unique Skills fall beyond the bounds of anything the System has seen before, it is hard to judge exactly when they will evolve and what they might become. But that they do evolve is a certainty.

My own Unique Skill evolved once it passed the Adept threshold. Then, until level 300, it didn't do anything at all. It remained the same. As it reached level 300, it fractured inside of me, splitting into two Unique Skills. The change was utterly unprecedented, and the experience shaped me deeply. The skill splitting was among the most painful things I've ever experienced, but also the most sublime.

I examined both of the resulting Unique skills with my Animancy years later, and I discovered many secrets about myself and my connection to the skills themselves. All skills advance when they accrue enough legend, which infuses one with mana. My own skills, however, were so complex that their thresholds were different.

To my fascination, it seemed they were always meant to be two skills rather than one. It's just that my experiences over-favored one to the other, and it couldn't fully bud. Only when I hit level 300 did it flower, and the stored mana was split between them. They evolved once more upon reaching their own milestones—level 200 and level 500, respectively. They didn't split again, evolving along the general rules of skill progression.

But every Unique Skill is a labyrinth unto itself, and its intricacies must be delved by an Animancer for true comprehension...

-Udraal Thann's Animancy Notes

"No, no, no, Shiv, no!" Adam cried, his Seer of Horizons playing the horror before his eyes.

Of all the things he could have expected, of all the things he predicted, of all the things he imagined, the Vicar's power rendered him speechless.

A mere few seconds ago, Adam watched Shiv as he rampaged across Lost Angeles. He had fired a few arrows, eliminating what few Diviners he discovered, alongside a few other threats Shiv couldn't easily counter.

The orc was an unwelcome surprise, but Shiv had handled that matter himself. Adam had considered firing an arrow into the dome to extract Shiv in case things got out of hand, but as per usual, Shiv proved himself the superior brute.

A patch of time went missing in Adam's mind thereafter, then Shiv suddenly reappeared in the air. Every time the Deathless used Chronomancy, it made it hard for the Gate Lord to track him. That, and Shiv's constant misdirection, made it difficult for Adam to keep up. He had Shiv imprinted with his own Divination mana, so the Deathless was always highlighted in Adam's Awareness. Yet, every time Shiv jumped across time or teleported to his knife in rapid succession, it took a few moments to locate him again.

No wonder the other Diviners are having such a hard time,

Adam thought. They need to constantly adjust. Not a bad strategy at all, Shiv.

But then, Adam saw Blackedge, and his insides went hollow.

There were so many eldritch entities biting, clawing, and gnawing upon the protective wards that shrouded the city. There were Dragon-Knights, necromantic artillery, snipers, mages, and more. The chasm was alive with the movement of Sullain's Abyssal Army, and arcing projectiles infused with corrosive power were fired from all corners of the surrounding ruins.

Blackedge was encircled in more ways than one. But still, Roland Arrow fought on.

His arrows retaliated in a constant rain, but only his arrows. Adam didn't see anyone else on the field. There were no Republic formations. Roland Arrow fought alone. That nearly shattered Adam's faith in the Republic altogether.

He whispered lies to himself, lies he knew in his heart were untrue. Perhaps the capital doesn't know. Perhaps some of the other Ascendants aren't aware. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps...

But he knew what he saw, and what he saw broke his heart. He loved the Republic; he believed in it, but they weren't here. The Inquisition was coming, not to support one of the Republic's heroes, but to aid an Abyssal Lord in sacking one of their own towns.

Blackedge had been abandoned. Betrayed. Sacrificed to an enemy of impossible power. And Adam saw that great enemy, then. He saw the Vicar's undulating, kilometer-long body, shaped from gleaming black metal and forged to resemble a serpent or centipede. He saw a faint blue mana lighting the Vicar's eyes, the same hue he'd seen when gazing upon the Animancy core.

And he saw all the spells the Vicar was weaving at the same time. So much magic, so many different spells all at once.

Adam's pulse quickened as he witnessed the Vicar summoning hundreds of eldritch nightmares. No, not hundreds—thousands by the second, from so many rifts. It was like there was no end to the Vicar's power.

To Adam's eyes, Sullain was godlike, impossibly skilled. To call him a Legend felt insufficient. With him unleashing so much power, so many complicated spell patterns, Adam felt like he was a flea trying to comprehend the workings performed by a man.

There came a moment of hope as his father's arrows descended. They cracked down upon the land, fracturing the ground for leagues, drowning the world in glorious, radiant ruin. Flames hot and bright enough to kill Shiv with just a few shots descended by the hundreds.

But something happened. A second passed, and then the flames sputtered and died. They were drawn away from the world and summoned to the Vicar's grasp. They coalesced as streams, and a moment later, the Vicar perverted the flames further, shaping them to his whim. Roland countered with more arrows from above, but Sullain simply shifted them away with a shroud of Dimensionality that was beyond anything Adam could ever hope to manage. Then, Sullain finished his mockery of Roland—he lifted the captured flame high into the air and left it as a sun. Then, he channeled Necromancy into it.

A flood of corrosive mana infused the small star. The same corrosion replaced the light and splashed down upon the land, causing all matter to corrode and decay.

Suddenly, time skipped forward, and the Vicar was looking around, seeming confused. But after a moment, Adam noticed something hovering beside the Legendary Pathbearer. A ball of red and white.

Before Adam's lagging thoughts could catch up to what had just transpired, a body crashed into the soil right in front of the gateway he was hovering above. The soft mud parted beneath the figure's weight.

Adam descended in a frantic blur.

At the same time, the Vicar unleashed a stream of Necromantic mana upon Blackedge, only for it to be split in half by an arrow with a pink-blue tip. The Vicar tried to intercept the arrow with a shroud of Dimensionality, but it blinked out of existence, jumping forward across space and impacting the Vicar's Necromantic sun.

The corrosive dawn burst apart, spraying mana into the world like a festering egg. Some of it crashed against the Vicar, but he held out a hand and kept the searing mana at bay, directing it away from himself and barely avoiding harm.

At the same time, he took care to shield the sphere of red and white hovering beside him. The Vicar looked repeatedly at the sphere, even as he fought to control his shattered Necromantic star. His body language revealed something to Adam: indecision, followed by a decision.

“Apostles! Press the attack! I will return shortly! There has been a new discovery gifted unto us by the Great One! Our victory is ordained! Press! Break the Flamebringer’s fortress. Spare none who do not bow before the Great One. Give no quarter to the murderers and butchers, but leave room in your heart for the feeble and meek. May the Great Adversary be undone! May the Great One rise again!”

And with a casual wave of his hand, an implosion of Dimensionality consumed Vicar Sullain, and he vanished from existence. His forces continued the assault without him. Almost immediately, they started thinning from the veritable rainstorm of arrows unleashed by Roland.

But the sphere of Vitae was gone. Taken by the Vicar. And now Adam was desperate to find out what was wrong with Shiv.

Please don't have your soul ripped out. Please don't—

Adam slammed down onto the ground right beside Shiv, and it was all the Gate Lord could do not to throw up. "Oh, Ascendants, oh gods, Shiv! Shiv, can you hear me?"

Adam had seen the Deathless wounded before, had seen him die over and over, but what had the Vicar done to him? He scarcely looked human anymore. His bone armor was shattered in so many places, and flesh bubbled out in swaying clumps that wept pus and blood. His helmet was cracked through, and part of Shiv's face had been fused with the bone. But it was a poor fusion. There were so many holes in his flesh that revealed fragments of misplaced bone. Patches of skin were—

Shiv let out a choked rasp.

"Shit, shit," Adam breathed. He channeled his Righteous Dawn Prevails into the Deathless. Shiv came alight, but Adam had channeled his glow too late. Shiv shuddered, and then, after a few final twitches, he went still. "No. Godsdammit, don't—Drain me! I'm here! I'm... Shiv?"

The Deathless didn't move at all. His eyes were unmoving, unfocused. His legs kicked out a final time and stilled. There was no breath in his lungs, no beat in his heart, no mana around his body. He was dead. But there was no Revenant either. Where was the Revenant? Why wasn't anything happening?

Again, Adam thought back to the Vitae hovering beside the Vicar. No, he's not dead. Shiv isn't—

“Shiv.” Adam’s words came out as a whisper. He knelt beside his friend’s body and shook him. “Shiv. Shiv! Get up, you bastard! Drain me! Don’t... Don’t...”

Shiv didn’t move. No drain came. Only the soft breeze made a noise that followed in the silence thereafter, rustling the grass. Adam looked at the corpse and felt sick. This was supposed to be just a scouting run. How was he going to explain this to—No, something else had to be happening. He wouldn’t accept this—Shiv was supposed to be Deathless. Aside from the Necromancy—

An explosion of red and white erupted from Shiv. Adam was blasted off his feet. He rolled and threw himself back to his feet in a second, and as he stood, he saw a twisting weave of colors before him; currents of brilliant red and purest white. Then came ripples amidst the color. Pulses of an outline. But then the outline started to break apart, and all that remained were the hues.

Adam blinked as he tried to comprehend what was happening to Shiv. He failed. But at least the big bastard wasn’t actually dead.

Or so Adam hoped. A sigh escaped him as he took a tentative step closer to the mess of red and white strands. “Shiv. Are you... Are you in there?”

And right as he asked that question, the streams of color began to rapidly fade from sight like a dying flame.

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Skill Evolution: Revenant (Unique) > Vitaemancy (Unique)

Strider of the Unbending Path 130 > 135

Adamantine Adaption 164 > 166

Woundeater 87 > 89

Pain lined every part of Shiv. Pain became Shiv. But more than pain, there was something else, a strange sensation, as his body unraveled.

His body? What was happening to his body? He felt fluid. Like a mess of different overlapping parts. He was dead. He was supposed to resurrect as a Revenant, but he hadn't. He hadn't simply rematerialized over his body, incorporeal, as nothing more than a faint outline of the figure he was.

Instead, he felt scattered. Like a mess of limbs, groping, starving, trying to find a source of heat. Coldness rushed through him. It was like ice-cold flooding his veins, dousing his existence.

He forced himself to focus before his vitality was finally extinguished. And as he did, he found the world around him coming into view. No longer was everything painted in muted colors. No, some things were vibrant now. There was a contrast, and beside him was a beacon of vitality.

That was Adam.

Shiv observed Adam as a hunger roared to life inside him. An all-consuming thirst almost overtook him. He wanted to drain Adam, drain every bit of him until there was nothing left of the man.

But besides Adam, there were other patches of color in the world as well. In fact, all of the world seemed brighter than before, with a thin layer of vitality layered upon it. But it wasn't the vitality he saw before. No. There was more than just heat in the air. There was red and white throughout the world. Just like his alloyed soul and vitality.

Shiv faded. His senses drifted. When they returned, he realized he wasn't a Revenant at all. No, his new body was a mess. It was like a swirl of dancing streams. Streams of Vitae. As he saw his new Unique Skill Evolution, his mind went blank. Vitaemancy. He got a magical skill specifically for manipulating his own being? How did that work? And what was he supposed to—

The streams of color felt like they were part of him. He moved all of them without issue. And as he did that, he realized it was hatching free from something. Something almost invisible. An outline that used to be his Revenant cracked apart into pieces and dissolved seconds after.

It felt like a metamorphosis unlike any other.

Chapter 117 (II) Vitaemancer

Before Shiv could consider the implications, he felt himself dim even further. He felt the cold wash over him—reach his very core. He was out of time. He needed to drain vitality. He needed to live.

Shiv speared into Adam like a leech seeking a vein. The Gate Lord shuddered as ethereal streams of red and white were pulled out from his body as if blood drawn into a syringe. Then, even more of Shiv's streams splashed against Adam's body and started draining him at the same time.

The Deathless didn't just have one strand of Vitae. No, every part of him consisted of the swirling flow. It wasn't even a part of him; it was him. This was the shape of his existence now. As it moved, he could see that sections of it were corroded and withered, barely hanging on. The Necromantic damage still scarred him. But he could feel the scars, and he could move the streams around himself.

It didn't heal the hurt, but it did make him feel better.

"Alright," Adam wheezed. His features paled fast as Shiv drew in massive surges of vitality. The Vitality Drain Skill had also been dramatically leveled from the blast he experienced earlier. Shiv could feel himself drawing considerably more vitality from the Gate Lord than he was capable of usually. But Shiv still needed more. It was like part of his Skill Evolution was incomplete. He needed to finish his metamorphosis, and he needed more—more—MORE!

Instinct took hold. Shiv directed his other streams across the land, seeking the grass. As they moved, a thundering sheath formed over his Vitae. His Inertial Overdrive activated. Shiv felt his gravitic field as well. Shiv blinked. His strands had actual weight. One of them crashed into the ground and tore out a chunk of soil. He also saw his Skysplitter dragged along by one of his Vitae currents. What the hells is happening to me?

His tendrils speared into the grass. He drank away the vitality of the surrounding vegetation in large gulps. They didn't wither or decay. They melted into him. Fused with him. And when he was done, there was nothing left behind. And suddenly, Shiv looked at the world around him. There was a thin film of red and white everywhere.

There was vitalityeverywhere.

Vitae everywhere.

Existence everywhere.

Shiv drove himself into that existence, and he drained. He drained as much as he could, and parts of the world tore open. Wounds developed. Wounds lined the flesh of existence. If reality were a fabric, then Shiv was sinking his teeth into it, leaving bite marks all over.

WARNING: MANA INSTABILITY DETECTED

Just then, a pressure built in the air. Shiv looked up, where one of the rifts had torn open.

And lightning struck him from a cloudless sky.

A bolt of volatile energy speared down from the heavens, impacting Shiv like the fist of a giant.

A spear of coldness sank into him as some of his Vitae burst apart. They sprayed out like broken pieces of glass, and the red glow of his vitality faded thereafter. Before Shiv could react, a blast of flame spewed free from another of the wounds he had left in reality.

He stopped time before the flame could hit him and halted his draining from the thin, fragile threshold that was the world. Instead, he focused on the grass and Adam. But as Shiv moved away from the flame and resumed time, the Young Lord crashed down on his knees and dry-heaved.

Shit—I'm draining too much. I need to... Gods, I need more vitality...

Vitality Drain 51 > 52

"It's okay," Adam said, spittle falling from his mouth. "I have—I have a lot more—as much as you need."

But Shiv could feel Adam emptying. And it still wasn't enough to complete the metamorphosis. There was also no way Shiv was going to let himself kill Adam. He stopped draining the Gate Lord and almost immediately felt the cold rush back into him. Immediately, Shiv could feel vitality evaporate from his new form at a staggering rate. Heat bled out of his body as if blood from a slit throat.

But he could move fast. He could cast himself in many different directions.

And so he flung his countless strands of Vitae at the grass around him, at everything that lived, at everything that glowed brightest.

Everything except that thin film lining the world itself.

He consumed the grass. He found bushes and drank them out of existence too.

In seconds, he slashed across the land, his body now a mess of red and white strings. They flowed like lashing whips, sucking up every droplet of vitality he could find. In under a minute, an entire kilometer of greenery vanished. There wasn't any decay. They simply ceased to be.

But Shiv still needed more. To his surprise, his Vitae reached far, reeling out at the speeds allowed by the interplay between his Inertial Overdrive and his gravitic field.

Vitaemancy was unlike anything else. It wasn't like a field he could wield. Rather, it was like moving his own spirit along, reshaping himself, touching things using his altered existence. With every bit of vitality he drained, more strings extended from him. His colors grew more vibrant, his terror fading before a growing focus. But even so, every movement performed by his Vitae, every second he existed in this state, vitality flooded out of him as well.

Everything he did cost vitality, and everything he drained became an influx.

From above came a chirp. A small bird was sailing just overhead, flapping its wings desperately as a hawk burst free from the clouds.

Shiv cast his Vitae through the bird first. In seconds, its existence vanished into his. The same strands blasted out from where the bird was and struck the hawk as well. It struggled a bit longer, shuddering and flapping its wings twice more, before it too faded into his Vitae.

And then, as he reached a hazy threshold, something flooded out from each of his streams. A membrane pooled around him. It extended beyond his Inertial Sheath and solidified into a field of circulating white and red. And then it hardened. It condensed. And Shiv stopped losing vitality as his being stabilized.

A mana field formed around him. A mana field that he could move his Vitae in, where his streams were pooling together and reforming into his living body.

This was his new resurrective husk. But instead of shadow, it was colorful. It was vibrant. And it was stable. But his Vitae was entirely solid now. A new form of mana so dense it was matter—but also an extension of himself. Tentatively, Shiv extended a trickle of Vitae beyond his protective field, and it immediately began to evaporate once more. He drew it back in, and it stopped evaporating. He cast a jet of Vitae at the tree in the distance, and it crackled through the air. He lost vitality along the way, but the moment it touched the tree, he began to drain it back in.

Did I... just become my own kind of magic? Shiv thought. He prodded at himself even as more of his body continued to reform. There was a strange twitching sensation inside him, but he ignored that as he found himself examining the other things. His Vitaemancy mana field was about as large as his body—and everything within was stable. He could reach beyond it, but it immediately started costing him his existence. What... What else can I do with this? I don't understand...

But then the twitching inside him became a violent struggle. From within his Vitae, something else burst free. He could hear screaming. He could hear her.

He could feel her struggling as she tried to tear her way out from inside him. Her body was trapped inside his, lost from the world for so long, but she was surfacing.

The long-dead Diviner stretched out from his red and white field with a hand outstretched. She resembled a person trying to claw their way free from a thick, translucent cocoon. But her struggles were insufficient, and she wasn't strong enough to break free from his Vitae.

Each of his currents was like adamantine, and her body felt fragile. But as she unlatched from him bit by bit, he felt his pain fading, and he brushed her flesh—and felt his corrosion imprinted on her body.

Rose wasn't just trying to break free because she wanted to escape. No, she was in agony. She had inherited his soul-wounds.

How the fuck did that happen? Shiv thought.

Rose clawed out again, and this time, Adam noticed her, and his eyes went wide. Shiv was reforming behind her, but his own shape couldn't solidify automatically until she was pulled back in or removed. That was what his gut told him.

And though Rose wanted to split from him, she ultimately didn't have the strength—or the skill—to do so.

But he did. And he was more than fine with letting her go. Shiv reached out and took hold of the Diviner. His streams clenched tight around her like solid bands. She cried out in pain, and he winced. Then, slowly, he began pushing her out through the field.

Rose shuddered. She turned. Shiv shook, but then his currents stabilized as he felt his flesh surface from over his Vitaemancy field. Rivers of red and white connected him to her. Just as they wove him back into existence, they wove her as well. Then, with a final ripple, he emerged fully back into existence, covered in burned rags, while she collapsed against the soil.

Shiv looked down upon her and swallowed. A few currents of Vitaemancy continued to weave around her, to coil and tighten. But she was coming into shape, and she was surfacing from the white and red colors of his unique mana.

Vitaemancy was a skill unlike all other magical skills. It was the substance that comprised Shiv's being, and it was something that was a mystery to him. Its capabilities, its uses, its very nature. Even if it made up who he was, he didn't know how it worked, and he certainly didn't know why or how it had restored Rose.

But that didn't matter. He'd promised that he would get her out at some point, promised and expected to find an Animancer, likely a restored Valor, to serve as her liberator. But he had an opportunity now. He had a means now. So he was going to try now to save her right now.

Not later, not tomorrow, not next year, now.

She surfaced from the lingering remnants of his Vitaemancy, much like he did. But a pulse and coldness radiated inside of him after he let her go. It was like he'd given part of himself away, sacrificed some of his vitality. Shiv felt weary again.

But he reached out. He searched the land with his Vitaemancy streams, and as he found more grass, he drained that as well. He didn't use his hands to direct his Vitae streams. They moved of their own accord, and when they splashed out from him, his body quivered as if it was the surface of a pond of red that oscillated with colors of white.

Every time he used his Vitaemancy, he lost something once it went beyond his field. But what was lost could be drained from the world, and now he could interact with the physical world using the shape of his solidified soul.

But the world can also interact with me in return, Shiv realized.

Before him, Rose Van Erren lay. He thought her hair had retained some of his vitality, but he realized that was just her natural color—blood red. But there were horrific scars lining her body, patches of corrosive burns that left her disfigured and twitching on the ground. Her body was horrifically melted, her skin like a dense hive mottled by acid.

Shiv looked down at himself, patted his own body, and felt only a few lingering injuries retained. She had taken on the bulk of the wounds he sustained. He was barely burned now. Was this... Did his Vitaemancy allow him to pass soul wounds on to other people? He certainly hadn't done this on purpose.

Adam was staring at his mother as well, his eyes wide, his jaw open and closing. The Gate Lord looked exhausted, spent, and now he was mentally reeling as well. Slowly, he turned to Shiv.

Shiv tried to say something, but he didn't have the words. He didn't know what to say, so he just shrugged.

"She wanted out, man... So I... let her out." Shiv muttered. It sounded stupid, but it was an honest statement.

Adam tried to say something, but then his eyes rolled, and he promptly pitched over. Exhaustion induced by the vitality drain claimed him.

"Shit," Shiv muttered. He probably drained Adam too much.

A whimper came from Rose as she stared at Adam. She lay there in the opposite direction he did, and mother and son were pointed away from each other. Even so, she reached out with a shaking hand, and she placed it upon his back.

"My boy," she whispered. She breathed in, and she remained in existence. She didn't fade out. Her chest was rising and falling. For all intents and purposes, she was well and truly alive.

Shiv stared. Did I just... Did I just bring a woman back to life? His mind spun at the implications, but he couldn't deal with this. Not yet. Not out here either.

He looked around, and he scowled. This place was a wasteland. Roland's bombardment had left everything a kilometer away glassed, but there were still probably Diviners—or Necrotechs with Master-Tier Awareness—lurking in the clouds or in the distance beyond. He didn't need them to know what he could do, and he certainly didn't need them to have any more information about him hatching a woman from his vitality. However that worked.

Immediately, Shiv reached down and gently picked up both Rose and Adam as he marched back toward the gate. The surface was still shimmering with waves of Dimensionality. Adam had kept the pathway active.

"Thank the gods," Shiv growled. "And fuck Sullain."

He passed through the dimensional rift, and as soon as he crossed over, heads turned to stare at him. Heads of mercenaries, of Umbrals on guard, of a Weaveress that stumbled back in surprise as Shiv blasted past her. He shot up into the air as she called out to him.

“Exalted Guest Shiv!” she shouted. “What are—”

"Call Uva!" Shiv shouted back in return as he soared through the air, toward the obsidian tower. "And get me Valor! We're gonna need him. I need him. I need everyone. I... I..." How the hells was he supposed to explain any of this?

As soon as he pondered that question, a Psychomantic thread passed through his mind as the familiar presence of Uva settled into his consciousness.

"Shiv, what's wrong? What happened?"

"I, uh..." Shiv looked down at Adam's mother, and then he looked down at Adam.

Uva hesitated. "Shiv. What happened to Adam. And that woman... Who is she? And why is she undressed?"

He opened and closed his mouth several times before he settled on the truth. "So, uh, I think my Unique Skill underwent a Skill Evolution, and then I died, and I gave magic rebirth to Adam's mom somehow. And now I need Valor to help me figure things out."

A long pause followed. For the first time, Uva was genuinely speechless and thoughtless. She let out a soft sigh. "Never a dull moment with you."

Chapter 118 (I) Vitality

"What is death?"

If you ask a Biomancer, it is simply a state of being. It is when all functions of the body cease and the organism begins to decay. Certain individuals will even declare death to begin when the organs fail, the brain in particular.

Should you ask a philosopher, you could receive anything from profundity to worthless platitudes. For, to them, death is not a real thing. It is not a true thing. It is a statement of existential metanarrative. And they gaze upon it as one word, a painting, ignoring the cloth that had been tainted by the oils.

And it drives me to a red-hot rage. It drives me to heights of fury I cannot comprehend myself.

The System cares nothing for my feelings. It delights in death. It feasts upon it. For death is a critical component in the advancement of our skills. Think of how your skills grow when you slay, when you prevail, when you butcher. Think of how the strain is accompanied by destruction. Every act you perform with your skills feeds it. It instills in it a story, a living narrative that develops and evolves, and eventually it becomes an evolution for the skill itself. An evolution too often nourished from death.

For what else are the flowers of strife but an end, but a severance of continuity?

And I cannot accept it. I will not accept it. I did not accept it for my mother. I will not accept it for myself. I will not accept it for this world. I will not accept it for anyone. Anyone.

System, hear me now. If there is any cognition to you, any awareness at all, hear me now and know that you are my enemy. Strike me down. Unleash your fury upon me. Give me all you have in violence, in deception, in magic and might.

Give me all and I will spit at thee. But if there is nothing to you at all, if you are just a thing of intellect but no consciousness, then I will usurp you. And when I do, I will punish you for this sinless sin that you have committed, this act which you know not of but with which you have scarred me so.

You have given me much, and then you have taken from me more. And I will not accept it. You will rue my power. You will rue what I will deliver.

"What is death?"

Death is something I will conquer. Death is something I will break. Death is something I will render untrue. Death is the one true adversary, and I will be the one to slay it.

-Udraal Thann's Animancy Notes

As Shiv tore across the skies of the gate, he noticed another change in the world. Everyone and everything in existence was glowing. It was all layered in a thin coat of Vitae, and he could feel it.

His insides thirsted for it, even though he was stable now. But Shiv knew the consequences of draining from that which did not glow so brightly, that which wasn't meant to be drained. Previously, he'd sapped only from living things, from people, from automata and organics alike. But now it felt like he could drain from anything. And more than vitality, it was the substance of the soul and one's life force. Just what the hell kind of skill did I get? he wondered to himself.

Rose let out a cry in his arms, and he tried not to look at her. Her flesh was fused together in a horrific, disfigured mess, and he felt his insides twist as he muttered an apology.

"Shit," Shiv said. "Alright, Rose—Sorry. I didn't know that—I'll figure out how to fix you. I just need to... I just need to get some help first..."

But she couldn't hear him. She was too busy screaming and writhing. Shiv held Adam as well, and she constantly tried to push herself away. The soul wounds were horrific, and every movement of contact seemed to inflict a torturous effect on her.

But he could also feel her Vitae; perceive it within her flesh. He could sense the burns there. The burns that used to be his, that lined his very existence after Vicar Sullain unleashed the Necromantic sun upon the world. But if he could create her from his own body, if he could push her out and form her from his disfigured vitality, then could he take it back, or could he transfer it to someone else?

All these questions swirled through his mind as he spiked his gravitic field again. In the distance, the Obsidian Tower rose high, and its peak glistened with a prismatic brilliance when kissed by the azure mana core.

To his surprise, four more structures surrounded the Obsidian Tower. They were square blocks of concrete and stone, simple in design, but they had webs going between them, and Weaveresses walked upon them with ease. There were a few dimensionals patrolling the area above as well. More than that,

there were what looked to be mystical checkpoints shrouding this new command center in layers. And that's what this place was: a command center being built right at the heart of the realm, right over the Vulketh Gateway as well.

Shiv passed through one of said checkpoints, a transparent sheen of magic that pulsed as he breached its threshold. It flashed green, and all the following layers blinked out as well. Uva's mana strand slipped out from his mind and continued on, snaking through the air until it touched one of the buildings.

It looked slightly like a tube that had been split in half. It was long, with no windows and only a large metal door. A large metal door that was rapidly swinging open as a Weaveress and two teams of Umbrals emerged.

Shiv recognized the Weaveress. It was the Biomancer that had helped him with Courtney a few days ago. Uva must have informed them of his coming. They also had two medical gurneys on standby, and the Umbrals were dressing themselves, seemingly preparing for active surgery and assistance. Shiv looked at Rose again and winced. She was screaming, always screaming, and he didn't think any amount of Biomancy or direct medical aid would help her. The wounds ran deeper than their ministrations could reach.

As he hit the ground, a vibration shuddered through him. Rose arced and let out a piercing shriek. "Sorry, sorry," Shiv whispered.

She writhed against him, pressing and trying to free herself. Her eyes were rolling. Sweat poured down her head and face. And under Shiv's right arm, Adam began to stir as well.

Adam's vitality burned faintly. Shiv had drained too much all at once. He should have gone for something else after a while, but he'd been so thirsty then. When he was draining Adam, he'd thought he would never be sated again, never be filled with enough life force.

"I'm going to get you well too," Shiv said, more a promise to himself than the unconscious Adam.

A concentration of threads speared into his mind and coalesced Uva herself into him, settling around his consciousness and briefly giving him a psionic embrace before she untangled herself and emerged right beside him. Her shield flashed out behind her as well, and the fragments drifted a bit like a cape. She was wearing her Arachnae Order leathers, but her shoes were the ones that Can Hu had reforged for her—the prismatic equipment that would allow her to submerge herself in the earth.

She looked at Adam, and then she looked at Rose. Her face momentarily contorted in disgust at the severity of the woman's wounds, but then her eyes widened. "Is that really her?"

"Yes," Shiv said. "I, uh... Yeah. Won't lie, this is some crazy shit. I can't believe it myself."

She stared at him, and she nodded slowly. "I didn't doubt you, but I still needed to see..."

The Umbrals and the Weaveress received both Rose and Adam. Adam was merely weak, and Shiv had realized something. His Vitae was stable within his mana field. The Deathless thought to himself: So... could I just give some back?

Holding on to that thought, he commanded his Vitaemancy and directed it back into Adam.

And before Uva or anyone else could ask what he was about to do, Shiv channeled the very substance that comprised his being. Streams of white and red exploded against Adam. He came aglow with a brilliant interplay of colors. Shiv immediately felt himself get weaker, but he'd also failed to account for

another thing. His soul was material now—as hard as adamantite, with all the strength and speed derived from his Gravitic Wrestler and Inertial Overdrive Skills.

The Vitae current crashed into Adam. His gurney shattered. The Umbrals jumped backward as the Gate Lord was blasted down and formed a small crater. Shiv let out a loud groan. "Shit, I didn't mean to do that."

But he didn't stop what he was doing; he just became more gentle. He fed a final surge of his vitality into the Adam. Suddenly, the Gate Lord folded over, grabbing at his ribs as he coughed violently. Now Adam came aglow while Shiv's inner brightness dimmed. The Deathless staggered back from sheer exhaustion. It was kind of like draining all the strength out of oneself in a sudden instant. Like a sudden onset of feverish sickness that radiated stronger and stronger with every passing moment. Shiv cut off the flow of Vitae as soon as Adam's eyes snapped open.

He looked down just in time to see Shiv reel the streams back into himself. An aura of red and white commingled around Shiv before fading entirely. And while Rose twisted and screamed in her gurney, the Umbrals and Weaver's Biomancer stared at Shiv. As did Uva. Her jaw slightly gaped, her eyes wide.

"The hell are you guys looking at?" Shiv cried. "Help her!"

He waved at the Weaveress. She snapped to attention and immediately called out to the Umbrals. They started wheeling Rose into the building, down a length of bright, clean, reflective tiles and pristine walls. Shiv couldn't even feel that much bacteria in the air there, and he realized this was likely an infirmary that had just been set up. A proper one, rather than a large tent.

Adam stood near Shiv. He stumbled, and the Deathless caught him, but he didn't look at Shiv. No, his eyes were locked on the Weaveress, moving his mother away. He flinched every time she screamed.

He looked at Shiv and shook Shiv's shoulders with shaking hands. "What's wrong with her? What did you do? What did Sullain do? What happened?"

"I don't—" Shiv stopped. Then he immediately closed his eyes and sighed. "I didn't mean to do anything. When I pushed her out, I think she took the corrosion—my soul wounds. She carried them out from me when she reformed. And now they're on her."

Adam's eyes widened. He gripped Shiv tighter as he snarled. "What? Then why didn't you stop her?"

"I didn't know that would happen!" Shiv shot back. "I didn't know what I was doing. I was just trying to reform myself, and I felt her struggling inside me. She was trying to get out, and I let her. I promised I would help her!"

"You gave her your wounds! How is that helping her?!" Adam cried. His voice was climbing to a hysterical height.

But then a strand of Psychomancy passed through Shiv and Adam. A wave of calm struck their consciousnesses, and they both took a step back, looking at each other as the tension inside them was choked down to a more muted level. "We can argue about this later," Uva said. "Right now, we need to figure out what's wrong with her."

And just then, Valor descended behind her. He flew unevenly. Damage still lined his skull, but he seemed better than before. Good enough to travel under his own power, at least.

"Shiv," Valor called out. "Uva informed me of what happened. Where is..." And Valor trailed off. He said nothing, but his eyes glowed bright with crackling flame. He analyzed Shiv once more, and a deep frown settled on his ghostly features. "Shiv... What has happened to you? I sense... Why do I sense such repulsion from you? Repulsion against my Necromancy."

"I got a Skill Evolution for Revenant," Shiv explained. He held out a hand, and he let a small, swirling stream of Vitae dance upon his palm. And then he pulled it back into himself. "I can move my own Vitae now, I think."

Valor just stared at him. A piercing howl from Rose that echoed out of the building broke the moment. Can Hu also arrived, descending on a column of stone.

As the gathered group hurried across the halls of the infirmary a moment later, Adam and Shiv were trailed by an Umbral in a white uniform. "Wait!" she called. "You need to be sterilized. She's badly wounded. We can't risk her being infected."

"The infection—it's not a physical wound," Shiv cried out. "It's a soul wound."

"Even so, her physical condition might still make her vulnerable to infection. We don't know what you might have brought in on you from the outside. Just hold still for a moment!"

The group ground to a halt, and the Umbral waved her hand. A crimson spell formed over it. Shiv felt parts of the bacteria clinging to him, small particulates of life, burst apart. Adam was cleansed as well, and then they rushed past the Umbral, blurring across room after room until they finally caught up to the Weaveress and her aides.

They were applying whatever healing they could, and Biomancy splashed over Rose Van Erren. It did nothing. Her flesh refused to heal. Her muscles refused to mend. Shiv could see her body trying to respond, trying to re-knit itself, sinew by sinew. But as soon as they touched, they separated again.

It was like her soul had a memory, a memory of being wounded, and with the damage layered upon her vitality itself, she couldn't exist in any other way.

She remained nude, with no time to pay attention to modesty when most of her body was practically consumed by corrosive burns. She was a nightmare of misshapen flesh, and Shiv could feel the burns run even deeper inside her. Her organs were also withered, one of her lungs, her kidney, her bones, and even her heart. Shiv hadn't realized how badly the Necromancy wounded him earlier, and now she inherited those wounds. He suspected Rose wasn't a Pathbearer that specialized in Toughness.

He felt her heart twitch and spasm—and it was beating more because the Weaveress was forcing it to pump rather than from its own power. Shiv hadn't even realized her heart was failing when he carried her.

She let out a gasp. Adam stood right beside her, and his eyes darted about. He looked at Shiv, Uva, and Valor before rushing over to his mother. He looked like a boy caught in a nightmare. And he reached out to take her hand. Rose arched her back and screamed. Adam winced, and the expression on his face was heartbreaking. To have his mother returned, but to be given unto him in such a state—

I'm going to fix this, Shiv declared to himself.

Uva tried to calm Adam through her, but he was in a maelstrom of emotional turmoil. Some of that turmoil was bleeding over into Shiv as well.

"Valor," Shiv said, "I think I might be able to take the wounds from her somehow." He channeled a stream of Vitae again. It immediately started fading the moment it got to open air, the moment it slipped beyond his mana field.

"Uva," Valor said, "connect me to Shiv. Make it a straight connection—enforced calm." And she did. Another Psychomancy strand passed through the Legendary Pathbearer and ended within Shiv's mind. Immediately, Shiv felt Valor's focus, his intensity, but also that unerring calmness enforced upon them. "The new skill, it allows you to manipulate your own Vitae as if it were a form of magic?"

"Yeah," Shiv said.

A pulse of uncertainty came from Valor, but the Legendary Pathbearer pushed through it. "Reach into her. I wish to see what you can do, to feel what you feel."

#### Chapter 118 (II) Vitality

Shiv nodded. Immediately, strands of red and white extended through the air, but he learned from his mistake with Adam. He didn't spear his Vitae current into her. And a good thing at that, as that might have killed her for good. And Shiv didn't know if he could bring her back to life again if that happened. He only had one Rose Van Erren locked in his soul. As he pressed his current against her body, he immediately started losing vitality. Shiv bit back a groan, but he connected to her vitality as well, and he felt at her damage, at the corrosion.

More importantly, however, his vitality merged with hers, and then seeped into her. He tried to pull at her burns, to manipulate them somehow, but it was like he was striking a film of oil with a water hose. He couldn't interact with it this way. His Vitae felt solid to him, but when it greeted a source of vitality, it reacted more like pooling water, entering like two streams of water merging together than anything else.

"That is normal," Valor said. "Like types of mana co-mingle when they're in a passive state, without someone's intent, they do not truly crash, but you have no experience with cooperative casting." Valor paused. "Focus, Shiv. Treat her body, her vitality, as if it were a body of water. You can displace it with your Vitae. There is only so much vitality one can sustain at a time, so cycle it through her."

"Cycle it?" Shiv asked.

"Yes." Valor looked at him. "Move what is inside of you against her and see if you can pull what is inside her into you when it is displaced. Do it quickly. I suspect you will not have the control, so use quantity to your advantage."

And Shiv did just that. Vitae flooded out from him, and Vitae returned as he drained Rose. A jet stream of white and red rushed out from Shiv, but then it circled back, crashing into him again, and along its length there were festering motes of green, acidic burns inflicted by the corrosion of Necromancy.

As soon as the corroded currents returned to Shiv, he let out a gasp as some of the wounds reappeared on his body. At the same time, Rose's flesh cleared. It was like her being remembered that it was uninjured after all. Her torso restored itself first, patches of smooth skin stretching out. The Weaveress Biomancer wasn't casting anymore. She was simply staring at Shiv, at an absolute loss as to what was happening.

Vitaemancy 51 > 52

Shiv, meanwhile, did his best not to fall over. He felt cold, cold and weak and hurt. More and more of his original injuries returned to him, and Valor raised a hand. "That's enough. I do not think..."

"No," Shiv said, "I can take the wounds. She probably can't. Besides," Shiv gritted his teeth as he felt his organs start failing, "I can just transfer them to someone I don't like in a moment, head out the Abyssal Gate and do a little... hunting..."

Valor regarded him and huffed with restrained pride. "Stand proud, then, Hero. I witness your will."

Shiv felt a flood of reluctance from Uva as well, but Adam, Adam almost looked overcome with emotion. He stared at Shiv as his mother grew hale and Shiv grew disfigured in her stead. Shiv felt his skin unlatch from his flesh and then melt together into clumps. His organs withered, and he nearly collapsed then, but he forced himself to stand. As he drew the last of his stream of Vitae back into himself, he staggered back, and the room spun. Uva and Adam caught him now. They braced him as Shiv let out a wheeze.

Uva stared at him for a moment, and he saw her colorful eyes widened in horror and she looked away. "That bad, huh?" Shiv chuckled.

"Do you remember when you asked me if I would still like you if you were a potato?" Uva said, trying to hide her discomfort.

"Yeah," Shiv said.

"Well, right now, a potato would be preferable."

"Wow, ouch." Shiv laughed. "Thanks for the honesty."

"Alright," Shiv ground out. "Adam, open the Abyssal Gateway. I'm gonna need to..."

And then the room started spinning around him too much for him to keep up. He lost a step and fell. The ground rushed up to smash him—only for Uva's shield to catch him first. "Oag—ohakkky...", Shiv slurred. "I'm fannne." He really wasn't well. His insides felt melted. And his heart felt like it ruptured more with every passing beat.

"I got him," Adam said.

Shiv felt two arms wrap around him, and he barely bit back a cry of pain. Suddenly, he was more sympathetic to Rose than ever. It was funny how fast one could forget intense agony when it wasn't constantly biting into their body every passing second. Adam carried him out of the chamber.

Uva settled into his mind and tried to help him ward off some of the pain. But soon she shifted to Adam instead, her own mind reeling at the sheer amount of suffering he was constantly experiencing. She couldn't focus, not with that much pain.

But pain was an old friend of Shiv's by now. And Rose couldn't survive this, not like he could. The whole affair had been worth it; basic arithmetic. Now he just needed to move his minus to someone else's plus. "Something like that," Shiv muttered to himself. "Hope we'll find a bloodsucker or something soon..."

The Challenger looks upon you with satisfaction.

He briefly lost track of time then. It was an eternity inside his own mind, writhing, trying not to sob or scream. But when his awareness next returned to him, he caught a flash of a swirling blackness. It was like he was entering a monster's maw. But then he noticed he was passing through the gateway—the Abyssal Gateway. Oh, good. I'll be able to—

Shiv's heart burst apart then, and he died again.

Vitaemancy 52 > 55

Vitality Drain 52 > 54

As soon as he died, his Vitae field slipped free from his body and smashed into Adam. The Gate Lord let out a grunt of surprise as he felt the dense swirl of red and white that composed Shiv slam against him.

Adam's eyes widened. His breath hitched. "Shiv, if you need to drain—"

"No," Shiv responded. He realized he was still connected to Adam through one of Uva's strands, but he wasn't losing vitality, not while he was still inside his field. And more importantly, he could move the field. He could keep it around himself. It didn't extend long, but it generally encompassed the space of his body, maybe the distance of him reaching out an arm or a leg. And he could move it, move it as he kept the bulk of his Vitae condensed together.

That was how the field remained concentrated as well. It didn't mold itself to his Vitae; it was simply at its epicenter, where he was meant to resurrect when he drained enough. And right now, he definitely did not have enough Vitae to resurrect, but at least he wasn't fading every passing second.

Definitely an evolution. Just a really godsdamned weird one...

A massive crater passed beneath him, and Shiv realized it was the crater he had left behind near the gate a few days ago. As he looked around, he saw a world aglow with dancing torches, bonfires everywhere, spreading beyond the ruins, encircling the Abyssal Gateway, and running deep in the Umbral Wilderness.

"Adam," Shiv said.

"Yes," he replied. "What do you need?"

"River," Shiv said simply. "Go to the river."

And Adam immediately sailed off in that direction. Uva was mantled to the young lord's mind now, continuing to do what she could for Shiv's pain and focus without being fully immersed in his mind. While they traveled, however, Shiv directed a section of his Vitae out as a cleaving jet of color. It burst through their air as he guided it using his gravitic field while it accelerated on the basis of his Inertial Overdrive.

He managed to spear sections of his Vitae into the ground, barely missing small embers; he noticed small animals scuttling through the undergrowth. But even as he missed, he could still control his Vitae, and it was a part of his body more than ever before. He flung it out using his gravitic field again, and this time he impacted his prey and began to sap from it.

A strange, single-eared creature let out a cry as its vitality was torn out of its body, and it vanished into a flood of red and white. They shot over the ravine then, and Shiv was launching out stream after stream, plunging it into the water. They split the currents of the river apart, and he struck the bed of the river, causing sediment to erupt and shockwaves to open up pockets in the flow.

He consumed crustaceans, fish, weeds, and more, and he reached out further. He drank in the surrounding trees, the animals that lived inside of them. Shiv consumed insects, he consumed fungi, he consumed everything that had a bright shimmer of vitality around them.

As he consumed them, his Vitae came back together, weaving himself into shape, weaving himself back to life. And with a final pulse of red, then white, Shiv emerged from his Vitae field, alive once more, alive and immediately dying as his organs started to fail again.

"Shit," Shiv rasped.

"Shiv!" Adam cried out as Shiv slumped over against him again. "I—" The Gate Lord gagged as he tried not to look at his malformed body.

"Hey, Adam," Shiv slurred. "I think, I think I'm going to need to find something with quite a bit of life force, something I can pour a lot of myself into and then circle some of myself back out."

"Alright, let me see..." Adam's eyes flashed. It was like a dance between the bluest sky and brightest dawn. The Gate Lord's face contorted in an expression of absolute focus, and Uva searched the lands as well, but in mere seconds, Adam proved himself to be the better hunter.

"Basilisk," Adam breathed.

"Basilisk," she replied. "You found a basilisk? Good option, but how large? We want one that's mature—"

"Oh, it's large. And not far either," Adam said, and he immediately blasted off. He shot over a patch of nothing that spread through the surrounding Umbral wilderness. A patch of nothing made so as Shiv drank trees and life out of existence. Suddenly, he came to a stop, and Shiv found Adam hovering just over what seemed to be a large boulder.

"Where is the Basilisk?" Shiv muffled.

"Below," Adam said. He formed two arms to fire a Veilpiercer that blasted the boulder apart. He accelerated down, and they descended into a deep cave that kept going and going. The cave wasn't so different from the one Shiv fell into after he got obliterated by Marikos. But instead of a mess of merely large snakes, however, there was a colossal, hundred-meter-long serpent slumbering here, coiled around itself like a small mountain. Its diamond-bright scales glittered, and it slowly lifted its head to stare at the intruders, its head rearing back as a look of animal surprise lit its narrow, slit-like irises.

It was like it couldn't believe its den was being invaded.

And that's how its expression stayed as Shiv triggered his Chronomancy. The world around him paused. Adam froze, but Shiv didn't. He cast his Vitae into the basilisk, caring nothing for gentleness as he impaled it through the midsection. Then, he began to flood it with his vitality while siphoning its vitality back into him. Weakness and strength cycled through Shiv as he fought hard to keep from dying halfway. He repeated what he did with Rose earlier.

As the currents of his Vitae flowed, it rushed out from him, carrying soul wounds that were transferred across the stream and siphoning unblemished waters of vitality that replaced his existing wounds.

Even with time frozen, Shiv watched as a patch of horrific burns spread across the basilisk's body. Its scales ruptured apart, and lumps of misshapen flesh swelled around it in inflamed chunks. Its vitality still burned bright, but Shiv could see its flesh withering.

He let time resume then, and his own body felt instantly relieved. There were still some minor burns that lined him. His vitality cycling wasn't entirely clean, but compared to just a few seconds ago, he felt like a new man. The basilisk, meanwhile, reared back as it let out a piercing scream, where an instant ago it had merely been offended about the ones breaching its home. Now its organs were failing, and it was dying.

Dying in Shiv's stead.

Maybe I can exploit this—Shiv's thoughts burst as the large beast swung its head at Shiv and Adam. The Gate Lord dodged to one side, while Shiv shifted another. The basilisk went after Shiv—and missed. But as it swung its head past him, it opened its mouth as a flood of fluid splashed over them, a liquid that was as corrosive as it was paralytic.

As Shiv inhaled, he felt his nervous spasm out of control while his Plaguefueled triggered. The acid, meanwhile, failed to do more than inflict some surface damage to his hardened being. Despite his body going out of control, usurped from his control by a rush of hyper-powerful venoms, his Vitae could still move. He launched a stream right at the basilisk, driving it into its open mouth. The stream impacted with its inertial sheath thundering. The basilisk's skull parted like a broken lid exploding off a steaming pot. Its brain matter splattered, and it died without truly knowing why.

And as soon as it died, Shiv felt its vitality dissipate, felt the white of its soul shatter, and that section of his Vitae detonated as well.

A large blast swept through the room. Adam let out a cry as he was flung upward and sent sailing through the roof of the cave. Shiv, meanwhile, was spiked deeper into the soil, blasting deeper for a dozen meters before he finally came to a stop.

After a good few minutes of twitching, his Plaguefueled finally consumed the venom, and a surge of euphoria like never before consumed him. It felt wonderful. The basilisk's venom was the sweetest nectar he had ever tasted, and in that moment, he veered so close to addiction that the first thing he did after digging himself out of the ground was to launch himself at the basilisk to see the state of its body. As he drew closer, he felt his body grow and expand, muscles and bones swelling larger than ever before, his flesh becoming harder than ever in his life.

He felt at its corpse using his Biomancy, and let out a relieved sigh that its poison glands were still there. Yes! Oh, I'm going to get so much use out of this.

Plaguefueled 62 > 63

Just then, six gleaming pyramids lit the dust and smoke around him. "Shiv!" Adam cried out. "Shiv, are you—"

And he found Shiv standing over the basilisk, twitching, shaking, giggling. And Shiv felt the last articles of his clothing tear apart as he grew to nearly three times his original size, the Plaguefueled skill reaching its limit. Adam stared at Shiv. Shiv stared back. The Deathless's eyes twitched. His muscles were still spasming slightly, but no longer from the paralytic venom. No, it was from an overflowing rush of strength as it continued to grow.

Adam hovered three meters above the ground, and Shiv towered over him. Shiv realized he was practically the size of 811 now, and he had to apply all his focus, all his Psychomancy, to stop himself from fully collapsing into a drunken state.

It wasn't enough.

"Oh , Composer..." Uva let out a breath. "He got even bigger."

Shiv wondered why she sounded so distracted as he awkwardly staggered toward Adam. Adam glided back. "Shiv, you—"

Shiv realized he could practically wrap an entire hand around half of Adam's torso. Shiv couldn't help it. He let out a euphoric laugh. "Basilisk! It was a great idea, Adam. Come here!" He reached out and drew the Gate Lord into a hug, his impulses breaching the effects of his Psychomancy.

Adam squirmed slightly, but then he stopped struggling and just sighed as he patted Shiv on the back.

"My Basilisk..." Shiv let out a low chuckle. "Basilisk's venom..." Shiv hiccuped. Uva reached into his mind and slowly pushed back his drunkenness. But as she did, a notification appeared before his eyes once more.

The Challenger has a great offer for you...

Shit, Shiv thought as a rush of mental exhaustion returned to him. I still have that to deal with.

“Adam,” Shiv said, still hugging him for some reason.

“Yes?” the Gate Lord said, sounding hesitant. “Are you well?”

“I... I think so. Thanks for... You know... Letting me drain you earlier.”

Adam let out a breath. “It was nothing. You... My mother...”

“Yeah,” Shiv said. “We got some shit to talk about during the debrief. About Sullain. And... About getting an army. Because we’re going to need an army for this.”

The Gate Lord shifted. “You’re going to talk to him?”

Shiv grimaced. “Yeah. Yeah, I think I want to see what we can get. But let’s deal with the other stuff first, alright?”

“Alright,” Adam said. And then he stiffly patted Shiv on the head. “Shiv. You can let me go now.”

Chapter 119 (I) Offer [I]

I don't know how to stop the orcs. Let's start there. I have no idea.

This war has been going on for generations. Longer than my grandmother can remember. Maybe just as long as the last incursion. We're Lone Star. We fight. Our automata build their inheritors to be bombers, gunners, processors, and makers. They yearn to become walking factories on legs, or siege engines that hold sky and land. Our children are soldiers from the day they're born. We live together in packs. No one even goes to take a shit alone.

Across the world, our Artillerists and our Rangers are known and honored, and yet we are being ground down. I've looked at the demographics. It's not going to be enough for much longer.

We do not have three more generations, and the orcs have limitless numbers. They keep coming. There's always more of them. They don't stay dead.

And every summer, it gets worse. That Legendary Warlord of theirs is learning our ways. He's adopting our ways. More than stealth, they're starting up their own artillery corps. They're fighting just like us. They wear uniforms designed in mockery of ours.

And meanwhile, we die. They take our towns, and we hear the screams on the wind. It isn't just the people in the towns they kill.

I looked at the suicide statistics of first responders. I don't want to ever see that again. They're breaking us in more ways than one.

Knowing all this, I couldn't go on anymore. I needed to understand how to stop them. I needed to learn their ways. So I did the unthinkable. I reached out to their Challenger. I accepted that offer he had for me. The offer that had been there for 20 years. 20 years I ignored it. 20 long years. And finally, I agreed.

He sent me an orc to teach me their ways. To show me how to get better at killing them. And he did show me. And he did fight for me. He killed his own kind. He instructed me on orc psychology. On their nature. On their weaknesses.

And through it all, I learned that there's nothing to break there. They love this. The struggle of war. You can't torture an orc because, while he might not enjoy the pain as it's being inflicted, it's ultimately all in good fun for him. It's a novel experience. He'll remember you, and he'll come back, and he'll try to outdo you. He'll try to torture you better than you tortured him.

And they don't care about each other. They can only love someone that isn't an orc. Maybe that's our only advantage. Humanity will fight together. We're communal. Tribal. They are a group of apex predators that put up with each other because they treat our world as a shared hunting ground.

High Command is delusional. They think that if we can mass enough artillery, enough powerful Pathbearers to perform one final charge, that we can get to the other side of their gate and destroy the connection between their dimension and ours. They don't know what the Tutorial is like. They've never seen it. But I have. The orc showed me much of his memories. That place is a death pit. We're not taking it. Not as we are.

What we need is someone that is more than the orcs. That's better at brutality than they. That's more committed to violence. That's more willing to learn, adapt, become, and assimilate the ways of war than the orcs. We need someone that is practically exactly like them but isn't ruled by cruelty, isn't consumed by brutality, isn't enslaved to the cruel god that is the Challenger.

But where the fuck are we gonna find someone like that?

-Hero-Ranger Morgan Munny

Adam's pace suddenly slowed to a crawl, just as he arrived before the doors of the infirmary. Prior to this point, he had been flying fast, curving and twisting through the air with such a eulogy that Shiv couldn't keep up with him—not without throwing his knife and reorienting the direction of his Inertial Overdrive.

But it wasn't hard to figure out why the Gate Lord stopped. Uncertainty gripped Adam. Anxiety. There was a great deal of weight that he felt. Meeting a mother he'd known to be dead all his life, a mother resurrected by someone he once hated.

But though Adam's footsteps slowed, Shiv's didn't. He seized Adam by his shoulders, and he began to push him forward.

"There's no need for this," Adam snarled, shaking Shiv off. "I'm moving. Don't rush me."

"Not rushing you," Shiv said. "But you gotta put one foot in front of the other. This was never gonna be easy, but you need to talk to her. No running away now."

"Just give me time," Adam spat.

Shiv stopped walking. Adam stumbled away from him. He eyed the Deathless with an annoyed glare. But then the look softened, and the true depths of Adam's fear exposed themselves in his eyes. He resembled a child now more than ever. His gaze lingered on Shiv's as if he were looking for direction. But where Adam was hesitant, Shiv only knew one way through trauma and discomfort.

Forward.

"Listen, Adam," Shiv began. But then, instead of pressing on, he actually spent a moment longer thinking about his words. His Psychology and Philosophy Skills worked in tandem as he processed his own thoughts. What did he want to say to Adam? What was his intention right now? Was it to pressure his brother-in-arms? To get him to meet his mother immediately and see the matter done? Or was he trying to make Adam feel better? To assuage the Gate Lord's feelings and ensure that he didn't suffer any more lingering trauma? And there was bound to be trauma, especially after all that had happened. Especially after all these years lost.

I just want Adam to experience the best outcome. Whatever that is.

Adam stared at him uncertainly. "I'm not delaying," Adam said, making up a justification. "I'm just thinking about what I'm trying to say as well."

They were merely a few meters away from the door. An Umbral emerged from Rose's room, and she spotted both Shiv and Adam. But before she could say anything, Shiv held up a hand, and a strand of Uva's Psychomancy passed through her as well.

Immediately, she offered a nod and continued down the hall the other way. The rest of the rooms along the hall were empty, save for a Weaveress taking a nap with a magazine over her face. Standing in the hall were Adam, Uva, and Shiv.

Valor waited at the entrance, and Can Hu drifted there alongside him. The Penitent and the Legendary Pathbearer were talking. Both of them were looking at Shiv. He was going to have to discuss things with them afterward as well. But for now, Adam had need of him, even if the Gate Lord wasn't sure about it.

"Listen, Adam, I'm not going to force you to do anything. No one in this gate can force you to do anything," Shiv said. "I don't know what it's like for you. I won't pretend to know. But I can tell you this. You're going to have to walk through that door at some point. If you're too stressed after what we've just been through, fine. But it has to be soon. There's not a lot of time to delay."

"I know," Adam whispered.

"What are you afraid of?" Shiv asked.

"I don't know," Adam said. "My mother is back, I think. Or is she? Is she even my mother? Shiv, you pulled a woman that looks like Rose Van Erren out of your Vitae. She—I want to hope. But I'm also..." The Gate Lord looked down at the ground and bit his lip. "I'm scared. I'm afraid this will be taken from me."

"Yeah," Shiv said, nodding in agreement. "We don't know. So, if this is going to hurt you, then it's a question of now or later. When do you want to get stabbed?"

And Adam's expression turned sour. It was an ugly statement, almost too ugly, but it was the right statement. Adam turned away, and he let out a sigh. "Yes, yes, now or later, I suppose. Now. I choose now."

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"I'll be right behind you," Shiv said. "Maybe I should wait outside too. I'll be here if you need me, but I don't think I should be the person in the background when you step in." He paused, trying to think about how to put this.

"I look like my father," Shiv said, "and the last memory your mother probably had before she died was of him cutting her unborn daughter out of her. It was brutal. It was horrible." Adam looked like he was going to be sick, but Shiv had to bring it up. "I don't want to hurt her any more than you do. Not in that way. She needs you. And if you need me, I'll be outside."

And as the disgust faded from the Gate Lord's eyes, he gave Shiv a final look of gratitude, and he turned, and he shuffled toward the room. At least he shuffled at first, but soon his shuffling became proper steps, and then finally he was at the doorway. He stopped. He looked back one last time, and Shiv, true to his word, was there, with Uva beside him.

Finally, Adam gave them a nod, and he stepped in, and Shiv turned all his senses away. Adam deserved privacy. Shiv did his best not to peek, to ignore how Adam was standing past the doorway, just staring at his mother as she lay in bed.

And suddenly, Shiv felt the touch of a soft pair of lips grace the side of his right cheek. He looked to the side, and he saw Uva hovering just below him, pressed up against him upon her board. The basilisk venom was still active in his body. He was standing at three and a half meters in height, and he felt more like a small house than a person at this point.

When he spiked his gravity field earlier, he tore a massive chasm in the earth behind him. The basilisk venom was like a steroid of steroids for his Plaguefueled skill.

Yeah, Shiv thought to himself as he mentally chuckled, basilisk venom is going to be the next thing I'm going to figure out how to create using my Biomancy. It'll work great on my enemies if I want to incapacitate them, but more importantly...

He clenched his fists and enjoyed the rush of power, of unfettered strength rushing through him. He was stronger, faster, larger, and more durable than ever.

The only downside right now was that it took Uva's Psychomancy to hold the worst of his drunkenness at bay. That was another thing he needed to improve on if he was going to use the basilisk venom: self-control. This wasn't like drinking five cans of beer. This was like hammering down half a dozen bottles of liquor in a row.

He had only done that once, with Georges, on the eve of his 16th birthday. He'd insinuated that, due to his increase in height and muscle mass, he would drink the head chef under the table. It was meant as a jest. A Pathbearer was always more resistant than a Pathless, be it to poison or physical harm. But Georges had a funny way of treating jokes, especially jokes that annoyed him. And Shiv, meanwhile, had a problem with backing down from challenges.

The consequences were disastrous. But it did get amusing when Shiv perfectly peeled his potatoes the next day anyway, despite suffering from the mother of all hangovers. Some of his hand flesh went in with those potatoes, though, so Georges got to scream at him anyway.

It's a good day when everyone wins.

"That was very viciously sweet of you," Uva commented.

He grunted as he looked at the door. "Yeah," Shiv said, "I'm just... I don't know. I feel responsible. I don't feel bad, or like I'm wrong, or like I did anything bad, but I feel responsible for what happened to him. What happened to both of them?" He looked down, and he shook his head.

Scenes played in his mind. Horrible scenes of his father bringing a blade down on an infant girl who wasn't ready to be born, and then on his own wife... His own pregnant wife, who had Shiv inside her.

Uva shuddered slightly as she glimpsed the memories. "What kind of demented ritual was that?"

"I don't know," Shiv said, "but after seeing it..." He hesitated. "I still got a problem with Roland. But imagining someone doing something like that to you or Adam? I..." Shiv's hand shook slightly. What would he do? "I'm afraid of what I might do. Roland was too kind to kill a child and too hateful to just let me go. I might've been more hateful than kind."

As Shiv departed the infirmary, he called out to Valor and Can Hu, getting their attention. "Valor," Shiv said. "Thanks for earlier. I didn't know how I was going to do that shit without your help. No idea where to start at all."

Valor nodded in response. "You did fine. Your inexperience was a barrier, but you did well to call me. And you did well thereafter. You as well, Uva."

She immediately adopted a posture as if she were standing in salute for a superior officer.

"Will Adam be well?" Can Hu asked, a note of reverberating concern in its voice. "I have seen humans reunite with those they thought long lost. I must admit that the circumstances that exist in my data banks are not nearly..." Can Hu paused as he looked at Shiv, "...as novel as what resulted from you, Pathbearer."

"Yeah, that's becoming a running theme with me by this point," Shiv said. His arms were folded, he shrugged, but he was considering the implications of Rose's resurrection. Was it truly Rose? Was it just a copy of her, or was this something that Udraal had planned all along? Maybe Udraal was the only one that knew. Nonetheless, he would let Adam have his moment first. All the questionable and miserable business could wait.

"But then, we still must talk of your new skill," Valor said, sounding uncertain. "This skill, this merged ability of yours, Shiv. You understand it?"

"Yeah," Shiv replied. "It's kind of like becoming your own magic in a weird way." He summoned a little bit of Vitae to his palm, and as the swirling mass of red and white shivered, he drew it back inside of himself before he lost too much vitality. "Still don't know what this really does," Shiv began. "It reaches out for me. It's like a solid."

"A solid?" Valor asked. "You can touch things with it?"

"Yeah, I spiked Adam in the chest earlier. I put a hole through a basilisk. It's about as hard as I am, moves as fast as I can, and I can direct it using my gravitic field. But inside me," Shiv patted his chest, "there's an active field—a mana field—that keeps it stable, keeps it from leaking out. Even after I die now, it's like a stasis zone for vitality."

"And your Revenant form before, what was the difference?"

Shiv considered that. "Before, I was just like a faint outline of myself. I couldn't really move because I didn't have mass. My bound equipment still followed me. I could strike people with that. But aside from my equipment and my magic, I didn't really have any way of affecting someone. When I resurrected, a layer of shadows would form over me and, well, it would hatch and I'd be back. Now, the red just stitches me back together. Well, it fills up, and then I surface from it. All this weird metaphysical shit's giving me a headache."

"This is good," Valor said. "This is useful information. Was your shadowy cocoon before as large as your field now?"

Shiv considered that. "Yeah, just about."

"Then I suspect it was simply the immature form of your current metamorphosis. A frame being built before the evolution, so to speak. And right now, you have ripened the skill. It has become something active, something properly mature."

"That's not the only thing," Shiv said. He remembered his conversation with the Vicar. Especially the part that had to do with Udraal Thann. "Valor. I had an encounter with Sullain. We exchanged words while time was frozen—Alright, maybe exchanging words wasn't all of it. He talked to me real nicely at first after he set me on fire with his Necromantic sun. And then he started trying to hash my name, trying to figure things out for me. He was pretty pissed off when I revealed what Havel was trying to pull on him. So maybe we have an opening there."

"Good," Valor said. "The more at odds our enemies are, the better."

"But, uh, he has some of my Vitae. He literally pulled it out of me when I exploded. After I went off, he caught it somehow. Just like he managed to capture some of Roland's arrows. Arrows that removed me from existence in a second. He's godsdamn powerful. I felt like an insect next to him. What kind of Magical Skills does he even have?"

Valor paused as he strained himself, trying to remember something. "His ability to control magic was... Omnimancy," Valor suddenly said. The flames in his eyes flickered. "The control of all magics."

Chapter 119 (II) Offer [I]

"All magics?" Shiv gawked in disbelief. "You mean he has every single Magical Skill fused together into one?"

"It's hard to remember, but... I believe so," Valor replied. The Legendary Pathbearer sounded uncertain, but worried nonetheless. "This is not good, Shiv. I cannot even conceive what he might be able to do with your Vitae."

"Yeah, what's worse is that he mentioned Udrael by name. He wanted to return me to him, like I'm some kind of lost dog."

And that made Valor look away. A noise of discomfort escaped from him as he looked up at the Mana Core. His gaze, however, clearly ran further into his own past rather than the light of the present. "Udrael," Valor whispered, "what have you been doing?"

"Yeah, I need to know the answer to that question too," Shiv said. "When we meet your son, Valor, I'll have a lot of things to ask him, and I might not ask him so nicely."

Valor slowly turned and regarded Shiv. "Shiv, I pray that you do not meet my son. Not now, not ever."

A growl almost escaped Shiv, but he controlled himself. He took a deep breath. "Valor, I know he's your son—"

"No, you misunderstand, Shiv," Valor interrupted. "This is not me expressing protectiveness or fatherly love, though I do care for him still. But no, this is me expressing concern for you. My son isn't just a Unique and Legendary Pathbearer. He is one of the few people I fear in all of Integration. Let that statement stand for itself."

Shiv nodded, accepting Valor's statement, but not bending before it. Valor knew his son, Shiv didn't, and more importantly, this was going to be an unavoidable issue. "I don't think we can avoid this. With how much his name has come up, this meeting is bound to happen sooner or later."

"It best be later," Valor said, with more than a little weight behind his words. "You—we—are not ready."

"Well, I wasn't ready for Sullain either," Shiv said, getting a bit frustrated with the direction this conversation was taking. "And I had to deal with him anyway. It's not up to me. The System is intent on throwing me against people who can contend with gods. Shit, it's thrown a forgotten god at me already, and she didn't feel as powerful as Sullain." Shiv let out a stressful breath.

Valor wasn't looking away from him. At that moment, Shiv realized Valor was suffering too. Suffering from a similar problem as Adam. Where Adam was worried, terrified that something would happen and take his returned mother from him, Valor didn't want to face his son at all. He still cared for him, apparently. But there was terror in that as well. Not the kind of terror one would have for a monster, Shiv knew. But one that you would have for someone who had wounded you too deeply.

Fuck me, everyone's a mess in their own way, Shiv thought. He'd heard that statement from Georges once. He didn't ask the Chef why that was. Georges had his own past, and to Shiv, it never felt right to pry. Might be the same business with Valor.

But in Udrael's case, it was a necessary preparation for an inevitable conflict. And it is going to be a conflict, Shiv told himself. It was looking more and more like his parents went to Udrael to see the ritual done. Or Udrael influenced it somehow, maybe even caused it. Whatever the case, he needed to find out. And on his own terms, not Udrael's or anyone else's.

"Shiv," Valor said once more, "you need to... No, we need to understand your new capabilities. Much is at stake now. With the Vicar possessing some of your Vitae, he may soon discover another weapon he could use against Blackedge. He may no longer have the Animancy Core, but he remains a Legend of theoretical and practical magic. We must comprehend the limits and functions of your new skill before he does."

"And we're also gonna need an army," Shiv said. "There were a ton of Necros. And it wasn't just a few stragglers. Their operation makes Confriga's look like a joke. They had riders that controlled time dragons, Valor. They deployed in seconds after they detected me, and they kept finding me. I managed to make it all the way to Blackedge, but every damn step was a fight. Always one mistake from dying. And then I ended up getting lit up at the end anyway."

Shiv grimaced as he also recalled being pinned in place by Sullain. The Vicar's powers of magic were beyond description. He had control over Chronomancy, Biomancy, Pyromancy, and countless more. And they were all practically the same discipline to him. If what Valor said was true, if he truly was an Omnimancer, then, well, how the hell were they supposed to even figure out how to kill Sullain?

"Not alone," Uva said.

Shiv grunted. "Well, we're gonna need to deal with the Vicar. We're gonna need to figure out my Vitae. We're gonna need to find an army to deal with his. And more likely than not, we're going to need to find a way to help all the people at Blackedge escape their current encirclement. But doing all that is gonna take... I don't even know what it's gonna take. But it's a lot. And I have no idea where to begin."

Valor paused and slowly looked at Can Hu. "Shiv, for your Vitae, I think we have a prime candidate to test your new skill on."

Slowly, Can Hu turned to regard Valor, joints screeching. Its eyes flashed, mimicking a blink. "Are you sure this is wise, Legend Valor?"

"I think there is nothing wiser, my friend," Valor said. "You have sustained severe damage to your soul. Your skills are shattered, and your very being is sundered to its foundations. Shiv shed Necromancy damage. Even that shouldn't be possible, and with his changed nature and his Vitae, he might be capable of more than just the impossible. He reached into Rose and cycled the damage from her into himself. That is beyond Animancy in some ways. More direct. Let us see what he can do for you."

Shiv looked between Can Hu and Valor as a heavy weight settled on him. "So what, I'm going to be able to fix Can Hu?"

"I wouldn't be absolutely certain about that," Valor said, tempering everyone's expectations. "But I wouldn't say otherwise, either. We must discover your limits first."

Shiv rolled his neck and looked at the Penitent. "Alright, then, why don't we start now? I'm ready."

Can Hu slowly looked toward Valor, and the green in his optics shrank. "I... I am willing to try anything."

"Was about to say the same thing," Shiv said. And immediately, he channeled a stream of red and white into the Penitent. Its vitality was brutally damaged. Even before Shiv truly suffused his Vitae into Can Hu, he could feel the many gaps and pieces of its soul that were outright missing. It was like there were sections of the Penitent that had been torn away by jagged claws. Not destroyed, not disfigured, removed entirely.

Shiv had no idea how Can Hu was still holding together. To fully conceptualize the unnatural state of Can Hu's vitality, Shiv had to think of a pond. A pond that had sections of absence where water simply didn't exist. But the moment Shiv pressed against the holes in the pond, he found his Vitae sinking into the absence, filling them at an alarming rate and flooding the nothing with his white and red.

Shiv's vitality plunged. He groaned, and Can Hu brightened with new life.

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The Penitent shook and shuddered, but rather than its body sounding like screaming metal every time it moved, there came a stable mechanical whirr for once, and Can Hu moved like its body was lubricated. There was no resistance as it took a few steps back.

But then Shiv's vitality began to run dry, and the space within Can Hu grew ever more unstable. Parts of the Penitent filled with vitality. As it did, Shiv could feel shapes at the center. Broken shapes. The Vitae itself wasn't enough. Shiv didn't really know what he was doing with the shapes, and so the moment he stopped focusing, his Vitae was ejected from the cracked remnants of what he assumed to be Can Hu's skills.

Shiv was about to keep trying, but a rush of lethargy took him. His Vitae receded back into his body as he tried not to collapse. Chills shot through his every sinew. "I felt something," Shiv gasped as Uva held him up using her shield. "I managed to reach in and touch some of what was broken. I just—I don't know how to put it back together."

Can Hu felt at itself. It said nothing for a moment, but Shiv could practically taste the Penitent's astonishment. Valor, likewise, seemed positively ecstatic. He drifted beside Shiv, examining him up and down, while casting glimpses at Can Hu as well. "No, no, this is a great outcome. This is more than great. This is fantastic. Do not be discouraged. This is exactly the outcome we want," Valor said. "I assumed it wouldn't be easy. Even if I had Animancy, it wouldn't be possible. You couldn't put something so complicated back together. But the fact that you reached in, that you managed to interface with it, that you managed to touch it... What you have here is... I do not fully understand, but it can function analogously to Animancy. But Animancy is not something I could wield like a solid object. Like a surgeon's tools."

Valor looked down at his hands, and a crackle of Necromancy pulsed there. "Animancy is the shape of the soul itself. You can modify it. It is not controlled by vitality, it is not interwoven with vitality, it is not a living thing. You can manipulate the conditions of one's soul. You can influence the development of a skill on higher levels and deeper understandings. You can even inflict indelible harm on one's existence. But what you are doing here... It seems that you are inflicting some of your own existence on someone else, restructuring and resurrecting or—"

"Valor," Can Hu cut in. "The skill doesn't say that it's broken anymore."

Valor went entirely still.

Shiv's eyes widened. "I fixed it?"

"No," Can Hu replied. "It says damaged."

"Damaged," Shiv echoed. "That's better than being broken, right?"

"This is incredible," Valor breathed. "This is..." And then Valor regarded Shiv, and his eyes flickered. "No. No. I think I understand now. This is... You are an incubator for souls and resurrections. My son has... You have made to return not only broken lives, but broken skills as well. Broken souls." The Legendary Pathbearer shook off his stupor. "I need that shard of myself more than ever. The part of myself that allows me to use Animancy. I cannot guide you properly without it. I cannot truly give you a mirror to work off of if I do not have the skill myself. But until then, until then, I can guide you on your discovery. And you need to continue treating Can Hu. Continue doing what you did just now."

"I'll get back to it the moment I recover," Shiv said. "I could just go out and drain some unlucky critters in the Umbral Wilderness, then come back again."

"Yes, yes," Valor said, "do that, do that as fast as possible. See if you can fill every single one of its soul wounds. It's like a transplantation. You're a universal soul donor, a perfect soul donor."

Valor shuddered, and his gaze turned distant again. "Udraal, how did you achieve this?"

Shiv let out a grunt and slowly began to trudge towards the Abyssal Gateway again.

"You're going already?" Uva asked.

"Yeah," Shiv said, "no time like the present, right?" She looked at Valor and Can Hu before she followed Shiv.

"It won't be long," Shiv said. "I'm just going to find..."

"I'll go with you," Uva said. "I think there are some other tests we can run on proper enemies."

"Proper enemies," Shiv said, his curiosity piqued.

"Vampires," she said very simply. "The First Blood will attack us at some point. I wish for that point to be delayed for as long as possible. And there are few who deserve whatever foulness might be inflicted by your new skill."

"Uva. That's kind of dark, but I also find it weirdly hot."

Uva smirked with pride.

And just then, another notification popped up before Shiv. But this one was accompanied by a powerful pulse of weight.

The Challenger demands that you make a decision.

"Godsdamn it, can't you wait?" Shiv snarled.

"What?" Uva asked.

"The Challenger, he keeps wanting me to talk to him. He's really trying to push this offer on me."

Uva narrowed her eyes. "Have you decided?"

"I don't even know what the offer is," Shiv snapped. "What about you? How's the Dreamtaker? She pushing anything on you?"

Uva was hesitant for a moment. "Not nearly as aggressively as your Challenger."

"He's not my Challenger," Shiv growled. "He's just... an asshole god I'm gonna have to deal with. And probably eventually have to kick the ass of." Shiv sighed. "Now, if I can figure out how to kill Vicar Sullain first, then maybe I can move on to imagining how I can kill an actual god."

"Then, before we leave, I think you should at least talk to him."

Shiv paused. "What?"

"We will need to know what he offers sooner or later anyway," Uva said. "You do not need to accept. You just need to learn. When we debrief, it's best that we do so with all the information possible. So. I will talk to my personal problem, and you go talk to your Challenger."

"Stop calling him my Challenger."

Uva pressed her lips together. "Considering he is willing to offer some of his forces to us? I suspect that makes him very much your Challenger right now. I have not heard of many gods offering the boon of an army, and we are sorely in need of allies."

"Godsdammit," Shiv breathed. "Fine. Hey, Challenger. Asshole. I got a moment. Let's—"

Shiv vanished from the gate.

Chapter 120 (I) Offer [II]

Strife had always been here. Before I was, Strife waited for me, the ultimate discipline awaiting its ultimate disciple.

You look upon me like I'm some unfathomable entity, some icon of cruelty, an avatar of brutality and bloodshed. That is an incorrect assumption. It is also an act of cognitive self-defense on your part, because you do not wish to conceptualize a world in which you are anything like me, because I have hurt you so, so deeply.

I will not deny this. I will not proclaim my glory in cruelty, or to relish in the wounds I have delivered upon you. These are not the things that give me satisfaction. Perhaps it gives some of my children satisfaction, but they are young in time, and some day they will fully understand that there are waters sweeter than the tears of their adversaries. But that is something that must be acquired through strife, through experience.

And before I was a god, I was merely a creation. Oh yes, oh yes. Do not look at me, so, Ranger. Close your jaw. Come now. Do you think I would have just emerged in the void? Do you think I would have reached such cruel and brutal perfection as a natural entity? No, I would have been more like you. I would have been imperfect and raw in so many ways because evolution is not a sculptor, but a blind man with a knife making cuts to a species just so it can stumble down the path of its continuation.

There was no stumbling with me from the very first day I was created. My makers wanted one thing of me: to hurt, to bleed, to inflict trauma, and when they made me, they gave all they could to ensure I was the perfect instrument toward strife in body and mind and soul.

But they performed too well. They were too good at sculpting, and when they let their hateful breath flow into my body, I grew aware, I learned, and then I went beyond them. I gripped godhood not for them, but for myself..

They were so heartbroken when I killed them, when I took their children and their bearers from them, how could they have been so blind? Turn to me, Ranger, and look upon me. I didn't kill them because it was cruel, though that was part of it, and that event had a hand in making me relish in my dominance.

No, I did it because there was something to be learned there, a lesson for both my creators and myself. They foolishly thought cruelty and bloodshed to be their ally, and I to be their perfect weapon, their perfect slave.

Cruelty, bloodshed, pain? These are just things, Ranger. Strife is just a thing. It happens because we are, and that is the way it is. That way, and not some other way.

Now offer your hand to me. I have such sights to show you.

-The Challenger to Hero-Ranger Morgan Munny

For Shiv, the transition was instantaneous. One moment, he was in the gate, the next he was lying somewhere underground, packed tight within a mass of corpses. Writhing maggots and the feeling of festering flesh assailed him, and he found himself staring at the face of a dead elf. Her face was crushed and mangled on the right, but more intact on the left. Her pale, green left eye stared on through him, her mouth hanging open in eternal horror.

For a beat, Shiv just stared. Then the stench hit him, dear gods, the stench. It was like pure, distilled death. It crawled up his nostrils, and it nearly made him empty his stomach right then and there. With a flex of his gravitic field, a blast of force detonated off his body. The head that stared at him disintegrated, as did all the other corpses that were stacked over his person. A pocket opened around him. A pocket that misted with blood and decay. Spraying viscera and rotting patches of flesh rained down from above.

As he gathered his bearings, his heart spiked. Shiv spun on his heels, prepared for any adversary, any kind of fight. But as he did, he took in more of his surroundings, and his face contorted in a look of disgust.

"Yeah," Shiv muttered to himself, "of course you'd take me to a place like this."

He was in a cave. Its space was narrow and claustrophobic, but it wasn't a cave made of stone and lined with soil on the ground. There were faces sticking out of the tunnel of flesh, stitched together and properly cured. Arms dangled down from the ceiling, and some of them had lanterns threaded through the decaying flesh. All around him were expressions of horror frozen in that final death rictus of their lives.

"Follow the light."

The Challenger's voice made the entire cavern shake, and Shiv heeded the god's words. He stared down along the path laid out by the lanterns, and they cast a trail that led toward a narrow crevice. The dancing radiance of candles slipped along the cleft of said crevice, and Shiv expected another area entirely to be waiting for him on the other side.

But though Shiv heard the orc's words, he didn't accept them. He had no intention of staying here or going along in this nightmarish hellpit, so he simply accelerated through a wall of bodies and kept going. As soon as he blasted through a section of the corpse-forged cave, the Challenger laughed, sounding like a grandfather beholding the antics of a small child.

Blood and ruined flesh peeled around Shiv, and he hit a brief stretch of open air before slamming into a hard surface. A sound of bending metal sang out to him, and Shiv felt himself dent what was a surface of reinforced titanium. The alloy beneath him caved some more until he finally pulled himself to a stop, pulsing his field a few more times to stabilize himself in the air.

As he looked down at what he'd just hit, he realized it was the ruined chassis of an automaton. Its body was twice the size of Shiv's, even in his current venom-enhanced form, but it was long dead and had a

large hole on the side of its abdomen. A single cyclopean optic stared at Shiv. The reflections from nearby lights made it glisten with momentary brightness before that faded as well.

Behind Shiv, the small mound of bodies he'd emerged from collapsed.

Tearing his focus away from the automaton, he finally noticed that wind was flowing around him. The air was foul and thick with the smell of iron and rot, and as he let his gaze wander across the world, he found himself in a hellscape no better than the pit of death.

The sky was a dark, uncanny thing, overhung by an uninterrupted carpet of clouds that rolled across the horizon like spilled paint the colors of rust and burned corpses.

The landscape was nothing but a rolling expanse of bodies, of broken chassis, of smoldering ruins, and of tarnished treasures. Shiv blinked as he tried to process just where exactly he was. The place was the very embodiment of an apocalypse. There was no life he could see for leagues around, and only the faintest shimmer of vitality layered itself upon this place, an even fainter shimmer than that which painted Integrated Earth.

Bodies ran from horizon to horizon, and Shiv finally realized that he had seen this place once before, in a vision of the Pathbearer he despised the most.

As he remembered the sight of 811 being reborn, he saw that the corpses on the surface were also particularly wounded in a different way than the ones in the cave. Their torsos had been torn open from the inside.

Like something had hatched from them.

Immediately, Shiv turned his Biomancy on himself. He checked his organs. He made sure there was nothing in there with him, and only then did he relax slightly. Shiv wouldn't put it beyond the Challenger to implant a parasite in his body and call that good entertainment as it hatched.

"Good paranoia," the Challenger noted. "I will have to think of that for next time. A novel challenge for a competent Biomancer. But a competent Biomancer you are not, dear Bruiser. Not quite yet."

"Never call me yours again," Shiv spat. "It's only funny when Uva does it, it's creepy when you say it."

"Oh," the Challenger said, voice high with provocation. "And what will you do if I do proclaim ownership over you, if I do keep referring to you as mine?"

"I suppose I can blow out my ears and then tell you to go fuck yourself."

"You would commit self-harm, just for me?"

"No, asshole. I'd commit self-harm for myself. I just don't want to hear your flapping lips. And knock off the weird possessive shit. I know you're listening in to my conversations and watching me live. Get your own joke."

A very human-like snort came from the Challenger, but he hummed. "I suppose that is an acceptable request. Very well. To business, then."

Just then, there came a flash right above, and the deafening echo of a thunderclap thereafter. The sky rumbled, and through clouds of pitch blackness, stained red with misted blood, fell a deluge of shapes. The shapes were humanoid and robotic, but there were also broken ruins of once-great structures, of shattered weapons from different ages and places Shiv had never known.

But to Shiv's astonishment, some of the bodies were still moving, still glowing with vitality. And as they fell from the sky, plunging fast, they splashed into the rolling mounds of death and decay, as if raindrops feeding an ocean. Some of them came apart upon impact, turning into bursts of spraying gore.

But Shiv's Vitae highlighted the survivors. They still burned bright, like lingering patches of flame among cooling embers. Their voices sang out then, and Shiv heard the madness in their throats, the growls of bloodthirst, the shouts of a ravenous frenzy. Some of them struck at each other with spell and blade, even on the way down, attacking anything that was near them, unleashing waves of destruction upon the ruined world.

One of the falling shapes landed nearby. It was the body of an automaton. One of its three arms was broken, barely hanging on by wires, and its face was lined with cracked, pulsing optics.

Shiv drew back on his gravitic field, and he slowly glided away from the writhing automaton. The damaged bot reached out for him, lashing out with its remaining limbs. But its movements were too uncontrolled. It flung itself over and landed on its chest. And then Shiv sensed a lifeform within the automaton's body. A life form slamming itself against the inner machinery of the bot as it tried to escape.

The automaton's metal chassis dented outward, bending unnaturally and violently. And then it stopped. The automaton went still beside the shaking of its body. Sparks burst out from between its joints. But as its life sputtered out, something slammed itself against the insides of the bot again and again.

The dents grew larger, more severe, until finally, the metal comprising the automaton tore open, and large, gray fingers reached out from the inside. There came a deafening bellow, a roar of effort as a large creature hatched free from the automaton.

Its gray-skinned body was unblemished, smooth like that of a child, but its face was that of a cruel purpose, full of wonder and awe at the pain it knew it could inflict.

Its eyes were bright yellow, and as its head rose free from the broken automaton's body, its gaze fell upon Shiv. The orc's face twitched for a moment, as if it wasn't sure how to control its muscles, but slowly, a wide, genial smile spread across its features. As the orc's jowls tightened and his lips flared, Shiv could see all the pointed teeth gleaming inside the gray brute's mouth. The orc was smaller than the others, fresher, less marred, but it was an orc still, and it was an orc in every single way.

Another rumble came from above. More bodies fell and struck the ground. Countless flickering beacons of vitality blinked out upon impact, but some endured. Some endured until they winked out too moments later, replaced by other flames emerging from within them.

More orcs rose across the horizon. They ripped free from the bodies and ruins, death serving as the cocoon to their metamorphosis. And they let out bellows, cries, bestial shouts, announcing their birth from the ruined husks of people that were.

"Behold," the Challenger proclaimed. "Behold, the fate that would have befallen you, had you let my skill consume you entirely of mind and soul. I would have claimed you upon your final end. For you would have been mine to claim, touched of my essence and power."

Shiv grimaced as he flew across the sky, dodging falling corpses and debris. "This is what would have happened to me if I didn't fuse Culinary Berserker?"

“It is only proper,” the Challenger said. “To take on a skill of my design, an Orcish Skill meant to honor your willingness to battle and break while testing your fortitude of spirit, is a challenge, after all. Should you fail, the process of losing your very being to me, like these poor victims, is but preliminary.”

“Yeah, it sounds to me you’re just spitting bullshit to justify all of this.”

“Hm. No. There is no justification required. They failed to defy me like you did. So I colonized their very existences. I do nothing greater or lesser than what the natural inclinations of nation-states and dimensions lead them to do. To prey upon others is our writ of existence, and to be preyed upon is our eulogy of demise.”

“And what fancy words are you going to use to explain just shoving me in a pit filled with corpses?”

“Amusement.”

“Fuck you.”

A loud chuckle came from the Challenger, and though unseen, the orc god’s breath was felt like a hurricane brushing across the world. The small orc near Shiv launched himself into the air, reaching for the Deathless, teeth bared to sample the large human’s flesh. But the winds unleashed by the Challenger grasped the newborn orc and flung him far into the distance. The sudden spike in acceleration snapped the orc’s arms and legs. Yet, rather than screaming out in pain, he laughed.

In the orc's wide, yellow eyes, Shiv saw the beast's unparalleled pleasure in simply being alive, and an insatiable urge to strive and slay.

As Shiv watched the orc get carried away, the Challenger continued his speech. "All who are swallowed of soul by my Orcish Skills are bound to me, and their souls are given unto me as their mortal bodies die, as an incubator of metamorphosis, an anvil for my warrior breed to be forged."

"So your orcs are just, what, parasites?" Shiv asked.

"Parasites?" the Challenger echoed, sounding almost offended. "No more than you are for growing strong from your struggles. And no more than you would have been, had you walked the Path offered to you by your father."

"My father didn't offer me a Path," Shiv said, clenching his teeth in confusion. He balled his fists as he looked up into the sky. "My father was a sick, twisted felling shit who murdered—"

"Oh, listen and think, boy," the Challenger interrupted, sounding frustrated for the first time. "Your reactive anger makes you stupid. I speak not of the man who sprayed his seed in your birther. I speak of the chef."

"Georges?" Shiv blinked. The anger in him broke, replaced by discomfort. "He... he isn't my father."

"Is he not? Did he not ensure you had a place to eat? To sleep? To work?"

“I... Yeah, but—”

“Did he not teach you many things that allowed you to survive? Risk himself by taking you in? Shape your personality by the heat of the stove and the edge of the knife?”

Shiv was silent by this point.

“He is your father in most regards. And you would have borne something of his if you had taken the Path of the Chef. A pity. I almost wish to know what you might be like if you devoted yourself entirely to this passion. But in all honesty, in that world, I would hold little interest in you, Deathless.”

Shiv frowned at the shrinking form of the newborn orc, then shook his head to clear his wandering thoughts. “So. Your orcs hatch from these consumed Pathbearers... and they have the Pathbearer’s Paths?”

“Correct. You have little understanding of a soul’s shape, and so you have little understanding of how difficult it is to ensure one has an oriented fate, so to speak, that their existences are structured toward a specific set of experiences, to embody a very particular kind of legend. After all, it is not so easy for a Slave to be a great warrior, or for a Chef to be a Master-Tier Mage.”

Shiv was getting tired of the Challenger’s constant prattling. “Right. Cool. Great. Glad you like to talk. Now, how about you tell me what this offer is so you can send me back before I see if I can tear a hole open in your realm with my Vitaemancy. I put a few holes in reality earlier. Didn’t like doing that back on Earth, but right here, right now, I don’t think I much give a shit.” Shiv let his Vitae streams swirl around his body for a moment, but the Challenger remained unimpressed.

"Your patience needs work," the Challenger said casually. "It is not a good thing to rush through your struggles. You lose the nutrition that way. Chefs are supposed to care about nutrition, no?"

"Wouldn't call any of this shit nutritional," Shiv replied.

"Oh, but it is. This is your great limitation right now. And I cannot entirely fault you for it, because the System seems intent on rushing you, on forcing you to be raw and undercooked." The Challenger picked his words carefully, and slowly Shiv stopped clenching his fists. Shiv knew the orc god was using some kind of Social Skill on him, but it didn't feel overly invasive. It just made Shiv want to listen.

"But despite the System's ways, despite its constant urge to see you finished, or to spur you to greater heights of conflict, you must be your own master. You must snatch from the System, and from life, every opportunity you can to sample new experiences, to take in new knowledge. And furthermore, there is no need for threats. You are not afraid of me, because that is what you are, a vicious creature, a warrior down to the bone, a bruiser. You will swing your fist at me, even if there is no hope for victory, no chance of prevailing greater than that of reaching up with your fingers and plucking a star from the night sky. And you will do so again and again, and I will batter you again and again, until, perhaps in your mind, you imagine your skills will finally outstrip my capacity, that you will grow strong enough to challenge a true god."

"I will," Shiv said. There wasn't any doubt in his voice at all. Someday... Someday, he was going to have it out with the Challenger. Someday, he was going to know how to kill a god.

And maybe I can do it with my Vitae. Pull him apart at the foundations and render him nothing at all...

"Someday, perhaps," the Challenger mused, "but not today. Today is a day when I make a few things clear to you, so that you understand what I can provide. But before that, I wish for you to have

understanding. Not of me, but of yourself. It is improper to treat everything as a struggle and a fight, after all."

The Challenger's last words were so unexpected that they gave Shiv whiplash. "Excuse me? Did you really just say that? Did I hear you right?"

"I am a god of strife and bloodshed," the Challenger proclaimed. "I am not a caricature of strife and bloodshed. I know very well what happens when one is utterly consumed, when one is dominated by the concepts that they interface with so much. You can see them now."

And Shiv did see them.

He saw the maddened Pathbearers writhing on the ground, their limbs madly clawing out, their skills blasting chunks out of the land—chunks made of corpses of other fallen Pathbearers.

Chapter 120 (II) Offer [II]

"That fate that which they experience is what it means to be a caricature, to be so utterly swallowed by what you do, by what you experience, that you cease to be who you are. That is not dominance. That is not mantling yourself above strife. And there is a reason why you are here, and there is a reason why I rule, and there is a reason why the orcs thrive and flourish in any dimension, in all worlds across the Integration. Because we are the ones that seek to rule over strife, that seek excellence in conflict, and the most exotic flavors in our cruelty. But bloodshed and battle cannot lead us like dogs on a leash. Not the finest of us. Not if we wish to truly be the ultimate practitioners. That requires thought, Shiv. Think. The mind and the body must be of an alloy."

And immediately Shiv thought back to the adamantite-armored orc. "There are some orcs that might need this speech from you."

"Indeed," the Challenger said, not offended at all. "But not the finest of us. It is an addiction that assails many of my kind. I must compliment you there. You saw, you exploited, and you finished the fight. The same could not be said for him, and now he will have to live with the shame of being so casually bested, of thinking himself an equal to you when he failed to even master his own mind."

"So what's the point of this speech?" Shiv asked. There was less heat in his voice now. "Some kind of pep talk about self-discipline or self-awareness?"

"It is not a pep talk, it is not a speech, it is not any of those things. It is simply a statement that we should always be more, so that we can best grasp our desires and reach the highest peaks of legend. Sometimes the finest thing you can do for your own cultivation of violence is to simply be peaceful, to observe, and to exist among your adversaries. Some monotony is good for the mind; it is balancing."

Shiv simply grunted. Despite his reluctance, he contemplated the Challenger's words and suspected there was more than a little merit to them.

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"Tell me about your offer. I'm here. I'm willing to listen, but I'm not going to make any promises."

"As it should be," the Challenger declared. "Nothing is promised in this world. Nothing, unless you can take it or you can force it. In all of Integration, bloodshed and change remain the only constants. Bloodshed, change, and us. You have done a wise thing, accepting this dialogue. You will find few warriors as fine as an orc, but also few harder to manage. If you cannot command an orc's fascination and rule them through your tyranny, your strength, then they will indulge in their own desires. And you must also avoid their daggers in the dark, their teeth when the night falls. I do not promise a tamed

army, nor do I promise obedient dogs. I give you killers, killers to the bone, and they will turn on you the moment they can, if you allow them to."

Shiv couldn't help but laugh at that. "If this is your pitch, it's a pretty shit one."

"It is honesty, and it is not a pitch. You can refuse me,"

the Challenger said. "I will bear no offense if you do, for there is none to bear. In better circumstances, and for most people, they would choose a human army, an automata army, an elven army, an army of beings that are alike to you in cognition and behavior. Perhaps even a Fae army, despite their whims and unpredictability. The only ones people fear and worry more than us are those who have touched your Psychomancer."

"But you think I'm different," Shiv said. "That I can manage an orc army? Is that your sales pitch? 'It's hard as hell, but you can do it, Shiv? If you're not a pussy?'"

"I don't think you're different due to your nature. You are different because you stand here, speaking to me, where so many of your kind would gawk and reel in horror. Look at you. Already, you don't notice the smell. Already, you've accepted that this place is one of death. And now you speak to me, you ignore my rules, and you demand that I tell you what I have."

Rather than responding, Shiv just nodded at the sky.

"Gods would smite mortals for doing such a thing, but you don't care, do you? In fact, if I did smite you, you might feel some satisfaction from provoking me, and you would look forward to returning somehow, to sapping vitality from this world and ripping it asunder with your Unique Skill... However it works. And that makes you a perfect ruler for some of my orcs—because you can give them a reason to fear, and a thrill above all others."

"Yeah? And what kind of thrill is that?"

"True death. As true a death as an orc can experience, anyway."

"What are you talking about?" Shiv asked.

"Calm down, Bruiser. Think. Think. I've been telling you to think for a reason."

Shiv wanted to spit some other acerbic remark at the Challenger, but he thought instead. He considered why the Challenger said what he'd just said, and he considered his Vitaemancy as well. He'd reached into Can Hu. He'd filled in the parts that were absent. He'd managed to change a skill from its broken state to merely being damaged.

And then he considered how his Vitae detonated when he speared it through the basilisk. Once more, Shiv summoned a swirl of Vitae upon his palm and stared at it. Within that mess of flowing red and white currents was his Unique Magical Skill. A Magical Skill that allowed him unfettered access to another's soul and vitality, but also let him grasp their bodies as well. Right? Unfettered access.... If I focused on someone's soul, could I just... rip it apart? Could I damage someone's skills? Or ruin their very existence?

Then he considered how he simply drank things out of existence. Trees. Animals. They faded into the Vitae like they never existed at all. Combining that with how his Outside Context Problem worked, Shiv realized what the Challenger was trying to say.

"I am capable of more than just killing an orc," Shiv said. "You mean I can truly break them? Destroy their souls?"

"You very well might be," the Challenger said. "But that will not stop an orc from being what they are. You may teach them fear, but fear will not stop them. Their instincts run too deep. They will seek cruelty unless they can master themselves, unless they can practice that protracted monotony of peace. And some will learn if you do deliver true deaths upon them. Some will learn to wait. To watch. To obey. Or perhaps it will all devolve into chaos, and you will fail. But before the end, whatever end, I am certain you will discover just how much harm you can cause with that new Magical Skill of yours."

"You have no problem with this?" Shiv asked. "No problem with me ripping one of your... kids asunder? Killing them for good?"

"Why should I? If you are capable of it and they cannot stop you, then why should it be otherwise? Orcs reincarnate to retain their knowledge, to make it so that they can rise faster every time they return. But you can be a unique experience. A novel Warlord to fight under. Not of our kind, but close enough. And the only one that can inflict a lasting, grave consequence. Oh, the thrill. Oh, the reward. Oh, the uniqueness of experience. And the fact that you are System-favored among favored... I can see orcs joining you just for the pleasure of tasting that favor as well."

And for the first time, the clouds parted to reveal an immense shape looming above. The Challenger was just as Shiv remembered him to be. Colossal of form, with scars that hid mass graves along their river-like lengths, and brilliant, shining eyes that were bewitching to look upon. The colossal orc sent down his declaration then, his tone changing from that of a lecturing mentor to one of an imperious god. "Heed me now, Pathbearer Shiv. I give unto you this offering, a means to build an army like no other. But in return, I want access. I want a gateway."

"Gateway," Shiv asked. "What gateway?"

"The one currently connected to Vulketh. The one that you previously thought was going to be joined to Weave. I wish for it to be bound to this realm, that broken little world that thought it could contain us. This place will serve as motivation or understanding. For if you fail to control my orcs, this is what will become of your world. Another dumping ground of bloodshed and ruin, soon to be fed into my Tutorial. A place at the beginning of all things. A restart. A place for orcs to learn new skills, new understandings. Share these understandings with the brethren, or kill the brethren, to take from them their pride, their lives, and to leave them constrained within the Tutorial. It is an academy. A slaughterhouse. It is a nightmarish paradise. And it will be the place from which I deliver upon you my orcs. And furthermore, you will not simply receive an army so easily."

"I'm already going to have to shepherd all your little monsters. What do you mean by 'not so easily'?"

The Challenger chuckled. "My orcs are spread out across many worlds, a small contingent of which are preparing to invade Lone Star once more for the coming summer. But this summer, perhaps things will be a little different. This summer, I have given a recommendation to a certain Maestro of mine, and he has his eyes on you as well. This summer, perhaps instead of trying to break those battle-hardened artillerymen, snipers, trench gunners, the Lone Star Orchestra can be diverted to the defense—or the counter-offensive—of Blackedge. But you need to convince them. You need to gain their appreciation. And to do that, all you need to do is one thing."

"What's that?" Shiv asked.

"Kill. Break. Bleed. Dominate your enemies. Drive them back. Kill their champions. For every Adept you slaughter, I think you may gain the appreciation of an Adept-Tier orc. For every Master you rip apart, a Master-Tier orc may wish to test their blade against you as well, but before that, they will offer it in service. And should you kill another Hero, or better yet, bring down a Legend, you will gain a corresponding amount of orcs at such Tiers as well."

"So, kill to recruit," Shiv said. He considered the offer, and it was simple. Simple, but also poisonous. Poisonous, but also potent. Vicar Sullain had an orc serving in his forces. Shiv had killed that orc, but it took a little bit of cunning and quite a bit of force. If he could get more than a few orcs like that, then

maybe, just maybe, he could make a fight of this. As for the Gateway part, he would need to see if it could be set up in a way that only allowed one-way access to its activation or something.

As with everything, though, there were costs, and there were risks. Shiv thought of everything the orcs could provide, and of his own capabilities. He was definitely going to need Uva's help—everyone's help, to keep these orcs under control. But most importantly, he needed to keep their eyes on him. He needed to be the one they wanted to test their mettle against, not anyone else. And he needed to make it clear that if the orcs harmed anyone else, he would kill them for good. He would find a way to break their very souls rather than just slaying them normally.

It might be able to work,

Shiv thought to himself. Maybe that can just be the incentive. They get to try again, like 811 did, like the newest adamantine orc did, instead of dying for good. Shiv couldn't believe it. He was actually considering this seriously, considering accepting the Challenger's offer. But not yet.

"I'll tell you what," Shiv said, holding his head high. "I'll get back to you on this. I've got a few other people to consult with, and a few things to figure out."

"Of course," the Challenger said. "It would be remiss of me to give you that speech on patience, and then try to force you into an early and hasty agreement. Furthermore, if you are so desperate, I fear my orcs will not be so interested in you, and my Warlord would look upon you as spineless, no fun."

"Well, I'm glad to please," Shiv scoffed. "So, we're basically done here, huh? Your offer is that we need to connect our gateway to your Tutorial so that you can funnel in what should be attacking Lone Star this summer, and that for every Initiate or Adept or Master or Hero or Legend I kill, an orc of the equivalent Tier will join in."

"That is the expectation you can hold, and that is the ritual I will propose between us when you return to me with the confirmation of your desires."

New Ritual: Bloodrites of the Vaketh-Insul - Slay enemies of an appropriate quantity and Tier to gain an equivalent in orc recruits from the Lone Star Orchestra.

"Vaketh-Insul?" Shiv asked.

"Nemesis-Commander."

Shiv gritted his teeth and nodded. "Fine, I got it. Now, send me back."

"Oh, but not yet," the Challenger said. "Before you return, a gesture of goodwill and a sampling of the true dish."

"What are you talking about?" Shiv asked, worry creeping into his voice.

"I'm talking about you getting used to leading a few orcs. This will either convince you of your choice or persuade you against accepting my offer, but it will be amusing to watch all the same. They will return with you once I send you back to your gate. Be sure not to kill them, or do. Attack, and they will fight back, but they will not hold it against you, and neither will I. After all, what are guarantees? What are promises?"

Shiv's eyes widened. "Wait, how many—"

And as Shiv blinked out of existence once more, the Challenger laughed, smiling down at the landscape of ruin from which his children hatched anew "Do remember to have fun, Bruiser. Kill them. Don't kill them. I don't care. Just remember to enjoy yourself."