

Deathless 121

Chapter 121 (I) Minions [I]

No two armies in Integration can be led the same way. Despite fighting as a collective whole, every army is made up of individual Pathbearers with a variety of skills, evolutions, experiences, and more. Beyond that, there are also the races, and I have fought in a very, very mixed company.

Elves, humans, goblins, we're not so different. Goblins are usually a little smaller. Quite a bit faster though, if we're talking averages of course. They also strangely can get quite a few skill evolutions that dramatically increase their regeneration. Skills that humans usually can't get. Best part about goblins, don't need to feed them that much. Even Initiates can survive a month off of some grubs, and once they get up into the Master-Tier, hells, goblins don't need to eat for years.

Elves aren't nearly as robust, but they do think a hell of a lot faster. There's a reason why they make good mages or scholars. There's something about their minds that lets them focus perfectly, control their own thoughts better, and also have multiple streams of thought at the same time. Furthermore, their biology is already extremely stable at a baseline. Not much decay or mutation. Problem with that, though, elves don't really do very good with Toughness evolutions. Not without a proper Path anyway.

Automata could be anything. Their variability is incredible. Their progress, however, is slow. That's why you usually have a massive cohort of automata Adepts. They stay there for longer than humans do.

Hell, we even had some fae join in. Weird thing about the fae, they can be Masters here in the morning, then little more than Initiates at night because they're afraid of the turning of the world. And they briefly touch Hero during an eclipse or right at the moment of sunrise. The fae are still part of the Integration, but they run on different rules. Or maybe they just understand the world to be different altogether.

We even had an orc with us. His name was Whisper, and he lived up to that name. He wasn't loud or brash. He was always polite, and he was always watching. For a while, I thought all the stories about the orcs were bullshit. Or maybe this one showed that they weren't all evil, that they could be taught, or they could live with us. He was the perfect soldier, just... perfect. Never a mistake, never a complaint.

While he was with us, every morning we found all the weapons sharpened before we got up. We found our equipment maintained, our rations prepared, our supplies packed, and in the field, we couldn't see Whisper. But Whisper was always there, watching over us. For a time, we even thought he was our friend. We got along with him pretty well. Whisper could be pretty funny.

And then, one day, as we were setting up camp near a village, Whisper ran into a farmer and, seemingly for no reason at all, butchered all of her children.

We discovered shortly after that he knew the farmer; she'd sent him back to the Tutorial once in a prior life of his. And he was eager to continue the fight. But she wasn't. She just wanted to live her life. She had been done with being a warrior for decades.

Thing about the orcs. They don't give a shit if you're done. They don't give a shit about anything unless you can make them give a shit. And that was the day we learned that orcs make fine soldiers, but they will never make fine people. Know who the hell you are leading. Know who you're marching with.

Never, ever trust an orc. They're not people. Even if they act like it.

-Memoirs of a Master-Tier War Mage

A second later, Shiv reappeared in the gate, blinking into existence right where he'd been, beside Uva. She stumbled back in surprise, her eyes wide and glowing bright. "Shiv, what happened? You vanished for a second."

"A second?" Shiv stared at her. "I was just gone for a second?"

"Yes," she breathed. "It was like you flickered in and out of existence."

"It was a lot longer than a second for me," Shiv replied. "Had a long-ass conversation with—"

And before he could say more, five towering figures blinked into existence behind Uva.

"Shit," Shiv growled under his breath. "I can't believe this."

As Uva turned and took a step back, her jaw dropped.

Before her strands could pierce and render the new arrivals little more than mind-hollowed vegetables, Shiv intervened by gripping her shoulder. "Yeah, no, I didn't agree to the Challenger's offer, but he still decided to give me a sampling. By sampling, I guess he meant a team of five orcs."

"We aren't a team. A team consists of four people. We are a bloat: slightly larger than a team, but not quite large enough to be a squad," the orc at the front of the group explained as he walked over to greet Shiv. He was dressed in robes of billowing midnight. Stars glistened on the soft black folds that

danced across his massive body, and a hood was draped deep over the orc's face. Shiv could still see his eyes, however. They gleamed a bright yellow, rather than that muted piss color that characterized 811's irises. The orc held out his hands, letting his sleeves fall back to reveal he wasn't concealing any weapons.

That didn't mean much to a Pathbearer. He could have bound equipment that was covered by a mirage or something. More importantly, this orc could be anything from a masterful unarmed combatant to a mage.

And I'm not a whole lot less dangerous unarmed than I am armed, Shiv thought to himself. He felt Uva slip her strands into his mind just as his drunkenness started to return. It was then that Shiv realized he didn't feel the intoxication at all while he was speaking to the Challenger. "The Bastard suppressed it without even saying anything," Shiv grumbled to himself.

"Uva," Shiv said to her through their connection. "Stay ready, but don't do anything. Not yet. And let the other Umbrals and Weaveresses know as well. I don't want any unfortunate incidents happening."

"What about Adam?" she asked.

He hesitated then. Adam was still probably talking to his mother. Shiv didn't want to interrupt that with unpleasant news about arriving orcs. "Just keep an eye on him. If he comes out, or if—"

But then Shiv felt the body of the Gate Lord blast down the hall of the infirmary, passing through the periphery of Shiv's Biomancy mana field as he suddenly came to a halt midair with multiple Veilpiercers already drawn.

"Shiv," Adam hissed as he prepared to loose an arrow at the orcs, "I thought we were going to discuss this."

"We were," Shiv cried, stepping between Adam and the orcs. "And I was a felling fool to think you wouldn't hear or notice this with your Heroic-Tier Awareness, but please don't shoot them. Yet."

The orcs didn't seem intimidated at all. If anything, they looked amused, like they were attending a theater play rather than standing in the middle of enemy territory.

Umbrals and Weaveresses were closing in. Can Hu held up a fist, and a wall of stone rose from the earth and quarantined the area, sealing away the surrounding structures from easy access as well.

"I just had a conversation with the Challenger," Shiv explained to Adam. "He told me his terms, and when we were done, he sent these guys with me. And no, he didn't ask if I wanted them. He just kind of chucked them at me."

"If we are not welcome, you can simply kill us," the midnight-robed orc said. It was such a casual statement that it made Shiv do a double-take.

"Yeah, we might just get there," Shiv muttered. He studied each of the orcs in detail before he said anything further. Aside from the robed orc, there were four others.

The first, and most noticeable, was a particularly huge orc that wore a set of armor composed of broken automata parts. Several head components were lodged in a ring around his chest and ribs. Their optics were still on. From his shoulders and back flowed various robotic arms. Some were broken, while some still seemed to be functional, grasping at the open air. More interestingly, the orc's lower jaw seemed to be an automaton transplant as well—a piece of steel replacing flesh and bone. Everything below his

hips, meanwhile, was entirely mechanical. Steam vents hissed hyperheated air along the orc's four multi-jointed legs.

This orc had modified himself severely. Shiv didn't even realize there was a skill that allowed one to do that. On the orc's back was also a large tube that pointed high into the sky, and he realized it looked like an old artillery platform, something he'd seen on a book cover or a poster at some point back on Blackedge.

Aside from the artillerist orc, there was another giant among giants. This one was wide-eyed, and his gaze jumped around the room. His bulky armor was metallic. Judging from its texture and color, Shiv guessed it was likely titanium in make. He had a massive club of black metal in his right hand, and a wyvern's skull, shaped to serve as a shield, strapped to his left. Slowly, as he finished scanning the gate, his eyes fell on Uva, and he licked his lips. Not in a lustful way, but in a disturbing, I'm-going-to-eat-this-person sort of way. Shiv could recognize that look anywhere, mainly due to all the years he spent in the kitchen, and he really didn't appreciate that look being directed at Uva. Not one bit.

Beside the large, wyvern-shielded orc was another greyskin brute, but this one was only half his size. He had two wands hanging from his hip, and he wore no bulky armor. Rather, he wore a canvas longcoat with a mithril vest over his chest. More importantly, his eyes were unique. Instead of having normal yellow-hued eyes, he had two Divination gems lodged in his sockets. They glowed a brilliant violet as he scanned Shiv, and slowly, a smile pulled at his features. His fingers twitched, and Shiv had a feeling that this Orc had a pretty impressive Reflexes Skill.

A pulse also radiated from the orc. A golden pulse. Chronomancer, Shiv understood. He briefly flared his shell, and the orc's Chronomantic pulse broke against it without inflicting any true damage.

"Yeah, think again," Shiv said, staring straight at the orc.

The orc blinked twice, and his smile only grew wider. Shiv spiked his Dread Aura as much as he could, but the way an orc responded to fear wasn't like that of a person, either. It got them excited. Their morale didn't break. They weren't so easily cowed.

Oh, this is going to be an exercise in psychology, Shiv thought to himself.

The final orc was the oddest of all. He was average in height and size among all the orcs, but his expression was utterly blank. And rather than wearing anything like conventional armor, even dramatically decorated armor, he instead had something with a chainmail suit jacket on the outside, and what looked like wool on the inside. Under it, he wore a vest with a very formal tie, slacks, black polished shoes, and even white leather gloves, to complete the strange ensemble. Most fascinating of all was the violin he carried. It was made from polished wood, and each of its strings glistened with power. A faint trail of darkness and static glided off the strings, and Shiv could recognize the Dimensionality anywhere.

"What kind of freak show did the Challenger send me home with?" Shiv muttered to himself.

"So," the midnight-robed orc said as he looked Shiv up and down, brushing his words aside, "you are the bruiser, the Deathless." He stared Shiv straight in the eye, and thanks to Plaguefueled, they were around the same size. The orc let out a slight chuckle. "Well, you're certainly larger than most humans I've met."

"For now," Shiv said, his voice dry. "Piss me off, and I think I can get a little bit bigger."

"Now that

would be entertaining," the orc replied, his voice filled with implication.

Shiv clenched his Skysplitter tighter and glared at the orc. "Go for it then. Show me what you can do. Let's not waste time."

"Hmm," the orc hummed. "Maybe not. Not yet. Right now, I'm interested in what you can do, and what we can do for you. Before that, an introduction. I am 991. But I have lived among your kind before, and they called me Whisper. I specialize in—"

And then the wyvern-shielded orc stomped up, knocking Whisper aside. He was a head taller than Shiv, even as he was now. And as the orc looked down, he sneered. "Big for an ape, but you don't look like much. Soft eyes. Soft skin." The orc sniffed at him. "Don't even smell right. Where's the blood? Where's the death?"

"We humans do a thing called taking showers," Shiv replied, deadpan. "Maybe it's a part of my culture that I can share with you."

"Oh, I know all about baths," the orc said. "I like certain kinds of baths." And once again, the orc looked at Uva, and he ran his tongue over his lips. "I like bathing and eating at the same time. In the same substances, specifically. That one there, whose skin looks even softer than yours? What is that? Is that an Umbral? I haven't tasted Umbral before."

"This Umbral is not going to be good for your longevity, orc," Uva said, her voice low. Her strands closed in on the orc. "I suggest that you turn away from me before something bad happens to you."

"Too late." Shiv let out an annoyed grunt. He froze time. Shiv was going to teach a lesson right now. Because the Challenger wanted it to be that way, because Shiv also wanted it to be that way, and because this orc made a stupid mistake. He thought he was going to dictate terms. He thought he was the biggest monster here, just because of his size. Well, he didn't have any Chronomancy, and this wasn't going to be a brawl.

Shiv understood what an orc was, and this idiot was stupid enough to make himself seem a threat. Shiv was going to make sure he wasn't going to be anything at all by the end of this.

A pulse of gold came out from the wand-using orc. It crashed against Shiv's temporal shell and inflicted chipping damage. It wasn't enough. The wand-using orc himself remained frozen. Shiv reached out and picked the wyvern-shielded orc off his feet, lifting the orc over his head. Despite the gray-skinned brute's size, he weighed almost nothing to Shiv, especially after Shiv's battles with the Court Leviathan, the Recollector, and the Jealousy. With a casual act of brutality, Shiv brought the orc's back down upon his knee, and a satisfying crack sounded through the world. Then Shiv repeated the act again three more times, until he was sure that the orc was utterly crippled. And because he felt like being a prick to the orc, he finally placed the orc back down the same way he'd been standing and let time resume.

The orc suddenly let out a cry as he bit the tip of his tongue off, and blood sprayed across Shiv's chest. He just sneered at the orc as the beast crashed down against the ground. Rather than reacting in violence, the other orcs all looked at each other and shared a collective snort.

The wand-using orc simply shook his head as well. "Boy's gotta learn at some point, right?"

"Indeed," Whisper said. He gestured to the orc Shiv had just broken. "This one here is Wall. That's what the humans called him during his last campaign in Forbidden Africa."

"What?" Can Hu said, marching over to join the conversation. "He was there? Why?"

"New Albion," Wall wheezed. He looked at Shiv and laughed. "You got me good, human. You really got me pretty good. Right vicious, you were. The only proper way to be."

Shiv just shook his head as the paralyzed orc looked upon him with pride and appreciation. What a weird fucking species, Shiv thought to himself.

"We are everywhere," Whisper said, talking to Can Hu, "and we are recruited by everyone who wants a Pathbearer of unique expertise that does not balk at suicidal missions. Should it be that surprising that New Albion inquires after our services?"

"Not really," Shiv replied, "but it does make me more than a little paranoid about you. If you know anything about me, you know that New Albion is near the bottom of my shit list, next to the First Blood, Vicar Sullain, the Outsiders, Compact..."

"You enjoy defecating on a great many people, don't you, Deathless?" Whisper said.

"Wouldn't say enjoy," Shiv replied. "It's just gotta be done."

"No," Whisper replied, shaking his head. "Don't lie to me. It is not good to lie. Not to me or yourself. You enjoy it. You enjoy killing. It's in your blood. It's of your nature."

Shiv leaned in, rather unimpressed by the psychoanalysis. "You want to know what else is my nature?"

Whisper grinned. "Do tell."

"Telling you to shut the fuck up," Shiv growled. "If we're going to work together, if you don't want to end up like him," Shiv pointed down at the broken Wall, "then you're going to do what I say. You're going to follow orders."

"If that is what makes sense to me at any given point," Whisper replied.

"Really? You're going to just go with insubordination immediately?"

"We are not a military outfit," Whisper said. "Me, Wall," and then he started pointing to the other orcs, starting with the one wearing the automata, "Mortar," the Chronomancer, "Tequila," and finally, the suit-wearing orc, "and Band, have all joined your cause willingly as an advance from the Challenger."

"An advance," Shiv repeated, unable to keep the frustration out of his voice.

"Yes, indeed. We encountered 812 after his return. Some of your people call him Stone, if you didn't know."

"And you don't call each other anything? Just numbers? What about if you die the same number of times? Do you two play scissors, paper, asshole to see who gets to keep the number?"

"We have a general measure of another," the orc said. "We do not need to know each other's names. We just need to understand what the other does, and what we can do to kill him. You need names, you cling to this notion of society, and so we will accommodate you, for now."

"And this is me accommodating you," Shiv said, glaring down at Wall. The orc then looked at Uva again, and Shiv cast his Vitae into him on impulse. A stream of red and white plunged into the orc's face, and the large orc let out a cry as the strands of Vitae tore his right cheek open. But then a loud blast of magical hues filled the air as Shiv felt his Vitae drill against the orc's Magical Resistance. That didn't stop the Deathless. He channeled more. He struck the orc with a laceration spell as well, and Wall's magical protections burst apart.

But then Shiv pushed deeper than the orc's flesh. He reached into the orc, just as he'd reached into Can Hu earlier. Shiv began to conduct an act of brutal surgery. He pulled at the orc's insides, ripping at his soul and draining his vitality at the same time.

Vitaemancy 56 > 57

Then Shiv launched another stream, connecting Can Hu to the network as well. Vitality flowed from the orc into Shiv, and some of it passed on back to Can Hu. Shiv reached into one of those sections of absence within the Penitent, and he filled them. The orc began to shake and spasm. For the first time, Shiv felt a pulse run through his Dread Aura.

The other orcs looked on in rapt fascination, trying to understand what he was doing. Even so, they didn't intervene. In fact, Mortar seemed delighted that Wall was suffering. The pocket inside Can Hu filled, and Shiv took in a final drink of vitality from Wall. But before he extracted his Vitae stream, he pulled at the fabric of the orc's inner existence, ripping as hard as he could. The effort he spent was immense. He felt like a child trying to break a rope in half, but as he flexed his gravitic field a final time, something finally split.

A cut burst open on the orc's chest, and the orc's armor shattered as well. A river of blood sprayed out. The orc let out a roar of pain and spasmed on the ground. As he did, Shiv hit him with a Woundeater. It didn't do anything. It returned to Shiv's arm, seeming confused. Shiv hit Wall again and again, but the orc never healed.

"Alright, now that I got your attention, what I just did to your friend here," Shiv said as he kicked Wall with his heel, "is tear his vitality open. That and some other stuff. I really don't know how this power works yet, I'll be honest. You might think that's a good thing. Probably not. Just because I don't know what it does exactly doesn't mean I can't use it to hurt you someplace deep. Now, I managed to cycle a few soul-wounds out of myself earlier, and I thought to myself just now, what if I could make my own soul wounds? Well. Wall," Shiv called out. The orc blinked and stared up at him, seeming intimidated for the first time. "I'm going to stomp your head in in a few seconds. It's not even because you challenged me; it's mostly because I needed to make an example of one of you anyway. And when you do come back, when you wake up, and whatever shithole you reincarnate in, I want you to look down, and I want you to understand the reason why you're still bleeding everywhere is because you couldn't keep yourself under control. Previously, death was just losing all your skills and starting over. Well, you're going to start over as a bit of a cripple. With me, there are consequences, there are consequences you don't fucking walk away from."

Dread Aura 91 > 93

Shiv ripped Wall off the ground using his Biomancy. And as he grabbed the orc by the neck, he pressed down with his other hand, and he pushed with his gravitic field, spiking the roof of the orc's head downward. A loud, sickening squelch followed. The orc's face submerged through his neck, and his entire skull vanished into his torso.

Wall didn't even have a chance to say anything, to declare an apology, or beg for his life. He couldn't even move his limbs. One second he was alive, the next, well, the next he was busy staring at his own lungs. Shiv chucked the massive orc aside as he made eye contact with each of the others.

And he had a feeling that that might not have been the wisest thing to do when he saw just how wide their grins were. No longer were they eyeing him up as easy prey or a potential adversary they could take down now. There was a hint of adoration.

Shiv remembered seeing that in 811's eyes. Godsdamn it, he thought to himself, I am not going to put up with this shit either.

"Well," Tequila said, folding his arms, "I suppose Wall will have a very interesting story to tell when he rises again. But the Tutorial may not be so kind to him now that he always bleeds. It will provoke a feeding frenzy from more than a few of our more cannibalistic brethren."

"Feeding frenzy," Mortar echoed with a chuckle. "Maybe if he gets eaten a couple of times, the dumbass will finally figure out how to slow down and think first before just rushing in." He gave Shiv a brief nod. "Well done, Deathless, that was nice and properly brutal of you." Now the automata-wearing orc clapped his hands together, and the air shook. "Now, where are your siege cannons?"

"My what?" Shiv asked.

"Your siege cannons?" Mortar asked again. "Where are they? I see buildings around us. Where are the cannons? Where is the artillery? There is no fortress without artillery."

"What bloody artillery?" Adam muttered off by the side. "We're barely starting to rebuild this place. And it's a gate. A separate dimension. What are we firing at?"

"Anything we want," Mortar declared.

Whisper shook his head, and he looked upon Wall's corpse with indifference. "Once again, before we were so rudely interrupted, I am Whisper. The big one here is Mortar. Our mage here is Tequila. And our

bard is Band. You may use these, or you may call us by our corresponding numbers. 991 for me, 3000 for Mortar, 304 for Tequila, and 111 for Band."

"I'm going to stick with the actual names," Shiv replied. "So..." He looked at the four of them and scoffed. "I guess this makes you a team now. No more bloat."

Whisper closed his eyes and snorted. Mortar laughed. Both Tequila and Band chuckled. On one hand, Shiv was glad he was such a hit with the orcs. But to be honest, he wasn't sure how he felt about them sharing his fucked up sense of humor.

"We are here to assist you in any way you can make us," Whisper said, "and in any way we are willing. Right now, we are yours to...advise."

"Wonderful. So having you guys is like getting a colony of cats as support rather than a pack of dogs."

"That's not exactly an apt description," Whisper said. "Cats—as you know them in your world—are still too social."

"You assholes do a great job selling yourselves, don't you?"

"With other humans, I might work to make my words more appropriate and appeal to their tribal psychology. With you, there is no point. You know what we are, and I can see what you are."

"All right, the first thing you can do for me, Whisper, is you can stop insinuating that you understand exactly what I am. One of your brothers thought he got me a few hours ago. He didn't. I had him. And

I'm going to repeat this one more time. You touch any one of mine, and I will cripple you. I will cripple you at the soul. I won't kill you. I won't break you for good. No, death is a mercy for some. It might just be nothing. It might be an eternal paradise or hell or whatever, but I can make life an eternal purgatory. I will find a way to break you so bad that you come back without sight, without senses, without limbs. Maybe just you screaming inside of yourself. How is that for an eternity? Sound boring enough to you?"

And with every passing word, his Dread Aura felt more and more feedback from the orcs. It did unnerve them to some extent, but it also amused them.

Dealing with these guys is going to give me a Psychopathic Psychology Skill Evolution or something, Shiv whined mentally.

"And that's if Uva doesn't get to you first," Shiv continued. He briefly looked at her, and he caught sight of something in her eyes, a hint of ravenousness. Well. He had something else to look forward to later. Shiv looked away quickly, however. He didn't want the orcs to pay too much attention to the affection between them. They knew enough already.

"All right," Shiv said, "since you're at my disposal..." His words trailed off as he considered what he could do with four orcs. "What the hell even are your Tiers, anyway?"

"They are all Masters," Whisper said.

"And you?" Shiv asked, raising an eyebrow.

Whisper just smirked.

Great. Heroic Stealth orc. I'm going to need to get Still Water to watch this one.

Before he could make up his mind, a loud cry came from behind.

"What is this?"

Null Mont's voice was shrill. She skittered over the battlements, and he could feel her fear vibrating within his spirit. "Exalted Guest Shiv," Null Mont said as she climbed down Can Hu's walls. "Explain yourself. Are those orcs?"

"Yeah," Shiv called back without a hint of embarrassment. "They're not orcs I decided to recruit. They kind of just got given to me. I'm dealing with it right now."

"You are supposed to warn me if..."

Shiv immediately pulled himself over to Null Mont. He got by her side, and he leaned down to speak with her. She flinched away from him as she realized how big he was. Weaveresses were generally a lot taller than pretty much any human, so it had to be especially unnerving for her.

"Exalted guest," Null Mont stammered. "Why are you so large?"

"Basilisk venom," Shiv explained.

"I... What?"

He ignored her confusion.

"Very, very simply, the Challenger decided to give me this group because they're supposed to help me on our missions. Anyway. I'm going to make use of them, but you cannot trust them. Do you understand?"

Null Mont's fangs twitched in confusion.

"Your reaction right now? It's appropriate. I would have the same reaction. But you need to stop being nervous in front of these orcs. I want you to take a look at them."

She did. They were all staring at her. Mortar lifted a massive paw and wiggled the fingers in a taunting wave. "Hmm. Weaveress. Burns pretty good too when hit by incendiaries."

Shiv stepped between them. "If you give them any chance, any opening, they're going to kill you. They're going to torture you to death and kill you very, very slowly. I have threatened and killed one as an example to the others."

She noticed Wall's dead body, and her eight eyes swiveled between Shiv and the pile of gore.

"Yes. I'm doing what I can, so you need to do what you can right now as well. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she said. "But I—"

"I know, I would have liked to have warned you. I would have liked to be warned myself, but it's not up to us anymore. I need you to help me right now," Shiv said. "I need you to be strong, and I need you to be my eyes too. That's the only way we're making it out of this."

He hooked a hand behind Null Mont's back as he slowly guided her toward the orcs. Her clawed feet started to drag, but she followed along anyway. "I'm thinking about using them against the First Blood."

And slowly, Null Mont looked at him. "You are?"

Shiv nodded. "Cherished Sister Uva and I were about to take an expedition out into the Umbral Wilderness."

She turned to face Uva. "Sister Uva, you will need to clear your actions and whereabouts—"

Shiv gripped Null Mont. "Null Mont. I know. Again, it's very understandable. But things are happening. We're doing our best to protect you. You gotta help us. Don't make your own life hard."

Silver Tongue 23 > 24

Psychology 8 > 9

"I—I..." Her voice trailed off.

"Just think about how pleased the Composer will be with you, helping us spearhead this mission to corrupt and damage the First Blood's neighboring patrols and bases. Just think of them as... expendable soldiers." Shiv gestured at the orcs.

"Ah, vampires." Mortar sighed with satisfaction. "I do like bombing vampires. They burn pretty good, and they keep burning, unless you get them in the heart."

Null Mont let out a hesitant squeak, and Shiv continued, exploiting her discomfort. "In fact, I was even planning to invite you along as well. Was just about to do that when the orcs arrived."

Deception 12 > 13

"Me? Me?" Null Mont stammered. "But—I—"

"Yeah, you, me, Uva, and," he gestured at the orcs, "our new minions are gonna go out into the Umbral Wilderness, do a little hunting, do a little scouting, and I think we're gonna cause a little chaos for the First Blood, and maybe bring back a few prisoners as well to figure out how best to protect ourselves against them."

Null Mont began to make a series of incoherent noises, and Shiv soothingly patted the back of her head. "Don't worry, I have full faith in your bravery. I need to have faith in your bravery, because I can't trust these orcs."

"You have a disturbingly good instinct for social manipulation when you focus," Uva said, blinking.

"Very wise," Whisper replied, a flat smile pulling at his features. "You should heed the Deathless's words, Weaveress. He has not lied at all about us. Be thankful we're only interested in him."

"Shiv," Adam ground out, "can we have a word?"

Shiv regarded Adam and went slightly stiff. "Look, I didn't agree to anything yet."

"It's not about them," Adam said. Then he stared at the orcs as his features contorted in worry. "Though we should talk about that later as well. No, my mother wants to speak to you."

"What?" Shiv asked. This wasn't what he was expecting at all.

"Yes. I was surprised too. But—"

"No," Shiv hissed. "We're not talking about this in front of them."

Adam froze, and he saw the orcs looking in the direction he came from.

"Mother?" Tequila asked. He stared at Adam and sniffed slightly. "Hm. Medical cleaning supplies? Is she sick? Wounded? How unfortunate. Send her my condolences. Or maybe I can greet her myself at some point?"

"Yeah, do that and I'll be using you as a Vitaemancy sock puppet until the end of time," Shiv growled. "Adam. Infirmary. Uva. Watch them—break them if they do anything." Shiv glared at the orcs. "Behave. I'm going to handle some shit."

"Don't worry," Whisper said, his eyes twinkling with delight. "We came here to have a very specific experience. We won't betray grand delights for lesser pleasures."

Chapter 122 (I) Minions [II]

An average Pathbearer assault team numbers four. Four to magnify each other's strengths and make up for each other's weaknesses. Four, so that at least one of you has the skills to face every possible scenario that might be thrown against you, while the others act as support. There are no set Paths for the four, but there are archetypes that you need to embody if you wish for your team to experience maximum success.

At the head of each team should be something of a Frontliner. This individual does not need to be of the Vanguard Path, but they need to be high in Toughness, high in Physicality, and high in Reflexes if possible. They should be able to draw enemy attention and hold it, and they should cause immense destruction in their wake to penalize enemies that turn away from them.

Then you need a dedicated Caster. Usually, this is the team's Jump Mage. It is not uncommon for a Jump Mage to double as the team's overall mage, but it does not need to be that way. What matters the most, however, is that you have a Jump Mage, because spatial repositioning and rapid extractions are essential.

Thereafter, you need a Logistician, someone that's capable of healing or providing active supplies on the battlefield. This can be a crafter, a Biomancer, anything of that regard. This is the most variable individual in the team. Some of you might call this the support. They go beyond that. They are the synergizer more than anyone else.

And finally, you need a Commander: a leader, a strategist for your team. They can be a Diviner, they can have a high Awareness skill, they can have something esoteric, but they must understand the nuances of the battlefield with a high Tactical or Strategic Skill, and they must guide the rest of the team for maximum effect.

With these four members, your team is mostly complete. Also understand that this is a recommendation, but you might most commonly see that there are effective teams made up of three members, or even duos that have achieved great things. Beyond this, there are also teams of four Frontliners that have served specific ends. However, these teams function in specific scenarios, so don't expect them to be the norm.

The most important thing about teams, however, is that you understand what yours can do and what it can provide. By the end of your time at the academy, you should know your comrades better than you know yourself, and vice versa...

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

Shiv hesitated much like Adam did earlier before entering Rose's room. The reason for his hesitation was slightly different; he was scanning for orcs. So was Adam. The Gate Lord was on guard right outside, and he'd gathered a small group of Umbrals and two Weaveresses to serve as his mother's personal guard after certain comments made by the orcs.

Mana strands connected both Adam and Shiv to Uva, who was currently on orc wrangling

duty.

Right now, the towering monsters were making small talk. Whisper was trying to discuss the nuances of Necromancy with Valor. From the sound of things, he knew more than a little about the lore of magic. Meanwhile, Can Hu and Mortar were glaring at each other, and somehow the orc was making a fight of the stare-down. Tequila, meanwhile, had lit up a large cigar and was listening to Band play his violin.

And I still don't know the full extent of their capabilities, Shiv thought to himself. Whisper said they were mostly Master-Tier, but he could be lying. Shiv wouldn't put it beyond the Challenger to dump a bunch of Heroic-Tier orcs on him who actively lied about being Master so they could enjoy killing him over and over. I'm gonna throw them into the nastiest fight I can later. I need to learn about them. Some things you can't fake. Especially not in active combat.

So far, all the orcs had Magical Resistance. Wall's Magical Resistance was the weakest, while Whisper's seemed the strongest. Tequila seemed to have the highest Awareness, because he almost imperceptibly flinched with every loud noise, a bit like Adam did. Uva suspected Tequila's Skill Evolution was more for hearing than it was for seeing, considering he only reacted that way to noise.

Mortar was a monster of Physicality and probably had a powerful artillery skill, which made him a ranged-heavy Pathbearer. Shiv wasn't used to running into those. And then there was Band. Shiv had no

idea what Band's deal was. The Deathless knew about Pathbearer singers and performers, though they usually didn't participate in combat. There were a few horn users that directed Umbral arm formations, but combat-oriented bards were a bit like combat-oriented chefs; cooking and music didn't really convert to active combat all that well.

But he's still here, Shiv thought to himself. He's here, and I got a bad feeling about that one more than all the others, mainly because I can't figure him out at all.

Despite this, Shiv did have a few outright advantages over the orcs. His Vitae allowed him to hurt them like no one else could. Well, maybe no one else but an accomplished Animancer. And there was his Chronomancy. So far, only Tequila had an answer for Shiv's time magic, but the orc's Chronomancy Skill was pretty weak compared to Shiv's Strider. Part of Shiv's paranoia made him consider whether Tequila was just holding back, but Shiv suspected not. Tequila couldn't move at all when Shiv broke Wall over his knee.

Overall, they were dangerous, but they seemed manageable. Or so it seems.

Just another set of problems I need to deal with. Can't let me have a dull moment, huh, System?

Shiv regarded four flickering beacons of vitality with a final look. He gazed at the orcs through other bodies and walls using his Vitaemancy, and Adam gave him a nod as well. "I'll keep watch over them. And we'll have my mother moved as soon as she is cleared."

"Probably a good idea. But they already know she's here," Shiv said. "Maybe the best thing to do is just to kill them. But I think I'd prefer to spend them in active combat than here. Keep them constant in the field. Active. Close to me. That's why they're here, anyway. Because the Challenger's got a crush on my ass."

The Gate Lord's expression flattened to one of exasperation. "Have you tried being less... you? It could help you avoid some of these problems."

"How do I be less me, Adam?" Shiv shot back, annoyed. "And why do I have to be less me? Why can't the other assholes take responsibility for themselves?"

"Because the System is desperate to break you, and not them?" Adam suggested.

"Yeah, well, the System can go lick a cesspit. Being me is the only way I got this far. I'll get better. I'll fix some of my flaws. But it'll come up with another excuse to make us miserable. We're not going to avoid any of this, Adam. The only way out is straight through. And straight through might just come in the form of us throwing an army of orcs at the felling Necrotechs."

Adam's shoulders were slumped with exhaustion. "I have no idea how to lead an army of orcs, Shiv."

"Neither do I, but I think we're going to need to figure that shit out if we want this to go well. It's that, or Uva calls on the eldritch—"

"We will find a way to lead these orcs," Adam spat immediately. Shiv could feel the Gate Lord's heart rate spiking. He really didn't like the Outsiders. And Shiv couldn't really even blame him. The Recollector had been a nightmare and a half for Adam. Hells, the monster was a nightmare and a half for Shiv. "I'm gonna go talk to her now. Just call me if they do something... orc-like."

"I suspect you'll hear the screams before my voice ever reaches you," Adam muttered.

“Yeah,” Shiv agreed as he walked into the room. “But if they hurt anyone, I’m going to break them. They know the score. Now, let’s see if they can keep themselves in check.”

Rose’s room was bright and wide, lit by a soft blue ambiance from a hanging nub of bioluminescence. There were eight beds stacked here, the mattresses made from dense clumps of weaver silk, the bedsheets white and pristine. The frames were of mixed alloys, and he realized that they were likely created using leftover scrap and other metals harvested from the ruins.

There were no windows here, which was a good thing, because he could very much see an orc finding a way to squeeze himself through a tight, tiny crevice, just to hurt a traumatized, defenseless woman. Said traumatized woman was currently sitting up in her bed. She had a gray colored hospital gown on, and was currently sipping from a steaming-hot cup of water. She regarded Shiv with pale-green eyes.

He stood before her a giant—the basilisk venom still buzzing hot inside him. Shiv had a layer of bone armor over himself now. It took merging sets of bone armor to create something he could wear right now, and when the venom wore off, he would need to adjust it again. The only thing he didn’t have on was a helmet. He considered wearing one to spare her the sight of his face and the ugly memory of his father. Considering she was the one that asked to see him, though, he suspected this wasn’t going to be a gentle conversation.

Seconds passed as he stared straight into her eyes. The atmosphere was uncomfortable, but discomfort could go slit its own throat. Shiv wasn’t going to let pain dictate his actions, inside or out. Rose, however, wasn’t nearly as iron of will. She looked away, flinching. As she swallowed her water and discomfort, she ran a hand through her crimson hair. “Fuck’s sake. You look just like both of them.”

“Yeah. That tends to be the case when someone gives birth to you. Genetics and all that.”

Rose scoffed. “You even sound like—well, more like Vera than Harlon. He complained. There was never an end to his bitching. But she snarled at people. Didn’t curse so much, but she was pretty good at making you feel like garbage. I guess that was one of the reasons I liked her at first. Because she spoke like how I wanted to speak.”

“And what happened after?”

“Well, after I stopped pretending to be the perfect City Lord’s daughter and started telling people to go fuck themselves myself, I realized that Vera was just kind of a bitch. But by that point, she was my bitch. So. Yeah. We ended up more like family, just as I realized I would have hated having her as a friend.”

Shiv grunted. “Didn’t last.”

“No,” Rose said. She wasn’t looking at him anymore. Not directly. Her eyes were staring off into the far wall. Or maybe somewhere else. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why did you save me? Why did you help me?”

Strange question. Shiv thought about it for a moment. “Because I could. Because you were trapped and didn’t want to be inside me. Because I thought it would be good for Adam to have his mother back after all this bullshit. If you are his mother.”

And that made her aim a glare at him. "If?"

"Listen, lady, I dragged you out from inside my felling soul-vitality mixture after a Skill Evolution I don't understand, using magic I barely know how to use. You could be anything. I think you're Rose Van Erren just from all the shit that you remember and what the Educator said, but by this point, I've run into so much weird shit I'm not sure about anything."

The harshness in her gaze lingered for a while longer, and then she shook her head and looked away. "I don't know either. I don't... I remember almost everything. But there are pieces of my memories that are gone. Not just from right before my death, but from my early childhood. My time in the Abyss resembles a kaleidoscopic maze of madness. But my butchering and death are clear and constant. So. Thanks for that, and go fuck yourself, System."

Rose's casual willingness to curse was making Adam poke his head into the room. He was staring daggers at Shiv.

"What?" Shiv said mentally.

"What did you say to her?"

"You're right outside, asshole. You heard everything I told her. I'm not the reason she's talking like a teenage chef who just learned his first slur." Adam's stare turned to one of confusion. "I'm comparing her to me at fifteen. It's a miracle that I don't use fuck, cunt, shit, piss, felling, or any number of other words that Georges loves so much in literally every single sentence."

"Why did Roland keep you alive?" Rose suddenly asked.

Her question caught Shiv like a kick to the gut, and he shuffled uncomfortably. “The actual reason or the lie he likes to tell himself?”

“Both?” Rose replied.

“Well, in actuality, he’s a traumatized chickenshit who couldn’t make up his mind because killing me was too uncomfortable of a thought—”

“Shiv!” Adam snarled.

Shiv continued. He wasn’t sorry. “Personally, he’s probably doing the whole ‘the Omenborn’s too dangerous to be let go. I must keep him contained here’ shit. Why? Would you have preferred if he finished me off for good? Is that it? Would that make this easier?”

The Deathless’s casual willingness to push into rough territory made Rose clench her teeth and look down.

A flood of anger poured from Adam. “Shiv. What the felling shit are you doing?”

But his rage slammed into Shiv’s, and the Deathless turned to glare at him. “Talking. If she didn’t want us to go there, then she shouldn’t bring it up.”

“My mother is—”

“Yeah. Traumatized. Hurt. Hates me for being the offspring of the people that killed her and sacrificed her unborn daughter. We can turn away from it, or we can deal with it right here. You want to argue with me over this? Fine. But I’m not going around this shit now she’s brought us to this point.”

Adam stepped into the room then, his teeth bared in a snarl. “You are absolutely incapable of not being a bastard sometimes, aren’t you?” He wasn’t even using mental communication anymore.

Shiv just sneered. “How else do you think this was going to go? What kind of peace do you think I can offer? She asked to talk to me. Well. This is the talk.” He turned and stared at Rose. “What do you want from me? An apology? A declaration of self-hate? To spit your misery at me? Fine. Let’s do it. Let’s do this shit because there are other things I have to deal with. I don’t hate myself. I’m glad I was born. Yes, I feel like shit that you and your daughter got butchered by my parents. Fuck them for that. But also fuck Roland Arrow and most of Blackedge for what followed. They could have gotten rid of me. Sent me off in exile or something. Hid my identity and had me monitored. Something other than just using me as some kind of hate puppet.”

By the end, Shiv was growling out his words. The bitterness was back in him. But this time, he noticed—his Psychology Skill activated. Talking about this—thinking about this made him angry and feel like shit. But just because he felt like shit didn’t mean he had to react to it. It’s like pain. But this isn’t arithmetic. It’s like calculus. I don’t know how to do calculus. Shit.

Shiv drew a deep breath through his nostrils and threw up his hands. Nothing for it. Confront the problem head-on. Take the hurt and beat it down, just like with any enemy.

“I don’t know what you want to hear from me, Rose. I don’t know what I can give you for your pain or loss. I’ll tell you what I told Adam before: If I could have done something to spare you or your daughter, I would have. But not at the expense of my own existence. I’m responsible for you, for Adam. Hells, even for Roland and Blackedge. But I’m not sorry. And if that’s not enough, then I don’t have enough regret to give you. Because it doesn’t exist.”

Silver Tongue 24 > 25

Psychology 8 > 10

Both Rose and Adam were silent. The Gate Lord was shaking slightly, but he seemed less pissed than a moment before. Rose’s lip was curled, but she was holding herself. Alright. That’s the ugliest part. Maybe... maybe a bit less brute force now? Could that help? I’ll just tell them how I actually feel and what I think we should do, I guess.

“Look. I’m sorry for going into this rough. I don’t really know any other way.” He looked at Adam first. “I don’t want to be a bastard, but it just—I don’t know what else to say, and this thing fucking pisses me off too, alright? You think about losing your mother, losing your sister. I’d never fault you for that. I think about being hated, getting beaten half to death in front of a church with no one caring, and eating rats in an alley. I’m not strong enough to be noble about this. Not yet.”

Adam’s gaze softened, and he looked away.

Shiv pressed on. “I’ll cook for both of you later or something if that’ll make it better. It’s the only thing I know how to do beyond killing. It’s basically the only thing I can really offer. I can’t undo anything that you suffered. Either of you. I’m sorry about that. But if this is the topic, we’re all going to get hurt. There’s no way out.”

Adam bit his lip and let out a quiet breath. He looked at Shiv again, and something about his gaze made the Deathless feel like a complete piece of shit. “Just be gentler. I know—No, I don’t know. We had this talk before, I just turned from it. I ran from it. It’s not all your fault. It’s some of mine. I used to think that justice was seeing you hurt and hollow on the streets of Blackedge, that the System had some kind of sense of honor, perverted and sick though it was. But I was just trying to use my hate to feed my grief. It didn’t work. My father, he—he should have done something else. We should have done something else. But—you don’t know what it’s like, waking up from a nightmare as a child, but then walking away as quietly as you can from the crack of your father’s bedroom door as he sobs into your mother’s old clothes.”

“I don’t,” Shiv said. He looked back at Rose and realized she was silently crying too. “But maybe Roland will get to see the real deal again instead. That’s the best I can do as an apology.”

Adam looked up at him and gave him a nod. “I’m sorry for calling you a bastard.”

Shiv managed a slight smirk. “I am a bastard sometimes. I should’ve kept my bitterness in check and had my shit together. She didn’t deserve any of that. I think we should give this topic—and her—more time. It’s too much, too fast.”

“Right,” Adam said.

Shiv turned to leave the room, but Rose called out to him. “Wait.” He paused and looked back at her. “I... Whatever else is between us, know that I, Rose Van Erren, daughter of Errol Van Erren and Alicia the Least, am in your debt as a noblewoman and Pathbearer. You have returned to me my life. And another chance to be with my family. My son. My love. I don’t—what your parents did to me—I need time. But I don’t just hold hate for you. Not after what you have done. You’re a Pathbearer of honor, holding to your word, freeing me without hesitation. And that makes you more than them to me already. Whatever my gratitude is worth.”

Something lifted inside Shiv. A rock formed in his throat as well, so he just nodded. "It's worth enough. More than enough."

He walked out of the room.

Chapter 122 (II) Minions [II]

"I'm taking the orcs with me and Uva," Shiv said. "You should talk with Null Mont about how we can cage them in the meantime. That, and if we agree to the Challenger, we might have a solution to the Lord Scorn problem."

Adam pulled his gaze away from his mother and frowned. "Solution? What do you mean?"

"The Challenger wants to connect the Vulketh Gateway to his Tutorial. Part of the demands."

The Gate Lord's eyes widened. "That sounds like another form of suicide, Shiv, giving the orcs a back door into our gate and the Abyss in turn."

Shiv paused once more and offered Adam a vicious smirk. "Yeah. For them. Talk to Null Mont about building an orc quarantine site or something—I wasn't actually going to take her with me. Spend some time with your mom. I'm going to break some vampires in half. Be back with new ingredients. Maybe some of it will be orc."

"Shiv, please don't make me get addicted to orc meat," Adam groaned.

“That’ll depend on whether the orcs stay wise or not,” Shiv replied. “Otherwise, we’re going to be sampling new flesh.”

Adam’s eyes lingered on Shiv for a few moments before a sob drew him back into the room. Rose was keeping herself together while Shiv was there, but now she and Adam needed to spend some time together. They needed this.

The Deathless felt a lightness in his chest. Dealing honestly with some of that made me feel pretty good. It was miserable as hell to face, but facing it made me feel stronger. Clearer about myself. A faint epiphany pulsed through him as he approached the open doors leading back outside. It’s not just physical and direct conflict I need to face. I gotta turn and handle the bullshit inside too. My mind might heal, but some of these thoughts are still poison for me. I need to handle them properly. Otherwise, they’ll get in the way of who I can become. And that’ll be a real tragedy.

Psychology 10 > 12

Philosophy 7 > 11

A rush of power flooded his mind and ego. Shiv blinked. Uva nudged him.

“Ah, shit,” Shiv coughed, slightly embarrassed. “Uva. How much of that did you hear?”

“I turned my focus away. But I know the feeling of someone growing psychologically stronger. Congratulations. You will make a magnificent Psychomancer yet.”

“Yeah,” Shiv muttered to himself. “We’ll see. Might be a race between that and Philosophy too. No idea why I’m leveling there as well. I don’t think I’ve read an actual philosophy book in my life.”

“You probably should. Understanding patterns and schemas of thought will make you write better as well.”

And that was all for Shiv. If it was going to build him up, he was going to do it.

He walked back over to the orcs and found Valor listening to Whisper go on about a certain Theorem of Lost Potential, and interrupted them by clearing his throat. The midnight-robed orc regarded Shiv with a glint of amusement in his bright yellow eyes. “Ah. Deathless. You return. As you can see, we have behaved ourselves.”

Shiv regarded the armed Umbrals and Weaveresses all around the orcs. Ikki gave him a nod, but Shiv could feel a shudder of fear vibrating inside her. He also noticed how Band was eyeing the young Umbral, just like Wall did Uva.

Shiv put a stop to that immediately. “Hey. If you don’t wanna find out if your violin can fit horizontally up your ass, point your eyes elsewhere.”

The orc offered a borderline apologetic smile and directed his gaze at the ground.

“You sound rageful, Deathless,” Whisper said. The orc was damned good at faking concern. “Did you have a particularly turbulent conversation?”

Shiv took a few steps until there was just a centimeter between him and the orc. “Stick your fingers in my wounds. Try to dig for details about me. Do it. Play these cruel games, and I’ll start talking to Mortar or Tequila and pretend you don’t exist.” Shiv looked Whisper dead in his eyes, and the cruel amusement there flattened to something of genuine appreciation.

“Ah. My apologies, Insul. I was mistaken about your character. It will not happen again.”

Somehow, that sounded like both a compliment and a threat coming from the orc. “Good. Now, get yourselves together. We’re going out.”

“To hunt vampires, I hope?” Mortar chuckled.

“Something like that,” Shiv muttered. “Null Mont!” The Exalted Weaveress flinched as Shiv called her name. He could feel her naked terror building—terror of the orcs but also him.

“E-Exalted Shiv,” she began. “Though I am deeply honored by your offer to deliver the Composer’s righteous wrath on the Bloodspawn, I think I must regretfully decline. My duties here are pressing and the gate—it needs—There are many needs.”

Shiv gave her a clear nod without mockery. He knew she didn’t have the mettle for this, but he wasn’t going to harm her ego anymore. That seemed to be the key to her. If you made Null Mont feel good

about herself after a burst of extreme discomfort, she'd let you get away with a lot. That, and it kept her idiocy in check.

"I understand, Exalted Mother," Shiv said. "Next time. And I'll be sure to remember your sacrifice when I'm pulling a vampire in half. In your honor."

She stood a little straighter. "Of course. My honor."

Tequila looked between Shiv and Null Mont before barely holding back a snort. "Oh. I see. Hm. Not bad. But I might have tips."

"Tips? Tips about what?" Null Mont said, turning some of her bravado and ire on the orc. Shiv's presence made her brave. It didn't make her any smarter. She had no idea how much danger she was in now.

Gonna need to save her ass before she gives the orc even more psychological insight. The big bastard probably knows how to manipulate her just from watching me.

"He's talking about killing," Shiv said, before Tequila could say anything.

"Killing?" Null Mont asked.

“Vampires,” Shiv finished. “Thing is, I don’t know if I need advice. Regardless, it would be great if you could talk to the Gate Lord when he has a moment later, Exalted Mother. I’ll handle this.”

“Of course,” Null Mont said. She cast a final glare at the orcs and walked away with lightning arcing off the metal quills poking out from her limbs.

Tequila glided to take a position beside Shiv. Uva glared at him as she began trailing behind the group. “You care for that one?”

“Not in the way you think,” Shiv said. “You won’t be able to get much out of me if you take her as a hostage or something. No benefits. Just consequences.”

“Oh, I know that,” Tequila said smoothly, blowing out a puff of smoke. “The one you’re most concerned about is her.” He cocked his head at Uva. “That’s why you killed Wall and mutilated his soul, after all. Because he threatened her and provoked your defensive mating response.”

“I killed him as a warning to the rest of you. And that might be more of a mercy than anything. You guys need to die to start back over in the Tutorial, right?”

Tequila eyed the others. “Indeed.”

“Then, if you’re feeling brave, by all means, go for Sister Uva. I just won’t mercy kill you after. How long can a Master-Tier orc Pathbearer live naturally? Without food or water?” The hidden grin on Tequila’s face dimmed until it was replaced by a look of consideration. “Yeah, you keep thinking about that. Whisper.”

Silver Tongue 25 > 26

Psychology 12 > 13

“Yes, Insul?” the robed orc replied.

“You’re taking the lead. Get us into First Blood territory. Uva will feed you all the details. I’ll stay connected to the rest of you through her. You want to have fun? Well, here it is. But you’ll be having the bulk of the fun. If I’m going to use you, I want to know what you can do.”

“Of course. Main objectives?”

“Reconnaissance,” Uva said. “We need to know the state of the First Blood’s forces in the neighboring region to better prepare for what is to come. Furthermore, it would be best if we can capture some of the First Blood for interrogation and...” She looked at Shiv. “Experimentation.”

“Yeah, let’s call it that,” Shiv grunted.

A sudden hum of a violin made Shiv look at Band. As the orc played, the winds around the group twisted and turned. Meanwhile, Mortar wandered behind Shiv and threw a heavy arm around the Deathless’s shoulders as he barked with laughter. “Experimentation. Love it.”

Shiv glared at the orc's arm, but he betrayed no discomfort otherwise. So, the psychological games are beginning already. Damn orcs just can't help themselves. They have to prod. And that might be my biggest advantage—I know their addiction. I just need it focused on me instead of Uva.

As Band worked his instrument at blurring speeds, the air twisted faster and faster until the light began to curve around the group.

"He's shaping a field of invisibility for us," Uva said with surprise.

"Is he now?" Shiv said, looking at Band. But the orc played on without ever meeting Shiv's gaze. This entire time, Band didn't say anything. He just played. And that made him the single most dangerous orc in Shiv's opinion. "Guess he's their dedicated caster. But maybe more than that."

"Definitely more," Uva said. "I'll try to pull what I can from their minds once we sync. I'll be subtle to avoid provoking them from turning their Magical Resistances on me."

"Don't do it if the risk's too high. We got other ways of learning about them."

He felt a rush of apprehension from Uva. "The risk there is that they gain more knowledge of us as well. Our behaviors, our habits, our weaknesses. They are all watching. Always."

"Yep. That's a godsdamned orc for you."

“How’s Adam and his mother?”

“Not great. But I’ll tell you later. When we’re far and away from these guys. I think Mortar’s trying to play up the big, dumb lug so he can read my facial expressions. It’s either that or he thinks I’m handsome. He’s looking at my jaw too much.”

“Hm. It is one of the better parts of your body. But it is already taken.”

Shiv’s lip curved slightly. Mortar noticed it immediately. And Shiv noticed the orc yawning—and using the opportunity to glance at Uva as well.

“Yeah. They’re going to make us paranoid wrecks before this is over. Listen. When you reach into their minds, be prepared for the itch.”

“The itch?”

“It’s... not something easy to explain, but if being an orc is anything like having an Orcish Skill, you’re probably going to feel a violent urge running under your skin.”

He felt Uva fortify part of her mind. “I see. Thank you for the warning.” She fixated the orcs with a stare, then. “Team! Prepare for synchronization.”

“Ready!” The orcs all shouted at once. Even Band.

Uva and Shiv both blinked.

Whisper grinned. “Before we begin, is this your first proper campaign, Insul? Because it isn’t ours. Do not worry. We do not need to be guided like hounds. We have the objective already. Soon, we will prove our worth. And then you’ll be agonizing about how you will be able to handle an army of us.”

“Yeah?” Shiv said. “We’ll see if that confidence is warranted soon enough.”

All the orcs looked at each other. A beat followed. They shared a booming laugh.

Mortar ruffled Shiv’s hair. “Warranted. You’re adorable, Insul. Bloody adorable.”

Chapter 123 (I) Minions [III]

Orcs call their armies orchestras for a reason. They make music with each other. They're not cooperating; they're just filling in the gaps. Make no mistake, every orc is a soloist. They play to their own beat, to their own tune. They have their own skills. They don't coordinate about how they develop, how they grow. There is no overall planning section. They don't have non-commissioned officers. They don't have commanders they effectively listen to.

What they do is discuss, observe, and adapt to what's happening on the battlefield, what's happening with the others. Only after watching do they strike. That's why their breakthroughs seem so spontaneous to us. Because they are. They're simply exploiting what another orc is doing, and they're all present.

When their counter-battery creates an opening, their frontliners will move, but at the same time they're moving, their Shadows, Assassins, Thieves, and more are ripping through our backline. Because they understand the simple fact that if the frontliners breach our lines and force the fight into the trenches, that's fewer eyes on them, which means more fun for them, which means more breathing room for their counter-batteries to move and fire again.

They're playing in accordance with each other's tunes. They're just not working together. Hells, they might tear each other apart on a whim if they don't like what another orc is doing.

I'm going to use an analogy that some of you might not understand. But they're all like jazz musicians. Yeah, the ancient style of music. They're all constantly improvising. But they're improvising on the basis that they already know tactics, they already have strategies in their mind, they already have skills related to both tactics and strategy, and they are trained. They're not untrained. Never forget this. Never, never forget this.

They've served in countless dimensions, on countless worlds, in countless forces. They probably know how we fight better than we do from all the lives they lived. This is not an improvisation born because they're just naturally perfect, naturally good at war. No, there's another layer to this. They're used to this.

So when you're fighting an orchestra, you can't just expect them to crack. Which is why we need to adapt to chaos. We need to break their coordination. Command, we cannot trade with them. Listen to me. Hear what I'm saying. We cannot keep trading with them. They're going to figure us out soon. We need to make them break cohesion. We need to make them botch the music.

-Hero-Ranger Morgan Munny

Lucian Gabriels never wanted to be a vampire, but when his genius Cryomancer of a sister got recruited, he came as a package deal. Now, Lucian was one of the worst vampires in existence, or at least that was how it felt for him most days. Especially with the way the other vampires treated him.

The first problem came with the elder who embraced him. Lucian's Lineage Core came from a 20th-generation elder or something. A 20th elder was practically a new spawn in their own right, so all that benefit of super stable biology and blood magic stuff was separated 20 times over from Lucian.

This meant Lucian got to experience fun things like regeneration lag, in which parts of his body healed slower than others when he got hurt. Also, he randomly coughed out lumps of cancer from within. Moreover, the elder who embraced him was kind of an asshole. He was the kind of asshole who gave Lucian a mop during a freak rainstorm and told him to not stop until the floor was dry. With the floor being a muddy pit outside.

His thoughts were briefly interrupted by something wet and slick smacking into the back of his head. Lucian sighed as he heard the other vampires laugh. Lucian looked down and saw a dead rodent sliding off his body, leaving a smear along his white leather armor. A set of bite marks lined the three-eyed rodent's ribs, and it looked practically deflated of blood.

Behind Lucian, the other vampires in his group sneered at him.

"Oh, sorry, farmer, I didn't see you there," a particularly tall elven vampire chuckled. "But the smear looks good on you. A little bit of red on a patch of white. Yes, indeed, I think you should thank me for this offering to your lacking aesthetic."

Lucian stared at the elven vampire and just sighed. Calum Gowain was better at being a vampire than Lucian, in practically every way. He towered over Lucian by at least two heads. Had a jaw that most

people could envy. A jaw that could break granite. His eyes were the palest blue, his hair was a flying tuft of blonde curls, and he took to being a vampire easily. He even had the elder's favor. Which placed him on the opposite side of the totem pole within the newspawn hierarchy.

It was the reason why Calum got to stand at the center of the group while Lucian had to wrangle the Blood Horrors in the front. Because Calum was a proper vampire, and Lucian needed to put his Husbandry

Skill to use. Because what other use was an Adept-Tier Spore-Farmer among a group of blood-drinking predators?

Not much was the answer.

Earlier, they had been tasked with checking in at a local observation post in the area. Usually, an observation post going silent was normal. The posts were connected to the local Fortress-City of Ur-Abathur by arteries, but there were plenty of underground lifeforms in the area. Sometimes, their tissues just got cut, and most vampires weren't the most punctual at fixing problems unless they were trying to impress someone above them. But recently, after an entire army vanished into Gate Theborn and never came back out, and then a Court Leviathan that brought over said army vanished into Gate Theborn and never came back out, the local Elders of the First Blood were getting a little nervous about more things potentially vanishing inside Gate Theborn and never coming out.

Or worse, something coming out of Gate Theborn and butchering everyone here.

Thus, a Third Elder told a Fourth Elder and so on until finally they reached Lucian's sire, and now he and the others were off doing a stupid task, for a stupid cause, because some other vampire wanted to fight a stupid war.

"I can't believe I left the spore farm for this shit," Lucian muttered to himself.

“For once, we’re in agreement,” Calum called from the back. “Why your sister strained so hard to bring you with her, I will never understand. But then again, how good can a Farmer’s sister be? It’s not like Cryomancy is rare. Could it be that she had other skills that attracted Elder Miana?”

Lucian kept his eyes ahead. They were moving through a forested path, and it was his job to make sure none of the Blood Horrors wandered off to attack a skaldeer or something. He counted the Blood Horrors with them again to distract himself from the other vampires. Fifty-two. Fifty-two in a bubble formation around his group of six vampires. It seemed a bit much to Lucian, but he wasn’t going to complain. He wasn’t much of a fighter at all, even with all the training the other vampires put him through.

Having Adept-Tier Toughness just made you better at taking damage. The fighting part was still a strange and terrifying mystery to him.

“So you agree, then?” Calum continued, egging Lucian on. “You agree your sister must have some other kinds of skills to lure out the favors of the elders? To suckle all that favor free?”

Lucian knew what the other vampire was doing, and he despised Calum for it. But Lucian knew better than to react. Calum was favored by Elder Wignaut, and he could do almost anything aside from killing Lucian without consequence. Lucian had tried to fight for his sister’s honor a few times before.

The crippling beating Calum gave him didn’t break his will, but getting impaled on a pike for a day and then forgotten over an open flame left scars deeper than the flesh. Lucian learned a few things about being a vampire. He learned that despite all this talk of family, he was on his own. And despite his sister’s promise, reaching out to ask her for aid was poison. Because she was embraced by another, and when different Bloodlines clashed, things could get very ugly indeed.

Especially for someone who was seen as a traitor to his line.

I just have to take it, Lucian told himself. I just need to stay as boring as possible. There will be more newspawn soon. He'll fixate on them. Just like he always does.

"Oh, Lucian, you're no fun anymore. What happened to you? Did me nearly drowning you in all that cave biter dung break something?" Calum yawned.

Yes. Yes, it did. Lucian never had much of a high opinion of himself, but suffocating in shit and being made to beg for breath and kiss Calum's boots drew him deep into the embrace of self-loathing. It also made him envy his sister. She was more like Calum. More than Calum. When she came around, Calum knew to keep quiet. But her presence cowed Lucian as well.

She clearly thought of him still as family, but—

"Shit in our veins, what is that? Is that fire?" another high vampire in the group called out. "Ur-Abathur didn't say anything about a fire when they cast those commands at me."

Lucian lifted his head, and his eyes widened. As he inhaled, the taste of burning flesh and ash flooded his nostrils. The winds washed through the woods, and the whistling breeze masked a chorus of faint screams. And through the thicket of vein-coated trees—trees twisted by the First Blood's Biomancy—he could see distant flickers where the observation post was supposed to be.

The Blood Horrors grew restless and agitated. Some snarled and hissed, while others began to trail off.

“No! Focus! Go straight!” Lucian cried out. He pulled at them with his feeble Biomancy and barely managed to keep them on track. Some of them turned and tried to flee, but Lucian let out a cry and forced them back into the horde.

What in the Great One’s name is wrong with them? Lucian wondered. And why is there fire? Is the observation post burning?

A cold chunk of ice formed in Lucian’s gut. He hoped it was just an accident. He wasn’t a warrior. Not even a little bit, and if there was going to be fighting, he would do anything he could to avoid active combat—to make sure Calum and the others were the ones that had to do any of the fighting.

Lucian didn’t want to die. But more importantly, he didn’t want to die fighting beside assholes.

And just as he had that thought, fingers as strong as iron bands clamped around the back of his neck. He could feel Calum shaping his digits into claws, feel how they were slicing into his flesh. “Keep walking, farmer,” Calum said, pushing Lucian like he was a meat shield. “Don’t flee now. We still need you hale and ready to guide the flock.”

Lucian clenched his teeth but didn’t respond. Because what was he supposed to do? What power did he have over his own life at all?

The smell of burning flesh grew stronger, but there were no more screams. As they emerged from the woodland path, Lucian’s jaw dropped as he stared at the blazing remains of the observation post.

Where the post was once an edifice of Biomancy—a massive pillar of flesh lined with many eyes and manned by vampires—now, it was a burning column. Its crackling brightness cast light on the walled compound at its base. But upon the walls were pikes. Pikes with heads and planted on them. And over the walls swayed the flayed skins of Blood Horrors and high vampires, flapping like bedsheets set to dry upon railings.

“By the Firstbloods,” Calum whispered.

Lucian didn’t say anything. He just stared at the carnage. At the brutality. Lucian had seen things—had been forced to do things as a high vampire. But this... This was a scene from a nightmare. Who could do such a thing to an outpost of vampires? And how could they get this far inside First Blood territory without being noticed? There were patrols in the—They had wardings and more. Psychomancers, Biomancers. How?

“There mus—there must be a few hundred heads on those walls,” Lucian breathed. He didn’t even notice when Calum released him.

The tall, elven vampire’s jaw was hanging open. The flames were reflected in his blood-red eyes, and for the first time, Lucian learned what it was like to see his tormentor terrified. But as Lucian looked past Calum, his eyes grew even wider, and his stomach plunged into a bottomless abyss.

“C-Calum,” Lucian breathed. “They’re gone.”

“What?” Calum said, his expression confused. Lucian pointed behind him, and Calum turned around. The rest of their group was gone. The other high vampires. The Blood Horrors guarding their sides and rear. All gone. Vanished. “What?” Calum’s head whipped about. He took a step away from Lucian—

And a crushing pressure briefly passed over Lucian. It was the same kind of pressure as teleportation, but subtler and softer, and a static veil of Dimensionality washed over Lucian. It became a barrier between him and Calum. Before Lucian could call out to the other vampire, a large hand wrapped around his head and held him still.

“Ah, ah,” a low, rumbling voice whispered beside him. A massive hand extended along the periphery of Lucian’s vision, and in the enemy’s other fist was a chain of Lineage Cores all bundled together by detached tissues and blood vessels. Gore dripped from the cores, and Lucian struggled not to heave as he tasted the scent of the blood.

Those belonged to the others in his group. He knew their stench—he knew it from all the months he spent beside him.

Lucian kicked and screamed, but Calum never heard him. It was like the—

“Stealth and Dimensionality make for a strange marriage,” the terrifying stranger said. “But a very amusing one. Would you not agree, little parasite?”

Lucian wailed. He struggled even harder—to no avail. He was plucked off his feet and made to stare at his captor. A massive, three-meter-tall figure held him like he was little more than a kitten. The monster wore scintillating robes of midnight, and Lucian’s eyes widened as he caught a glimpse of the creature’s gray face under the hood.

Orc! Lucian screamed on the inside.

“Sarah! Moore?” Calum kept calling, looking everywhere but behind. Not even when Lucian’s muffled screams rose an octave.

“There is no point to this,” the orc said, his voice a somber, soothing tone. “Within this domain, nothing that is said or done will be seen or heard by those beyond it. That’s why you didn’t notice all your friends screaming.” The orc held up the chain of cores and wiggled them. Then, he frowned. “Oh. Not your friends, then. What a muted response. But I should have guessed from how poorly they treated you.”

Finally, Calum turned, but though he looked directly at Lucian, he didn’t seem to see anything.

“Poor fool.” The orc sighed. “No Awareness. But also no clue. And if I had to guess, no hope of survival. Tell me—Do you want him to live? Blink once for yes. Blink twice for no.”

Lucian stared at the orc for a long second, but closed his eyes twice immediately thereafter. There wasn’t even any thought put into the action. He saw the opportunity to see Calum suffer, and he took it.

“Ah. I thought so.”

“Farmer?” Calum called out. “Farmer? Where the hells did you—”

The orc flicked his hand at Calum. Lucian couldn’t follow what happened next. There was a blur, and then Calum was pinned to a tree—with a massive blade protruding from his chest. The tall vampire’s jaw dropped as he started to scream—only for the orc’s Dimensional boundary to pass over him as well. Finally, Calum laid eyes on the orc—and Lucian swaying in the beast’s grip. His breath hitched. He extended his left hand and tried to cast a Biomancy spell.

But the orc flung something at Calum first, and the high vampire's left arm vanished into bloody mist.

Calum's screams were guttural and wonderful. Despite the all-consuming terror, Lucian tasted satisfaction at watching his abuser suffer. Then, over the orc's shoulder came an arcing flame, and it crashed down somewhere beyond another stretch of trees. Somewhere beyond Lucian's sight. A massive blast lit up part of the Umbral Wilderness thereafter, but the orc didn't seem to care. No. He was advancing upon Calum, and he had a dagger in his hand now.

A blade he pressed into Lucian's hand after releasing the poor ex-farmer. Lucian bounced on his feet as he stared up at the orc. Nearby, Calum writhed and whimpered.

"Carve out his Lineage Core," the orc said. The statement was spoken too casually for such a brutal command. "Take it out for me. I would be most appreciative."

"Nuh-No!" Calum roared. He arched his back as he tried to pull himself off the tree. "Farmer—kill the bastard! Pull the blade out—" The orc reached out and pinched Calum's lower jaw. He kept squeezing until Calum's chin folded in half along the base and burst apart in a scattering of bone and teeth.

"No," the orc breathed as Calum screamed. "Peace and quiet. Somewhat. Enough for you to make your own choice. Cut his heart out, friend. Please."

And despite shivering in terror, Lucian felt a warmth as the orc spoke to him. He felt an urge to please the orc—to make him happy. That, and the repressed hate Lucian held toward Calum, was enough to force his hand. His eyes met Calum's as the other vampire briefly stopped struggling and stared.

He tried calling out to Lucian, but his jaw was little more than a lump of hanging meat. Lucian clenched his teeth. "Call me farmer again. Do it?"

Calum shook his head violently.

"I said, do it!" Lucian cried. He stepped forward and held the blade in both hands. Tears began to roll down Calum's face as he writhed and struggled. "I hate you. I fucking despise you. All you've ever done is hurt me and insult my sister. I—I have dreamed of this. I prayed for this when you drowned me in shit."

Lucian drew in a harsh breath as his body teetered on the brink. He was trembling as he felt himself tearing on the inside. He knew there would be no going back for him in some ways if he did this. But in a few other ways, he wanted this. He wanted this more than he wanted anything in his life. Lucian hated being a vampire; he hated what the System forced on him, but he hated Calum the most.

Even if the orc was going to kill him, Lucian could... I can live with it.

"Hey, Calum," Lucian hissed. The other vampire stopped struggling again just long enough to give him a final, desperate look as he whimpered for mercy. "What was it you said to me when you forced me into the cave biter's waste? Oh, yeah: eat shit."

And he drove his blade into Calum's body. The blade bounced off bone, but Lucian just gritted his teeth and thrust harder. Calum howled, but the orc covered his face with a large hand. "Keep going," the orc said encouragingly. "Cut around. Slice and glide. Don't saw."

Against his natural instincts, Lucian listened. He respected the orc. He wanted the orc to respect him too. Slowly, he hewed through dense tissue and dug around bone to peel away the outer layer of Calum's chest. And then, finally, he pulled it down as he gagged at all the overflowing blood. Before him, the Lineage Core trembled with crimson mana and ceaseless, flowing blood. Even now, patches of flesh grew out of it, its regeneration strong, unceasing.

Lucian dropped the orc's blade as he swallowed back sour spit. He grasped the Lineage Core in shaking hands and turned to the orc. The towering brute nodded, and Lucian pulled with all of his might. With a resounding snap, the arteries and biomass connecting Calum's core to his body broke. Lucian looked down at the heart of his hated rival, and his shell-shocked expression turned into that of a sneer as he spat on it before offering the core to the orc.

The orc just smiled. "Nicely done. Was that your first?"

"I—Yes. Yes." Lucian felt like he was drifting inside. Part of him wanted to flee, but another part commanded him to remain in place. Speaking to the orc filled him with warmth and a need to impress. It was more respect than any vampire had ever given him. "Did I... Did I do good?"

"Very nice," the orc hummed.

Lucian swallowed and nodded. "So... Are you going to..."

The orc eyed him for a moment, and a cruel intellect gleamed in those yellow eyes. The orc turned away from him and looked up. "Psychomancer. I have a request. And a potential rat we can plant among the vampires. Come take a look at this one. Maybe he's more acceptable."

Another presence slipped into Lucian's mind. A subtle but insidious sensation filled him, but the orc shushed him before he could panic. "Breathe in. Breathe out. Don't let fear grip you. Pain and death are passing things. Just be present now. Root yourself in place. Your thoughts will betray you otherwise."

Lucian stopped shaking. There was something hypnotic about the orc's words, and Lucian wanted to hear more—He wanted to do anything to get the orc's approval. "I'm sorry."

The orc laughed. "Why?"

"Because... because..." Someone was rooting around in Lucian's mind, but all he could think about was why he felt bad.

The orc smiled. "Hm. I know why. Better than you. Perhaps it is easier for me to admit. You say sorry so the world will stop hurting you. So the other vampires will stop hurting you. It is the only thing that has protected you. More than your skills. You are so used to being pathetic even as a high vampire that it is the only comfort you know."

The rawness of the truth made Lucian dry-heave. He—

"Empty your mind," the orc interrupted. "Do not poison yourself with thoughts. For your thoughts are poison. They cannot be anything but after a lifetime of poison. This will take time to cure. Time you might yet still have."

Chapter 123 (II) Minions [III]

Shiv's mouth opened slightly as the vampire suddenly burst into tears. He hovered overhead with his Chameleon active and just watched as Whisper demonstrated his capabilities.

The orc's Dimensionality and Stealth Skill Fusion was already nightmarish. The fact that someone could have a ten-meter-wide Dimensional Domain that couldn't be perceived from the outside and didn't let sound leak from the inside made the orc's Stealth unparalleled. Shiv couldn't even feel the orc with any of his mana fields while the domain was active. Not even his Vitaemancy showed Whisper's exact position.

And that was due to another capability offered by the Dimensional sphere: You could only enter if Whisper wanted you to. Otherwise, you'd just pass through the other side after feeling a slight pinch of pressure.

But the orc was also more than just a sneaky, knife-wielding juggernaut who could systematically depopulate an entire base of vampires in under ten minutes. He also had a knack for dialogue. Social Skills. Very Evolved Social Skills. Social Skills strong enough to make a vampire turn on his own kind and then break down sobbing in the aftermath.

Now, said vampire was hugging the orc's leg, blubbering incoherently.

Another flash of flame rose over the horizon. Shiv looked, and he saw a swarm of Blood Horrors and vampires sailing through the air, their bat-like bodies flocking toward where Mortar was. But the orc would be long gone by the time they got there. Meanwhile, Tequila and Band were busy slaughtering every vampire response team they could.

As Shiv took a peek into their surface thoughts, he found Band summoning a small army of Dimensionals with his violin, while Tequila ambushed teams of vampires with his dual Dynamancy wands. Yet, Tequila didn't finish killing all the vampires. No. He would simply leave them mostly splattered before dropping

the corpse of another vampire among the regenerating horde. Thereafter, he would frame said vampire by using their weapon to stab and disfigure some Blood Horrors.

There's always more than violence and death with them, Shiv realized. They're all doing things to increase chaos. To make the vampires confused about who's attacking them. Leaving bodies of their allies—vampires from another Bloodline, I think. Burning observation posts. Bombing them from afar. Using Dimensionals. It's...

Shiv winced as he realized this was very much something he might do in combat. Chaos. Brutality and confusion. But the difference was that he generally acted on instinct, and they were methodical.

And now, Whisper was actively talking to the vampire—and Uva by extension, trying to convince her that they had a usable spy. "...But this one is ripe. You don't need to do anything particular. He already hates being a vampire. They abuse him. All I needed to convince him was a few words. I'm not asking you to alter his mind in the field—I'm just asking for a chance. An opportunity. To work on him. To see what we can get from him. It will be worthwhile to understand their culture and current forces."

"I can already scour their minds for these details," Uva said. "And we have no easy way to interface with a spy on our end. Better that he be given to Elaboration."

"Ah," Whisper said, holding up a large finger. "But that is where I must disagree. I have experience setting up networks. Networks of... dispossessed individuals. And though you are my superior in this task, I ask that you lean on my expertise and let me show you what can be done with so very little."

He gestured at the vampire, who continued to shake and cling to Whisper's leg. "My friend. What is your name?"

The vampire slowly lifted his head. He was bald, with a narrow nose and dark eyes. “L-Lucian.”

“Ah. Lucian. Would you like to return to your kind? Or do you want to come with me?”

“W-with you.”

“See,” Whisper said. “Look at how they mistreated this poor soul.” And he slowly began patting the vampire on the head. To Shiv’s astonishment, the bloodsucker leaned into the orc’s touch. Whisper wasn’t even doing any Psychomancy. All that was just from a few words spoken.

“We’re going to have to keep that one away from people,” Uva told him. “Band is the mage of their group. He has every major Magical Skill—except Psychomancy, it seems. Dangerous. Flexible. But still relatively vulnerable with how he avoids direct encounters. The one called Tequila is quite fast and accurate, but I suspect you will experience the greatest ease with him. His Chronomancy just seems to slow those around him.”

“Yeah. Meanwhile, Mortar is pretty damn fast for a big Artillerist, and—”

A chain of explosions tore across the land. Shiv turned to see a wall of flame blotting out part of the horizon. And just as he noticed that, Shiv’s body tensed as he sensed Mortar manifest directly below him. He dove out from the soil like it was a body of water and slammed down on the ground beside Whisper. They shared a look—and Shiv caught a momentary baring of teeth between the two.

“Deathless! I got the last of their outer observation posts.” Mortar staggered away from Whisper as he grinned up at Shiv. “The blood-lovers are finally scrambling their elites. Saw some of their Master-Tiers through some of my mortars, I did. Caught a few of my bombs before they fell too. One’s real quick. Quicker than me. Probably got a Hero in the field now. Would love to stick around and get bloodier, but I think we left enough of a mess. Most of their outer observation’s burning. Last patch of space before we start getting too close to that big scab they got here.”

Calling the local First Blood Fortress-City a big scab was an apt description indeed. But it was also kind of a heart. Connected to each of the observation outposts by subterranean arteries was a metropolis forged from luxury, slavery, metal, bone, and Biomancy. Right now, they were still on the far outskirts—the periphery of First Blood territory. Past this point, they would be marching toward Ur-Abathur, which was around forty kilometers of vampire-run metropolis guarded by uncountable amounts of Blood Horrors and more than a few viruses lingering in the air.

Despite this, it was obvious that Ur-Abathur was lacking in proper Pathbearers after the recent losses they took trying to take Gate Theborn. They still had uncountable amounts of Blood Horrors, but after all the skirmishing the orcs had done, it seemed vampires were primarily fielding Initiate and Adept-Tier teams as fast-response groups. It took the First Blood getting bombed for hours before their Masters and Heroes finally responded, after all.

Pair that with how they couldn’t find any Court Leviathans, and it seemed the vampires weren’t going to be able to muster another run on the gate in the next few days.

So. We got a little breathing room with the vampires, at least. More now, maybe.

“Right. Good work.” Shiv said.

Mortar just grinned at him—then the grin faded as he looked at Whisper again. “What you got there, sneaky.”

“A friend,” Whisper replied, scratching the vampire’s head like one would a puppy.

“A pet, more like,” Mortar replied. “Planning on nurturing another rat, are we?”

“Maybe,” Whisper said. “Planning on murdering another one of my spies before they be useful?”

Mortar let out a disgusted snort as he looked over at Shiv. “Not unless the Insul says so.”

“How obedient,” Whisper replied.

“Just prefer burning my enemies down directly. You can’t rely on pets. They’re too easy to domesticate.”

Shiv narrowed his eyes at the statement. He wasn’t sure if this was a deliberate performance between Whisper and Mortar, but there was some kind of tension between them. A difference of thought and an existing history.

“That might be something we can use,” Uva said, noticing the same thing. “We can leverage them against each other.”

“Or maybe this is just them playing with us,” Shiv replied. “I wouldn’t put it beyond them. Hells, I would bet on it. They’re orcs, Uva. They’re hyper-attentive. They won’t start giving us anything easy like this. This is just a little too sloppy.”

Psychology 13 > 14

The Umbral replied with a hum of agreement. “You might be right. Still. Parts of how they feel are genuine. There is something there—they might just be exaggerating it to make us react a certain way.”

Shiv let out a sigh. “Can’t let down your guard around these creatures.”

“I did it!” Tequila giggled. “Finally. Far too much work, but it finally paid off!” The orc’s amused laughter flowed through Uva’s Psychomancy strands, and Shiv directed his attention over to the wand-wielding orc. From behind Band’s veil of Aeromantic invisibility, Tequila looked on as two vampire patrols and their Blood Horrors crashed into each other. Shiv blinked as he noted some vampires already lying dead between the groups. The corpses were dressed in the fashion of the responding patrols as well.

“I managed to get two Bloodlines to fight each other—to make them think the other was behind the attacks.” Tequila rubbed his hands together and took a drag on his smoke as he watched the bloodspawn tear into each other. “Challenger, this was a thing of beauty. Love it when the prey do the fighting for me.”

Shiv frowned as he noticed Tequila to be a bit of an instigator. Probably needed to watch him too. But another detail that almost went missing was how easily Tequila and Band worked together. It seemed some orcs had more cooperative instincts than the others—and could even befriend or partner with other orcs. There was quite a difference between Band and Tequila’s interactions compared to Whisper and Mortar.

Yeah. Both definitely an exaggerated performance. But also some genuine animosity there between Mortar and Whisper. Probably be wise of me to speak to Mortar since Whisper's got some heavyweight Social Skills.

Awareness 14 > 16

The two levels of Awareness surprised Shiv, but also centered him. Awareness was more than just listening or watching. It was also taking in details. Understanding exactly what was being said and what was hidden beneath the surface. I need to keep studying them just like this. Watch them as much as they watch me.

"Deathless," Mortar said, his tone serious. "I'm willing to stay and fight, but if you ask me, we should get gone. It'll take them time to regrow these observation posts. They'll have to stretch more of their troop capacity in the meantime, so they won't be hitting anything. If our main goal is to delay, we got that. And we chucked plenty of the rats into your cape, so we got some prisoners to interrogate too." He looked at Whisper's personal vampire. "And maybe a rat. But we stick around, and we might be doing some dying ourselves. The vampires are stretched, but they're not that stretched. We're overstaying our confusion."

And despite Mortar's jovial nature, he seemed to be the most tactically minded of the orcs.

Makes sense, considering he's the artilleryist.

"Uva?" Shiv said. "This good enough?"

“Better than I hoped,” Uva admitted. “To see the First Blood deeply spent and vulnerable is a relief and an opportunity. I think Weave might be able to mount an operation here as well. I will need to report our finds. Thirty vampires should be enough to restore more than a few of Can Hu’s skills to a damaged state as well.”

“Yeah,” Shiv agreed, but there was an unease developing inside him.

“The orcs. Do they worry you?”

“Oh, yeah,” Shiv admitted. “Everything they did here was... They know more about this war stuff than I do. None of them really got spotted. They hit the enemy. They cut the observation posts. They led us through the territory without issue. Now we’re about to make a clean exit, and I still got no idea about their real limits. They’re playing a good game.”

“Indeed,” Uva said. “But you don’t need to watch them alone. And we might be done with the vampires, but there are other opportunities to stress test them.”

“Like what?”

“You said you needed more ingredients.”

A grin slowly spread across Shiv’s face. “Right. That. Alright. Patch me to them. Time for some new orders.” If commanding these orcs was going to come with a constant dose of paranoia, he was going to squeeze every bit of labor out of them as possible. And they weren’t just going to be used on the battlefield, but in the kitchen as well. “Orcs. We’re getting the hell out. Job’s done here. But we’re not going back to the gate yet.”

“We’re not?” Tequila replied. “Oh? Another Faith is to suffer a tragedy today, then?”

“Another place to bomb?” Mortar asked.

Shiv shook his head. “Nah. Have any of you done any cooking?”

“Yes,” all the orcs replied at once.

That surprised Shiv. “What? Really?”

“What kind of good hunter doesn’t cook?” Mortar asked. “Barbecue’s good for patience. And the way the meat drops off the bone... Mhm. Sumptuous.”

“Cooking’s good for the mind,” Whisper said. “And recipes reveal much about a culture and a people. It is too useful to ignore as a skill.”

“Food. Good with wine.” Band’s mind was a strange, jumbled echo of words. Other thoughts bled through, and Shiv couldn’t quite make sense of them.

“I like eating other orcs,” Tequila casually admitted. “They taste better with mutton, though.”

Shiv blinked. "I... Right. Well. We're gonna make a few pit stops to collect some ingredients. I want to see if I can bag a few more basilisks."

"Basilisk?" Whisper lifted his head.

Shiv looked down. "Yeah."

The robed orc just chuckled. "Say no more, Insul, for you look upon an orc with a Snake-Whisperer Skill."

Shiv's mouth gaped. "That's a thing?"

"Yes," Whisper said. "So is Basilisk Riding. They make for impressive mounts if you charm them. But I suspect that's not what you want, is it?"

It took a while for Shiv to recover from his moment of disbelief. "No. But... Shit. You can really ride them?"

"Do you want me to show you?" Whisper asked, smiling.

"Yeah," Shiv said with a nod. "Yeah. And you better not be bullshitting me."

Whisper placed a hand to his chest and grinned. "I swear to the Challenger that I tell no lies."

Chapter 124 (I) Commis [I]

"Alright, Chef. You're officially a commis now. You know what that means?"

"That you're going to start paying me to peel these potatoes?"

"You being a felling smartass with me, boy?"

"No, Chef. I just got used to saying yes, so you stop yelling at me."

"Oh, now you're being a smartass. Well, keep peeling those potatoes. Don't let me see you cut your hand. Otherwise, you're going to be peeling a thousand more."

"Yes, Chef."

"Alright. Listen, as a commis, you're not just going to be peeling bloody potatoes. You're going to be portioning meat. You're going to be learning to prepare the sauces. You're going to be chopping the vegetables. You're going to be cleaning up the kitchen. You're going to be helping all the other chefs at their stations. You're going to be working the grill. You're going to be making the soups. You're going to be making the pastries, and so on. You're going to be working under me and my senior chefs. So, whatever we need and whatever we can teach, you're going to be learning. Always."

"Yes, Chef."

"I want you to read recipes every day. Now, I understand that some words are hard for you, so I've prepared a dictionary for you. If you don't know any of the words, write a note and leave it inside the recipe book so that I can explain it to you later. What this means is that you're going to need to come in a little earlier, so you're not confused about what you're making for the day. Understood?"

"Yes, Chef."

"Right. But understand, you are an assistant chef now. That makes you a chef in training. You're not a janitor. You're not someone's serf. You do what me and the other senior chefs tell you to. But not anyone else. They have their own business. Don't let them offload their work onto you. If you do, I'll fire you on the spot, and then I'll kick their asses. Assistant chef is still a chef. You better respect yourself and respect the people you work with. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Chef."

"Good. Because without people like you, the kitchen does not run. Never forget this, Chef. It doesn't matter how high someone's skill gets. It doesn't matter who they are in life, or how supposedly bloody important and noble they are. Your skills don't define who you are. What you do, and if you show up, and what you give, does. This world isn't run by Masters, Heroes, and Legends. No, no, it's functionally run by Initiates and Adepts. People who keep the wheels turning, who keep the people fed, who keep the houses built, who hold the line, steel in their hands, and blood in their veins while the giants above them do their little dance and steal the credit. The world is commis, Shiv. Never forget that."

-Georges Archambault and Shiv

Adam drew in a deep breath as he basked in the light of his mana core. So high up, he let the core's hum drown out his senses as much as it could. His Awareness was still too strong. He could hear everything, and if he focused, he could see everything thanks to his traveling Heroic-Tier Awareness.

And that Awareness kept returning to his mother.

Their conversation had been one of beautiful agony.

Seeing her was... Well, there were no words for him to describe it. He couldn't have dreamed of this moment in a thousand lifetimes. For all he could achieve as a Pathbearer, defying death was not one of the skills he imagined ever having. But Shiv had that. And through Shiv, Rose Van Erren had been returned to life.

But she wasn't whole. Not truly. Memories were missing. Her emotional state was frail, and most interestingly, and somewhat terrifyingly, though she still had her Path, she lacked any skills. She was effectively weak as a Pathless right now, undeveloped, un leveled, a whole new person rather than the powerful Diviner she once was.

But by the end of her conversation with Adam, her Divination skill returned at the first level, as did Foreshadowing. He wasn't sure why that happened, and neither was Valor, but it likely had something to do with Shiv's Vitaemancy.

But all that was negligible to Adam.

His mother was alive.

His mother was alive, and she remembered him. She asked to hold him. He wanted to tell her so much, but ultimately, few words truly flowed. In place of dialogue, there came tears, and old memories were exchanged. Memories of her reading Hark! Little Sparrow to him. The book Shiv had used to prove that Rose was inside his soul. And when she mentioned it once more, Adam knew she was real. And that realization made Adam's insides twist in agony.

But it was a sweet agony, a delightful pain. He would experience this pain for every passing second across the rest of his life, if it meant keeping his mother by his side for good.

They'd moved her away from the infirmary, where the orcs suspected she was. A group of Umbrals was guarding her now, and she resided in a compound for dignitaries in the surface district. Even so, Adam's anxiety swelled inside him like a straining muscle. The tension there grew and grew like a coiling knot that got tighter every passing second, and the tension never stopped growing.

He didn't want the orcs to be where his mother was. If what Shiv had said was true, if these gray-skinned monsters were truly so smart, so perceptive, and so cruel, Adam didn't even want his mother in the same world as an orc. Precautions had to be taken. A great many precautions.

And though he wanted to talk with Null Mont about the orc problem, the Weaveresses had retreated to "consult with her fellow Exalted Mothers about problems." Apparently, consulting meant fleeing to her private quarters in the obsidian tower and drinking copious amounts of strange, bottled fluids.

"Another problem to deal with," Adam muttered to himself. "Wrangling a drunk, idiotic spider-wasp-woman. Ascendants, what has my life become?"

He watched as another section of the ruins flattened out. The rubble had been drawn out of the ground and shaped into a massive sphere. It was then flattened and placed beside several other spheres of condensed detritus. The Geomancers and Can Hu were going to start sorting out the materials within these spheres to see what could be extracted for use and what would be cast away.

Adam could still see and smell bits of flesh and crushed bone lodged within the spheres. A great many people had died during their struggle against the Reollector, and there was still so much of ruin to clear. But they needed space. They needed space because Adam was going to order the emergency construction of an orc quarantine zone. If they were going to get an orc army, that was going to be essential—the monsters were going to be restricted to their own area in the gate.

They couldn't be allowed to mingle with the other people here. Not the martial Pathbearers, not the Pathless or former slaves, not anyone. The orcs were simply too dangerous, and Adam wasn't going to risk them going on a killing spree or hurting anyone. Especially his mother. What kind of commander has to defend himself against his own army? Adam thought.

He drew in another breath as he tried to calm himself. Despite his apprehensions, they were going to need an army, and they didn't have time. The only other easy choice was the eldritch. There was no way Adam could lead an army that would drive him insane with its presence. He doubted that the Outsiders could even be led in any workable manner to begin with. So. Orcs it was probably going to be.

Blackedge was being held by Roland Arrow and Roland Arrow alone. Other defenders the city might have had at the beginning were nowhere to be seen, and though Adam wished to deny his thoughts, to turn from the most cynical interpretation of the situation, he expected most of the other defenders to be wounded, spent, or just dead. And Roland Arrow couldn't hold the town alone. Not against that monster Sullain, who now had some of Shiv's Vitae, and would likely use it as a weapon against Blackedge, if he figured out its mysteries before Valor or Shiv.

“There's just no end to the work,” Adam moaned. He rubbed at his face and felt his mental fatigue building. “No rest. I need to talk with Uva about this anxiety. It’s killing...”

Just as he mentioned Uva’s name, he caught sight of a shape slithering out from the Abyssal Gateway. A translucent string burst free from the Dimensional threshold and twirled through the air. Adam immediately recognized it to be Uva's Psychomancy, and he accelerated to greet her.

His vector-wings flared. The Gate Lord tore across the horizon. There was no buildup to his top speed. One moment he was still, the next he was moving at maximum velocity without any air friction or propulsion. He met the grasping strand head-on, and immediately, Uva's thoughts flowed over into his.

“Adam, prepare yourself for coming in fast.”

“Understood,” Adam replied. He fully opened the gateway, and it trembled with greater frequency. “How did it go? Any pursuers or problems?”

“Better than expected. Clean escape. But we have a lot of ingredients with us, so be ready for that. And don’t shoot the basilisks.” The source of this content is [No\(v\)elFire.net](http://No(v)elFire.net)

“What?”

Uva didn't blast him with memories then, but she did send several other images. Images of basilisks, of cave-biters being secured beside basilisks that raced across the Umbral Wilderness, of Shiv and the orcs exchanging curses and laughter while riding atop the monsters.

“Uva, what in the hells is even going on? What are you showing me?”

“You’ll see soon enough.” She sounded annoyed, but also reluctantly amused. “Just don’t shoot us.”

What was she— And before Adam could finish his thought, the serpentine head of a massive basilisk burst out through the Abyssal Gateway. A veil of static blackness clung to the huge creature for a moment, but it pushed through, rearing its body back as it let out a shrill screech. Its gem-like scales glistened beneath the azure light of the gate. And upon its back, Adam could see Shiv pumping his fist, while Uva's strand led back to a dense knot within the basilisk's mind.

Adam's jaw dropped as over three hundred meters of giant snake smashed its way across the gate. Umbrals and Weaveresses threw themselves aside. Recently summoned air Dimensionals surged to intercept the massive creature.

“Uva, are you inside the mind of the basilisk?”

“Yes,” Uva said, her voice deadpan. “Shiv especially requested my aid when he started losing the race.”

“The race? What race?”

And just then, another two basilisks burst through the gateway. They were equally large, and they blasted across the same ruins behind Shiv’s basilisk, sending tides of displaced rubble flying everywhere. The second-closest basilisk was being ridden by that orc who wore the midnight robes, and he

constantly whispered into the creature's ear. Adam could hear Whisper muttering random hisses, and none of it was comprehensible to the Gate Lord. But the snake seemed to understand just fine.

Behind Whisper, Mortar smacked his basilisk over the head and terrified it into moving by loudly firing flak into the air. It tried to bite at him, but he dodged back, laughing as he barely avoided death.

A final basilisk came through the gate carrying two orcs on its back. But rather than being mind-controlled by Uva, being whispered to by the Whisper, or bullied by Mortar, the last one simply slithered happily along. It snaked across the ground to the pace of Band pulling his bow, making his violin sing a jaunty tune while Tequila whistled along.

The absurdity of the scene before him managed to do something for Adam—something he didn't manage to do alone: it emptied his mind as thoughtlessness overtook him.

Some of his mental fatigue faded. He felt a sense of relief come over his being as his mind got a moment of rest. Rest, followed by immediate exasperation and the spiking of stress as he realized all the damage Shiv and the orcs were causing.

“Shiv! We just fixed the ground outside the felling gateway! What are you doing!”

Skill Gained: Riding Proficiency 1 (Common)

15 adult cave biters, 21 captured vampires, 8 tons of varied mushrooms, 2 tons of mangoes and loom grapes, one of those hypercaloric, amber-red, bulbous plant-bulbs found in the Umbral Wilderness, 20 tons of river fish, one ton of deep river weed, and the basilisks.

That was the haul. It was frankly a stupendous haul, an incredible haul, but most importantly, it was a haul Shiv couldn't have obtained on his own. Uva used her Psychomancy to render each of the massive serpents docile. Meanwhile, Umbrals and Weaveress came in to help them with the unloading process—but all the members of the Arachnae Order couldn't help but gawk at the large serpents now crowding the space below the Court Leviathan.

Yeah. Definitely going to need to start up a giant monster zoo for myself or something. Wish I could fit them in my cape, though. That would have made this easier.

Uva cast a psionic command. The basilisks' eyes glazed over, and their instincts to resist or harm vanished from within them. Even so, Umbral Geomancers came by to secure them in place, locking them to the ground using alloyed bands and barriers of concrete. They remained parked near Shiv's special cooking zone, and he let out a grunt as he picked up an entire cave-biter carcass as an offering for Courtney.

As he rose into the air, he stared down at each of the basilisks and grinned. They were magnificent creatures. He let one dose him with its venom again, and the effects of Plaguefueled spiked to even greater heights than before. And now, he had more than one renewable supply of the stuff.

Plaguefueled 63 > 64

The boost in strength made things easier for Shiv as well. The cave-biter went from being something he had to wrestle with a bit to merely a hefty weight he could drag in one arm. The world also moved more slowly, Shiv's body was hardier, and most of all, he felt good. Very, very good.

I'm going to need to make sure I don't get addicted to this, he thought. He was actively studying what Uva was doing for him, which part of his mind she was actively suppressing to stop the development of a lingering urge.

He didn't have her fine control over Psychomancy, nor her deep understanding of Psychology yet, but he was developing both of those skills. In time, he would be able to control his own mind completely. And that would allow him to get as plague-blitzed as he wanted while still remaining functional. Otherwise, he would be little more than a drunken brawler every time he wanted a major boost.

His Plaguefueled had amused the orcs to a considerable degree. Apparently, that was a skill some orcs had as well, but only the incredibly reckless orcs, as Whisper described. After all, getting Plaguefueled meant that the Pathbearer had to get extremely sick several times and had to suffer from a plethora of different viruses and diseases until their body finally fought it off.

Or until they died, Shiv thought to himself.

As Shiv had held the cave-biter up to Courtney, the leviathan simply regarded him for a moment before one of its tentacles descended, wrapping around the carcass. Shiv was glad he didn't need to manipulate any of its minds for it to respond, but as Courtney held on to the cave-biter, Shiv frowned. The leviathan continued clinging tight to the biter and did nothing else.

And that's when Shiv realized that Courtney wasn't very smart.

Courtney was, in fact, so stupid that she required an entire army of vampires to help her use her body and to do her thinking for her. She could do some basic things, but eating or absorbing biomass might be too complicated without someone guiding her.

“That's all right, Courtney,” Shiv said, patting a tentacle encouragingly. “You're trying. We're trying. We'll both get smarter.” He just let the Court Leviathan hold on to the carcass for now.

He would have to get the Weaveress Biomancer later. See if she could help Courtney digest some biomass. He didn't want the poor Leviathan to starve to death after all. And with an ample supply of her meat, he could provide regeneration to everyone. He still didn't know what a cave-biter could provide.

Probably nothing nearly as good as regeneration on its own, though.

“Always remember, Shiv. Shit ingredients, shit food, yeah?” Geroges's voice echoed through the Deathless's mind.

“Georges, if you could see some of the produce I have here...” Shiv muttered to himself as he looked down at his massive hall. Most of his other harvested dangled off the sides of the basilisks. “Ah. I'll show you when I get you out of Blackedge.”

There was enough stuff here to supply the Swan-Eating Toad for a good month or so, at least. And that was another reason why he looked forward to freeing Blackedge—he would get to show Georges just how much he improved. Hang in there, Chef. I'll build an army and get you out. Even if it has to be an army of orcs.

Chapter 124 (II) Commis [I]

As soon as Shiv touched down on the ground once more, he found himself intercepted by Adam before he could speak to any of the orcs. The Gate Lord immediately pulled him aside and gestured at the basilisks. "What the hells is wrong with you?" Adam hissed.

"Food," Shiv said.

Adam just stared at him and let out a low groan as one of his eyes twitched.

A large smirk grew on Shiv's face. "Are you going to tell me that you can't imagine this tasting good?"

"No. That's not the problem. The problem is you blasting the ground apart—and racing with the orcs. What are they, your friends now? I thought they were terrifying monsters that killed without blinking."

"Yeah, but... They challenged me to a race and shit. What was I supposed to do?"

Adam stared at Shiv like he was simple. "Tell them no?"

"Adam. I'm not going to let an orc beat me at anything."

"You are practically a bloody orc, you giant idiot. And now..." Adam gestured at the basilisk. "Fine. Make them into food, I guess. But dammit, we just fixed the place."

Shiv leaned in very close to Adam so that the orcs didn't hear him. Then he whispered, "Sorry. How about some pan-seared basilisk with abyssal mango and loomgrape glaze paired with cauliflower, mushrooms, and glass peppers? I promised to cook for you and your mom, right?"

Adam's expression softened. "Yes. You did. So. How did it go?" UPDATE FROM NOVEL(F)IRE.NET

"Pretty good," Shiv said. Then his expression flattened into one of discomfort. "Too godsdamn good."

As soon as Shiv turned to regard the orcs, he found them staring at him. All of them had their arms folded. They knew he was talking about them. Whisper in particular had a certain gleam in his eyes. A gleam that made Shiv more nervous than anything else. "We're gonna have to watch that one. He's a social expert among the orcs, and that's saying something considering they're all godsdamn social experts with Adept-Tier Social Skills at the very least."

In fact, it took Whisper promising that he would visit later to get Lucian—their turncoat vampire—to go with the Umbrals. Lucian was to be placed in a separate space from the rest of the vampires currently still stored in Shiv's cape. Whisper had plans for Lucian, and Shiv wasn't sure if he approved of this or not.

But Whisper was an experienced orc, and from what he claimed, he'd created several spy cells of his own in other dimensions and worlds across the Integration.

And if we can release our own spy back into the First Blood, Shiv thought, we might be able to counter everything they do ahead of time.

According to Uva, Weave had tried for years to infiltrate the vampires and bring them down from within. But though Aviary found the First Blood an open door, Weave didn't have the culture or the lasting infrastructure for such operations. Even the vampires who turned away from the First Blood wanted little to do with the Composer.

And more than that, Weave's campaigns against the vampires were usually either disruptive or defensive. The simple truth was that Weave fought to survive, while the First Blood spent millions of lives regularly just to expand.

"We'll have to talk with him at some point," Whisper said, looking at Adam. "You cannot hide him from us forever. And he is the Gate Lord, after all, isn't he?"

Shiv glared at the orcs. But Whisper was right. "Adam," Shiv said telepathically. "Don't let them smell any weakness."

The Gate Lord scoffed. "I think all the fear I have in me for this year got scared out of me by the Recollector already. I can handle a few orcs."

Shiv waved at the orcs, and they came forth immediately. "Watch them carefully. They like playing mind games."

Adam nodded and narrowed his eyes.

A social battle was upon them. Frankly, every encounter with an orc was a struggle. And this one held its own hidden threats and rewards.

“You called for us, Insul,” Whisper said. Slowly, his eyes turned away from Shiv. The weight of his gaze fell upon Adam with the suddenness of a stabbing blade. “Ah, Gate Lord Arrow, we have heard of your father, the mighty Roland Arrow. Some of our brethren had experiences with him.”

“Experiences,” Adam said dryly. “What kind?”

“The kind where they ended on the right side of his arrows.”

“The right side?” Adam said, confused.

“Yes, the pointed ends. The ends that killed them. Very good shots. We hope that your archery honors his.”

Shiv let out a grunt of displeasure. “Hey, Whisper.”

“Yes, Insul?” Whisper asked.

“Knock that shit off. I know what you're doing. Stop throwing Adam off. Adam, this one here talked a vampire into surrendering. But not before he convinced the poor bastard to cut out one of his buddy's Lineage Cores.”

“Oh, but that's where you're wrong, Insul,” Whisper continued. He also kept using Shiv's title. Shiv suspected that was to influence him somehow.

Psychology 14 > 15

And when he leveled up from that suspicion, Shiv figured he was right. “They are not, as you say, buddies. They might be vampires, just like some of us...” Whisper eyed Mortar, and the automaton-wearing orc just sneered. “...orcs of a feather. But we are not, as you say, affable with each other. Biological symmetry and racial identities are one thing. But personal preference and beliefs are another matter. No, I simply facilitated his revenge. Retribution he never expected to fulfill. I saw it in his eyes, you see. I read it on his face. He wanted to hurt the other vampires. I gave him his freedom.”

“How?” Shiv asked. “I am curious about that. You killed everyone else you came across. Took their cores. He's the only one you spared.”

Whisper smirked proudly. “Did you know that there is such an Awareness Skill Evolution that lets you read micro-expressions?” And despite everything, Shiv felt his curiosity provoked.

“There is,” Adam said, frowning as he confirmed Whisper's statement. “But that's usually something that those with the Path of the Investigator develop. How do you have it?”

Whisper's smile grew wider.

“Right,” Adam sneered. “Perceptive psychopath.”

“What an apt description,” Whisper replied with a grin, as if Adam was flattering him.

“Bit ugly,” Mortar said. “I don't like thinkin' myself a psychopath.”

“What would you describe yourself as?” Shiv asked, genuinely curious.

“Just an orc who likes to have a bit of fun. Set things on fire. Blow things up. I'm a simple fellow.”

Shiv snorted because he knew better. “This ‘simple fellow’ likes to play stupid,” Shiv said, pointing at Mortar. “But, uh, you could probably talk strategy with him, can't you?”

Slowly, Mortar's exaggerated smile died down a bit. “Hmm, talk strategy.” He looked at Adam. “Can you?”

Adam straightened his shoulders. “I will have you know that I graduated top of my class at Phoenix Academy—”

“How many battles have you been in?” Mortar interrupted. He leaned down to meet Adam face to face, but he made sure not to breathe on the Gate Lord. Instead, he started sniffing through his nostrils. “How many battles?”

Adam sneered. "What about you? You ever kill a Dragon-Knight, orc?"

Mortar considered that. "Well, that depends. What do you mean by kill?"

"How can it depend?" Adam said, scowling. "Did you kill one or not? Because I have. I brought down a Lance. We brought down a Lance," Adam said. Looking at Shiv.

"That's impressive," Mortar said, nodding. "And I have to say that depends on because, well, after my bomb went off, a good few of my allies disintegrated too." He let out a giggle. "Technically, I killed a few Dragon-Knights. I just wasn't supposed to. Real shame, really. They were nice blokes."

Adam grimaced slightly as he took a half step back from Mortar. "Shiv, I'm not sure about this one. He seems very likely to—" And then his voice trailed off as he looked at Shiv. "Never mind, we're fine. I remembered that we're already dealing with one destruction hazard."

"Hey," Shiv said. "I don't really—" And then Adam just stared. Shiv coughed. He had detonated his inertial sheath near Adam a few times. That aside, he was pretty destructive—indelicate when he moved around. "Shit," Shiv muttered.

"Hm," Adam replied. "You're becoming self-aware."

"Ah, problem with controlling the yield, eh?" Mortar replied, chuckling at Shiv. "That's all right. Every good artilleryman learns their lesson. Of course, usually someone else pays the price."

“What about these two?” Adam said, looking between Band and Tequila.

Adam eyed Tequila's two wands, in particular. And the orc had the audacity to wink at him. “You recognize these?”

“Dynamancy wands,” Adam said. “You use both of them at the same time?”

“Yes, it makes you kill twice as fast. And I like going fast,” Tequila replied. “Also like a few other things.” He clapped his hands together. “Like rice wine. You got any rice here?”

Adam considered that for a beat. “I'll have to ask one of our quartermasters.”

“You don't need to do that, I can ask myself,” Tequila said. “Just simply direct me.”

“No,” Shiv cut him off. “If you're going to do anything or talk to anyone, I or Adam better be with you.”

“You suspect us so much,” Tequila said, sounding offended. The orc almost pouted. But then he broke out in a smile and rolled his eyes. “Ah, I suppose I can't blame you. But can you blame me? I do like to socialize. I have to do it enough for the both of us here.” He briefly patted Band on the shoulder. Band nodded shyly. As shyly as an orc could, anyhow.

Band didn't speak very much, but he held on to that violin in a death grip at all times. Adam looked Band up and down. Slowly, he narrowed his eyes. His mouth opened and closed. And finally, a sense of certitude crawled over his features.

“What?” Shiv asked. “What's wrong?”

A moment passed as Adam eyed the orc and gave a small laugh. “You’re a Diviner!”

Band's eyes widened. Tequila drew in a breath.

“Yes, you are,” Adam continued. He pointed at the violin. “Not just a Diviner, your bloody Divination Skill’s mixed with your instrument. How did you do that?”

A loud, coughing laugh of incredulity came from Tequila. “Is that how you keep knowing what spells to use at what time? Is that how you keep knowing who to summon? You can tell what enemies are coming. You can listen in on the System strumming its threads using your violin. Band, you scoundrel. Why didn't you ever tell me?”

Band scowled slightly at Adam. Instead of saying anything, he briefly pulled his bow across his violin, and a horrible screeching noise followed.

“Ah!” Adam cried, clutching the sides of his head. “What the bloody hell was that for?” Adam's eyes came aglow with a violet hue. “Oh... Oh. How... That’s not... I didn’t know you could communicate with someone through Divination Music... But... You're a disciple of Vivalde? How? You’re an orc.”

“Who's Vivalde?” Shiv asked. “And did he just communicate with you?”

“Legendary Republic Diviner.” Adam's breath hitched. “He once trained my mother.”

Band pulled his violin once more, and Adam shook his head. “No, no, you can't.” Adam drew in a long breath as he reconsidered. “I'll talk to her later. Maybe, maybe it might do you both some good if you spoke, I think. I'll need to think about this,” Adam said, shaking his head. “I need to be present too.”

“What the hell's happening, Adam?”

“He's a Diviner. He used to train under the same master who taught my mother.” Adam eyed Shiv. There was something else he wasn't saying. Something about Rose and how she related to the matter. But Adam wasn't going to reveal it in front of the orcs right now. Probably wise.

“Anyhow,” Whisper said. “Not to rush you, Insul, but I do recall you boasting about your Cooking Skill.”

“Wasn't a boast,” Shiv said. “And you all promised to help me once we got back. I want to see how good you are at something that isn't killing. We'll be doing the cooking here.”

“What are we making?” Tequila asked with a glint in his eyes.

Shiv looked at one of the basilisks. "Remember our wager? Last basilisk to arrive gets eaten."

Almost immediately, Band began playing a mournful tune, and Tequila placed one of his wands over his chest. "Ah, Gemstone." He looked upon his basilisk, its eyes staring off in the distance, its massive, split tongue whipping at the air. "We will miss you. You served, and you rode free and happy. But this is a cruel world, ruled by cruel Pathbearers. Drift away upon that memory of your final, last, free, and jubilant ride."

It annoyed Shiv that Tequila's pre-eulogy for his basilisk started to bother him. "All right, well, Gemstone is going to be donating some meat soon. But I want to know how good you guys are as Commis. You know what a Commis is?"

All four orcs looked at him and nodded. "Yes, Head Chef."

Shiv's mouth slammed shut as he frowned. He was looking forward to explaining to the orcs what a Commis was, just like Georges did to him before. "Wait, just how much cooking experience do you all actually have?"

All the orcs stared at each other. And then they started smiling, showing rows of teeth. "Well, I wouldn't like to toot myself too much," Mortar said. "But I did run a restaurant chain for a while."

Suddenly, a clenching feeling of inadequacy overcame Shiv. "You what?"

"It wasn't very successful, and the lizardmen locals were extremely racist and hypercompetitive, but I still managed to endure for a year before they finally broke down my walls and set me on fire over my own grill before sending me back to the Tutorial."

“I was an assistant for a fey Alchemist who also doubled as a gastrointestinal healer,” Whisper said. “Their food and soup mixtures were delectable. The alchemist tasted good boiled too.”

Tequila comparatively shrugged. “Well, my main experience comes with mixing wines and alcoholic beverages, but I did learn how to cook to a slight degree just to have an accompaniment with my libations.”

And just then, Band pulled something out from his chainmail suit jacket. It was a blade. A blade that Shiv recognized to be Moonsteel. It was practically the exact same make as the one George's had handed Shiv before he was thrown off of Blackedge. Shiv's eyes widened. “How did you get that?”

Band simply grinned. “From Chef.”

“What chef?” Shiv said.

Band shook his head. “Cook meal, then tell. Or maybe not, if meal bad. If meal shit.”

Shiv squinted at the orc. “Do you know Georges Archambault?”

Band just sneered. “Will tell. Only if good meal. Not raw and shit.”

Shiv's lip curled. "Alright, motherfucker, that's how you want to do it? Fine."

"That is how I want," Band said. "Motherfucker."

Part of Shiv knew the orc was provoking him, but cooking was special. And Band was going to die of a food coma for this.

Just then, Uva manifested herself next to him. "Shiv, I—"

"Turn that one's mind off, Uva," Shiv said, pointing at Gemstone. "I got something to prove."

"What?" Uva said. "We need to process the prisoners. We need to—"

"We need to cook one of these basilisks. And they're going to help me," Shiv said, glaring at the orcs. "They're going to help me, and they're going to be the first ones to taste the dish this time."

And, as he said that, Whisper reached into his midnight robes and pulled out several orc-sized aprons. Shiv's disbelief only grew as Whisper produced sauces, salts, and other implements as well. "Chef," Whisper said, "do you have condiments, or shall I provide the ones I have on me?"

"Challenger," Shiv called out, "you planned this, you bastard. You blind-sided me with cooking orcs."

“So, is that a yes or a no, Chef?” Whisper asked innocently.

Chapter 125 (I) Commis [II]

“What the hell is this?”

“My apron, my knife. I understand that what I did today—”

“Shiv, fuck off. What are you doing? Get that thing out of my fucking face. I'm not firing you, and you're not quitting.”

“I—I hit the chef de partie over the head. I splashed boiling water in his face.”

“Yeah, after the cunt threatened you with a knife, after he fucked up my order, after he tried blaming it on you, after he screamed and tried to abuse one of my Commis. She's gone now—probably not getting her back, so that's one more person down for the kitchen. Soon to be two. You want to know why it's going to be two, Shiv? Because I'm running out of a Chef de Partie as well, and so long as I'm here in this town, he's not going to be working at the Swan-Eating Toad. He's not going to be working anywhere. And you're not quitting. You're not quitting for defending yourself or telling a cunt to go fuck himself. I told you before. I told you at the start of this. What did I tell you?”

“Uh, you told me a lot of things, Chef.”

“What did I tell you about respect? Respect your fellowships and respect yourself. Don't take shit from them. I told you that. I told you that a thousand times. You are not a slave here, you're not a serf. You

hitting him is a natural consequence of him being too much of a cunt that his cunt eyes have actually become working cunts, and he can't see what he's doing wrong. Well, he's gonna learn real soon. Yeah, he's gonna fail and learn."

"But, Chef—"

"It doesn't matter if he's more senior than you. This is a kitchen. We work together. We try to make food together, and if it went wrong with him, then he is the problem. It doesn't matter that he's higher up; it matters that the failure happened to him and not anyone else. We all fuck up. That happens. I scream, I lose my shit, I go outside and smoke, we talk about it. It happens."

"Yes, Chef."

"I can fire you for being incompetent as a chef, that's one thing. I won't hate you. This happens. Sometimes you're not fit for the job. Sometimes the skill just leaks out of you, right? It burns, and you're tired, and you don't want to do it anymore. Sometimes the world outpaces you. Never, never, never is there an acceptable case where a chef makes a mistake, tries to throw it on someone else, and continues working there. This isn't the government. We're not nobles or elites. We don't get a free pass to be shit. You can't get away with this. People have to eat our food. There are other restaurants to choose from. Do you understand?"

"I think, Chef."

"Good. Now put your apron back on, pick up that knife, and get the fuck back in there. There are cabbages that still need preparing."

“Yes, Chef.”

-Georges Archambault and Shiv

"We stand before you arrayed and at your beck and call, O Chef de Cuisine!" Whisper declared.

A grin adorned the orc's face, and he spun a knife in each hand. Both of them glistened, pure and free of bacteria, cleansed by magic and heat. Beside him, Mortar conjured a ball of flame in his hands and shaped a spatula from a hovering mess of metal. Tequila, meanwhile, juggled a series of condiments while Band stared at the Abyssal Gateway as he slowly dragged out wailing notes on his violin.

Shiv took in the orcs and squinted. This wasn't a cooperative kitchen. The orcs standing before him had arrayed not in support, but to challenge his authority, to find any hint of weakness within Shiv's emotions—any weakness in his cooking. He had disciplined them by breaking Wall earlier, but that was merely the physical struggle. The battle here was social, psychological, and above all, egotistical.

Cooking, like combat, was an essential part of Shiv. And if the orcs thought they were going to shake him, to find weakness here, they were sorely mistaken.

I am the pillar, Shiv thought to himself as he drew in a slow breath. He studied the orcs' bodies and found them utterly calm, and studying him as well. Shiv's fingers twitched. Whisper noticed. Band stopped pulling his bow. Tequila and Mortar grinned at each other as tension built. I am The Chef Unwavering. And today, these orcs are going to learn.

"Alright. Listen up. We're going to prepare this basilisk methodically. Carefully. Properly." Nearby, Gemstone lay unmoving, its heart stopped by Shiv's Biomancy—a merciful end delivered in prelude to a

new culinary struggle. "You're going to help me make this. You're going to man the stations I tell you to man and prepare the ingredients the way I ask you to. And when we're done, you're going to be the first to try the dish. And I will see you broken before me."

"Oh, will you now," Tequila said, yawning. "Do you cook with your mouth, Chef? Got a Boasting-Cooking Skill Fusion?"

"Can't be," Mortar sneered. "He's bad at the former. Might not be good at the latter since we're wasting time."

You son of a bitch! Shiv snarled inside. But outside, he kept his expression calm and his gaze focused.

Most of their secondary ingredients were prepared nearby. Cauliflowers, mangos, loomgrapes, glass peppers, mushrooms, and more lay in sectioned piles behind the orcs. At the center of the special cooking zone, the Deathless and the orcs continued their staredown as the Court Leviathan continued to wave the dead cave biter up and down. This made the dead monster's shadow serve in place of rolling tumbleweeds.

A small audience of off-duty Umbrals, Weaveresses, mercenaries, and more watched from a distance. Behind Shiv were Adam and Uva. The former looked confused, while the latter held a look of utter exasperation on her face.

Shiv gave the orcs a final glare before he continued his speech. "We do this the standard way. Preparations first. Portioning first. Cutting and slicing first." He stared at Whisper and eyed the stealthy orc as his first victim. He would break Whisper here and now so the other orcs knew what was coming. "You good with those knives, Whisper?"

"Some might say so," Whisper replied. He flourished, the twin gleaming blades in his hands.

"Well then, pick a side, Whisper," Shiv said, gesturing at the dead basilisk. "Three hundred meters. Plenty of space. Whichever end you want."

"And why am I picking a side, oh Chef?" Whisper asked. Intellect glinted behind his yellow eyes, and Shiv knew what the orc was trying to do. He was trying to annoy Shiv, trying to throw him off. It wouldn't work.

"Because it's faster if both of us prepare the basilisk at once," Shiv said. "I could do it alone. But this makes it more interesting. Doesn't it? Let's see who's the better cutter."

Whisper bared his teeth. "Ah. So it is to be a portioning duel, then. Do not blame me if I shame you, Chef. I choose tail."

"I'll take head," Shiv replied, barely suppressing a growl.

"Meet in the middle?" Whisper asked. He knew they weren't going to do that.

"We'll meet along the way. Whoever reaches the other first. This is a kitchen, Whisper, not a democracy. What we get to do here is determined by skill, by efficiency, by blade. If I get to you early, that means you're not keeping tempo."

Band vigorously pulled on his violin to give Shiv's statement a bit more gravitas.

"Oh, I'll keep tempo, Chef. Don't you worry." Whisper bowed lightly. Not slight enough to be submissive, but just enough to let Shiv know he earned a bit of respect.

Everything the orc does is manipulation mixed in with some truth, Shiv remembered. Never get it confused. Not even when they flatter you, Shiv.

Shiv never broke eye contact with any of the orcs as he magnified the size of his Skysplitter. He placed it below the huge pan he used to fry the Court Leviathan's tentacles. With a casual flick of his hand, he channeled a rush of flame into the blade as it began to simmer. Then, he noticed the ball of fire circling Mortar's right hand.

"Mortar," Shiv called out, "this knife is magic-amplifying. You got Pyromancy?"

"A bit," Mortar said. "You want me to heat it up?"

"I want you to get it hot. Basilisks have some regeneration, so we're going to need to burn this deep. We're making pan-seared basilisk with abyssal mango and loomgrape glaze paired with cauliflower, mushrooms, and glass peppers. Are we clear on this?"

"Yes, Chef!" The orcs barked as one. And they responded without a hint of irony. They were loving this. And Shiv was too. Godsdammit, this is kind of fun. Is this what it's like to run your own kitchen?

“As of right now, you,” he pointed at Mortar, “are in charge of the grill. Whisper, when we're done portioning out the basilisk—and we are going to portion this entire basilisk perfectly—you're going to be in charge of cutting the vegetables and other ingredients as well. Don't fuck up the portions.”

Whisper grinned. “Of course, Chef.”

Suddenly, a waft of smoke assailed Shiv's nostrils. He looked at Tequila, the wand-using orc, who leaned his head back and grinned. He was smoking two cigarettes at once and was placing sauce after sauce on a nearby table. The azure sun struck the bottles the orc placed down, and their insides came alight in a multicolored glow. “Smoking's for the outdoors. Snuff it out unless you're resting. You don't smoke unless you're on break. Got it? And we're not going on break today.”

Tequila nodded and drew in a long breath. Both his cigarettes were inhaled down to the nubs, and he spat them out, aiming at the back of Mortar's head. The large orc moved faster than Shiv expected. He caught the twin butts before they impacted him in a massive metallic fist.

“Use your Chronomancy next time, copper,” Mortar snorted.

“Copper?” Adam muttered.

Mortar gave Tequila a disgusted look. “Tequila here was a detective for a while. An inspector, even. HKPD.”

“They let you be an investigator?” Adam gawked.

"Why not?" Tequila shrugged. "It's my Path."

The Gate Lord's expression grew three times more incredulous that very instant.

"Anyway, Tequila, you're going to be in charge of the sauces," Shiv continued. "I need you to prepare the mangoes and the loom grapes."

"Can I offer a suggestion, Chef?" Tequila asked, now folding his arms behind his back.

Shiv's eyes narrowed. There was going to be a trick here. "What kind of suggestion?"

"I think we could use some wine with this. Rice wine. The people here look parched, starved of a good accompaniment. We focus so hard on the main course and the side. But what about libations?"

The Swan-Eating Toad always had a set list of drinks. In truth, it was not Shiv's expertise. He was mostly focused on food. So focused that he wasn't that good at baking either. And just then, Georges's voice echoed in Shiv's head again.

"You can't possibly be skilled at everything, even in your desired art. You don't have enough time. And those who'd have enough time still can't do everything at once, no matter how powerful they are. The important thing for you to learn right now is that you have to rely on other people. Let them do their felling work. Let them be who they can be, and don't get in their way. Even if they are an asshole, especially if they are an asshole, sometimes you just need the asshole to shit himself hard. That way, he can propel himself and drag the rest of the group with him or make a mess and clean it up on his own."

"If you can handle the wine without it getting in the way of your actual station. Sure. But doesn't it take months to ferment wine?"

"Only for the unskilled," Tequila replied. "I just need some rice and wine." And then he was looking at Uva.

"Turn your eyes away from me, orc," Uva said, her voice low and unamused. "I am not a maid for you to command. And neither are my sisters."

"But Sister Uva," Tequila said, making his voice seem childlike, "I don't know where anything is here. Please. Can you lend me your aid..."

"No."

Tequila frowned and turned a troubled expression on Shiv. "Is she this cold when you fuck her? Does she feel like an icebox? You into that kind of thing?"

Adam sputtered. Shiv gritted his teeth, and Uva's stare turned to a vicious glare. The Umbral's right eye twitched. "Shiv. Dearest. I fear this brute has tragically lost the will to live and is fated to die in his next mission. He will be surrounded by enemies after wandering too deep into an ambush. I shall mourn for him in advance."

“Poor bastard,” Shiv said, shaking his head as he looked at Uva. “Always saying the wrong thing at the wrong time.”

“Why are you looking at each other?” Tequila asked. “What are you saying? If it’s tips you want, I can offer them. I served as a sexual consultant for some of my colleagues while I was an inspector.”

“They will miss you,” Uva muttered darkly.

Tequila’s smile froze for a moment. “What?”

“That rice wine better be godsdamned good, Tequila,” Shiv said. “Otherwise, I’m not sure if I’ll remember you in a few years.”

“Ah.” Whisper sighed as he wagged a large finger at Tequila. “Our habitual line-stepper has stumbled over another line again.”

“What? It was an honest question.”

“And yours will be an honest death,” Whisper replied with a casual shrug. “Between the Deathless and the Sister, I think the former offers a better end. Especially since none of us will euthanize you if something happens.”

Tequila grimaced. “That’s a horrible thing to say to a fellow orc.”

“Think. Before. Talk.” Band grunted each word at Tequila while shaking his head.

And that was another thing about orcs—if you bit down on one of their mistakes, the other orcs might just join in on bullying them with you. Because everyone was fair game for domination and abuse.

“Should have just mixed the sauce, sauce-mixer,” Mortar rumbled, laughing. Then, Band and Whisper laughed too, leaving Tequila to contend with the hard gazes levied upon him by Shiv and Uva.

“Oh, Challenger, this might be a short run,” Tequila mumbled to himself.

“And Band,” Shiv said, staring at the final orc.

Band lowered his violin and grinned at Shiv. “Yes.” His voice was like gravel grinding against a chalkboard surface. “Your. Orders. Chef.”

Shiv had something special planned for that one. He had a knife—the same kind Georges gave Shiv. And there might be something there connecting Georges to the orc. Something Shiv wanted to know about. “I want you preparing the main dish beside me later. But start with the vegetables on the side. I want to see how good you are.”

“Why’s he special?” Mortar grunted. “This is bloody favoritism, Chef. I ran the chain.”

“Yes. But he has a Moonsteel chef’s knife,” Shiv said. “And I want to know why and from where.”

Mortar eyed Band and let out a grunt. “I could tell, Deathless. I could tell you all about this sentimental bastard. All kinds of things.”

“Fuck. You,” Band snarled at Mortar, but the big automata-armored orc just blew Band a mocking kiss.

Shiv’s Outside Context Problem trembled—and that provoked a reaction from Band. The musical orc’s eyes widened, and his violin immediately came aglow with violet energy—so much Divination mana it spilled into the visible spectrum. He pulled hard on his bow just as Shiv started to have a vision—the screen gone since there was no Rose to filter the details through. Before Outside Context Problem could trigger, the orc canceled it out with a screaming note from his instrument.

Outside Context Problem 61 > 64

A splash of Vitaemancy broke away from Shiv. The vision died. He clenched his fists—but froze as Band held his violin high.

“Tell. After,” Band said. A mana strand hovered just a meter away from his head. The musical orc glared at Mortar with an expression of loathing. If this hate was fake, Band was one hell of an actor.

“Shiv?” Uva said, her tone focused and cold as winter. “Are you alright?”

“Just fine,” Shiv said. “No idea what he just did, though.”

“He canceled out something,” Adam said. “I saw a pulse of Divination—broke my focus for a moment. It conveyed a message to me too...” IF YOU WANT TO READ MORE CHAPTERS, PLEASE VISIT [NOVE\(!\)Fire .NET](http://NOVE(!)Fire.NET)

“Told. World. Stop. My. Secret. Tell. Later. Cook. First.” Band sneered at Shiv. “Tell. Everything. If. Cooking. Not. Shit. Most. Cooking. Shit.”

And that confirmed something for Shiv. Band had definitely had an encounter with Georges before. “Not shit, huh? Fine. I’ll show you not shit. Commis! Stations!”

Chapter 125 (II) Commis [II]

Shiv and his orcs broke to perform their designated tasks.

Immediately, Shiv locked eyes with Whisper, and an instant rivalry was born. Shiv pulled out Halspur’s Perfect-Edged Chef’s Knife and a bone dagger. Meanwhile, Whisper gestured with one of his glowing blades and summoned a swarm more from the depths of his billowing midnight robes. The summoned blades danced around him, flowing to the movements of the blades like an orchestra would obey a conductor.

Shiv and Whisper briefly circled each other before breaking and moving to the opposite ends of the basilisk.

“Is walking around each other like two stray cats truly necessary?” Uva deadpanned.

"Yes," Shiv said, finally ending his turn and backing away from Whisper.

"Not doing this affects the cooking," Whisper replied, never taking his eyes off Shiv.

"What is even happening anymore?" Adam muttered off to the side.

"What is happening," Uva began, "is that you might be getting replaced as Shiv's favorite companion."

"What?" Adam asked, frowning at Uva. "By these orcs? Impossible. And also, I'm not his favorite companion. That's not where we are." The Gate Lord fell silent as he went back to staring at Shiv and Whisper. Then, his frown deepened. "Do you actually mean that, or were you just making fun of me, Uva?"

She eyed him with a flat stare that turned into a look of pity. "Oh, Adam."

"What? What?"

"You better watch yourself, little bird," Mortar growled out as he looked at Adam from the corner of his eye. The large orc released bursts of flame from the mortar on his back, slamming them upon the flat side of the Skysplitter. The prismatic blade came alight and conducted the magic, and the pan above it grew dull red with heat. "Think you're not that interesting compared to us. Can't even cook, can you?"

The orc's declaration made Adam scowl. "I can learn, you bastard."

Uva covered her face, trying not to cringe. "Adam, they're provoking you."

"And they succeeded. I don't care if I'm a favorite companion or whatever," Adam snapped, showing exactly how much he didn't care with his frustrated outburst. "I don't even care if Shiv likes me, but I'm not being replaced by bloody orcs."

Mortar then threw his head back and barked a loud laugh. "Ha! Goaded!" The other orcs wheezed. Tequila slapped his knee, and that just made Adam sneer at them. He instantly accelerated next to Shiv, who was standing beside the head of the dead basilisk.

"Alright, what are we doing?" Adam asked.

"What do you mean, what are we doing

?" Shiv asked, barely noticing Adam's presence. Right now, there was only he and Whisper in the world, and he wasn't going to let the orc clean, peel, and slice this basilisk better than him.

"The orcs are attacking me socially," Adam hissed. "And you said you'd teach me how to cook, didn't you?"

"I need to teach them first," Shiv whispered as The Chef Unwavering activated. The world glistened with a soft, white glow. Focus consumed him. "I am the chef. I am the kitchen. I am my knife."

"Shiv... Are you entering a bloody fugue state while we're talking?" Adam gawked.

"I am the chef," Shiv muttered, holding up his knife.

Whisper was reflected along the blade's edge, and the orc sneered at Adam.

"You don't belong here, Gate Lord. Here in the kitchen. You're not a chef. You should go back to where you're most useful." And Whisper grinned. "Maybe your mother needs another hug. But... maybe we might be better at holding her than you are? We do have longer arms. And more body heat."

"You piece of shit," Adam snarled.

Shiv held Adam back and simply shook his head. "Don't," Shiv said.

"Don't what? He's trying to—"

"He's trying to use you to throw me off," Shiv breathed. Shiv felt his Deepest Edge trembling within its blades, and it yearned to be unleashed. It yearned to glide across the entirety of the basilisk. When he cut, he wouldn't chip any of the shiny scales. He wouldn't hew too deeply or cleave off an improper amount of flesh. No. The scale would be degloved perfectly from the prime meat. "Adam. Stand back. This orc thinks he's gonna shake me—that this is going to split my focus. It won't. No more tricks, Whisper. I come for you."

The robed orc held out his arms. "I await your skills, Deathless. Show me!"

"Witness the end of your culinary ambitions, Whisper. In this kitchen, there is no god, no System, only me. We start when you slice."

Uva sighed. "Of all things that induce megalomania in a man."

Whisper scowled. "This is hubris, Deathless. But so be it." And as soon as the orc finished speaking, a swarm of blades exploded out from his body and began gliding along the basilisk's glistening scales.

Shiv's eyes widened as he glimpsed the path of Whisper's cuts. A swarm of blades was splitting between the crevices of every scale, loosening every single piece of the basilisk's body. Immediately, one hundred meters of the basilisk were flensed through. The cut was almost perfect, with only the thinnest slice of meat still attached to the scales.

Awareness 14 > 15

Precise. Controlled. Slight meat loss... His focus must be incredible to control this many blades. He must have Parallel Thinking. Too bad for him.

Whisper intended to chip away at every part of the basilisk piece by piece. Shiv was going to flay the skin clean off with a single blow.

He took a step forward and gathered his concentration. The Chef Unwavering lit the path of his cut. Instinct took hold thereafter. Shiv knew the path for his slash. He let his blades fly. All he needed to do was—

His chef's knife twisted unnaturally out of his grasp, twisting at an angle.

Shiv caught sight of a sudden shine lighting his blade—the same gleam that lit every single one of Whisper's blades.

It's part of his skill, Shiv realized. He has control over knives in general, not just his own.

Whisper grinned. Shiv's cut went off course while more of the orc's flying daggers zipped toward him.

Then, everything halted in a flash of gold. Before Shiv's blade could commit a mistake he couldn't recover from, he cast himself back in time and jolted back to where he was a second ago. Rage flared in the Deathless as he looked upon the offending orc. He was well within his rights to throw Whisper out of the kitchen. Competition was one thing, but risking the food over ego? That was unacceptable.

But before that, he needed to finish showing this orc how things were properly cut.

Yet, even as with time frozen, his daggers glowed with the same hue as Whisper's flying knives.

Shiv just scoffed. "Like that's going to stop me. Fine. Take my knives. I'll do this the painful way."

He summoned the power of his Biomancy and immediately flayed his skin clean off his entire body. Pain consumed Shiv, but after all he'd endured the past few days, he barely grunted. He poured that injury into a Woundeater and then unleashed it into the basilisk as a spell. At once, its scales detached with a rippling shudder.

The faintest cracks formed on his shell.

He conjured lacerations thereafter. The Chef Unwavering allowed him to tune the scope and severity of the cuts while his Biomancy showed him where to unleash the slices. Not having Deepest Edge made this harder, but still, he relished the challenge as he unleashed spell after spell into the massive serpent. A neat grid formed across its body as Shiv cleaved it apart with magic rather than steel. He glided through the air, spiking his gravitic field faster and faster to buy himself more time, surging his Reflexes. Inertial Overdrive thundered around him, and Shiv felt himself grow faster. With Plaguefueled boosting his physical attributes to an absurd degree, he shot past fifty spikes before his marrow began combusting within his bones. Even then, his flesh was slow to tear.

I love basilisk venom. Have to learn how to make my own.

Woundeater > 90

The drunkenness threatened to overtake him at several points without Uva keeping it at bay, but The Chef Unwavering kept him from the edge, and his Psychomancy did just a bit more to center his focus.

Soon, he was gliding beside the orc, finishing the slices on Whisper's end as well. As he concluded his cuts, Shiv glared down at the orc and let time flow—just as his temporal shell nearly shattered.

Whisper's blades stabbed down, but they were dragged out of position as Shiv plucked the basilisk's scales clean from its body and extracted its organs from its open mouth thereafter. The scales were flung into Whisper—but phased through him as he activated his Dimensionality Skill. Even so, as the massive swath of gleaming outer skin finished passing through the orc, his eyes widened, and he stared in awe as Shiv extracted the basilisk's skeleton with a gesture. The Deathless pulled every bone in the basilisk's body between its split flesh without displacing any of the meat.

The Chef Unwavering 57 > 59

The cuts Shiv made were delicate. Perfect. Unwavering. The bones hovered in the air for a moment, and then they were dropped beside Whisper as a statement. When the skeleton impacted the ground, Shiv slammed down as well.

“Clean this,” Shiv said, pointing at the skeleton. “Move it somewhere else and come back. You're done with the cutting. You support everyone else, you understand? You're not commis anymore. You're just a helper. You're lucky I let you stay here at all.”

Whisper's eyes widened in surprise as he sensed Shiv's genuine anger. “I... Yes, chef. Of course. But—”

“Facing off against each other is one thing. But risking the dish is shit I will not abide. You have the skill, but you're not the chef. You disrespected me and yourself when you pulled the trick with my blade. If the cut went wrong, the basilisk would be split, and the cuts wouldn't be right. In my kitchen, we do things right. No fuck-ups. And that includes you. Cleaning duty. Apron off.”

Whisper's mouth fell open, but Mortar interrupted him with a loud laugh. The pan before the large orc was white-hot now. "You always did like that underhanded shit too much. Told you. Told you he wouldn't appreciate it always. But you don't listen. Always think you're smarter than the humans. Or me."

The midnight-robed orc let out a slight grunt of discomfort and bowed. "I... Apologize, Chef." He handed over his blades in response. "Here. Take these—"

Shiv shook his head. "I don't want that. Those are your knives. I want you to clean the kitchen and do what the other orcs tell you to."

Whisper looked uncomfortable. "Everything they tell me?"

"Oh, shit," Tequila said, rubbing his hands. "Someone's been demoted to assistant."

"Within reason," Shiv said. "Now. Bones. And then support. Mortar!" he called out, turning away from Whisper. The stealthy orc almost looked ashamed. "Pan's ready?"

"Aye, Chef. Come here and see for yourself."

“Good. Band—” And to Shiv’s surprise, he saw a small army of air dimensionals circling the air, bearing the ingredients for the side dish in their grasp. Cauliflower, mushrooms, and glass peppers formed a whirlwind in the sky. There, at the eye of the food storm, was Band, hovering and playing his music. From his bow then came flashes of flame as fire dimensionals combusted into existence beneath the air. They unleashed their flames upward in bursts that splashed through the vegetables, and slowly, every single ingredient was being seared and prepared at once.

Shiv’s The Chef Unwavering Skill showed him just how well they were being cooked. The heat of the flames kissing the mushrooms wasn’t the same as that which coalesced over the cauliflower. Somehow, Band was adjusting and focusing the temperature and reactions of his dimensionals—and he fixed Shiv with a proud stare as he did.

“Alright,” Shiv said, slightly impressed. “Good leadership. Good eye. But I’ll see you on the skillet soon.”

“Skillet.” Band growled. “Make. Food. Good. Or. You. Are. Shit.”

The Deathless bared his teeth and removed the bone armor around his torso. He wanted to feel the heat more; he wasn’t going to half ass anything with Band.

“Mortar! Keep the grill going.”

“Aye, Chef.” Mortar chuckled. He offered Band a quick glance. “Looks like we got ourselves a showdown, Tequila.”

“My mithril’s on Band,” Tequila said. Somehow, and from somewhere, the orc managed to find a large lump of gelatinous rice. He was now mixing it in a water-filled barrel for some reason. “He’s got a spell for everything.”

“Heh.” Mortar grinned at Shiv. “I don’t know. I think our new Insul’s going to take more than a spell to put away.”