

## Deathless 126

### Chapter 126 (I) Competition

"I'm not sorry, father! He deserved it! He deserved every second of the pain I gave him! I should have hurt him more! More!"

"I'm not asking you to be sorry. I'm telling you to be controlled. Are you a Pathbearer, Adam?"

"Yes."

"No. If you were a Pathbearer, then you know that what he said couldn't be forgiven—but the magnitude of your retribution should have been controlled! You must take responsibility for your actions, but you also must feel their weight and choose the wisest option! The right choice! Always. The burden is impossible, but we must bear it. Because if not us, who will?"

"He said things about Mother."

"I know what he said, and that's why I do not blame you for your emotions, but condemn your actions. Do you think it doesn't bother me to hear your mother invoked this way? It does. I want to kill him for what he said. But I'm also over my emotions. And I choose what to do with my anger. You beat him, Adam. You beat him in a sanctioned duel. He was humiliated and broken. But you kept going even after the match ended. You—It is only by my name that you are not suspended, or worse. My name, and Captain Irons's direct intervention."

"What? Captain... Why?"

“Because he knows the cost of falling. Of letting our anger win better than even us. And he moved to spare you what happened to him. Adam... Come here. Come here. Let me hold you. There. Listen to me. I know. I understand. I am angry too. But we must be better than our enemies. We must be greater than our wounds. We must. It has to be us. There’s already too much darkness. Someone must bear the light. Someone must do the right thing—no matter what it costs their heart. Otherwise, the price only grows. And so does the pain.”

-Adam and Roland Arrow

Band didn't cook like a chef, but rather a conductor guiding an orchestra of dimensionals in a marriage of musical and culinary artistry. Fire, air, and water dimensionals emerged from pockets of vibrating Dimensionality—vibrating because they were summoned forth from the shivering strings of Band’s violin. The dimensionals formed a small whirlwind around Band, carrying him aloft at the eye as a maelstrom of ingredients hovered around him.

At the very bottom of the whirlwind were the fire dimensionals. They channeled heat and infused it into the various ingredients hovering above them. The air dimensionals guided the cooking materials on their path, spinning them in the air as if a belt of asteroids. Beyond that, the air dimensionals also formed veils of protection around the more vulnerable ingredients—shielding the mushrooms from any spillover heat. Finally, at the top was a small army of water dimensionals who unleashed sprays of moisture to help some of the ingredients retain texture and maintain moisture.

Shiv observed his new rival with consideration. Band was an interesting chef. He wasn't directly cooking himself, but he had his eye on every single ingredient in flight, and with a few pulls on his violin, he guided his dimensionals toward the completion of the side dish. Air dimensionals carried the vegetables through the air. Fire dimensionals seared cauliflowers and only singed the mushrooms. The glass peppers were entirely spared—to be placed around the outside per Shiv’s earlier orders for both aesthetic and taste-related reasons.

Not everyone wanted peppers, but if one wanted a bit more sting on their palate, it was just a bite away.

As the violin-wielding orc did a turn in the air, he winked at Shiv. From behind a curtain of hovering cauliflower and simmering mushrooms, Shiv shook his head as he called out to Tequila. "Sauces, are they ready?"

"Come take a look for yourself, Insul

," Tequila said with a loud chuckle.

The orc had both his wands out, but what Shiv noticed first was how thoroughly stained Tequila's apron was. It had the deep purple of loom grape juices painting its bottom, while its center was dappled in splashes of orange. Before the orc were two massive containers. They were translucent and plastic, originally used to store the raw mangoes and loom grapes before they were probably pulped and made into paste.

Originally, Shiv guessed Tequila would move the mangoes and loomgrapes into other containers they had nearby. But instead, and with a few mere gestures from his twin wands, the forces of physics performed Tequila's work for him. Claws of gravity came down, not hard enough to crack the containers, but just enough to smear the fruits into a fine, powdery paste. The orc drew circles in the air with his wands, and his Dynamantic field began to churn. They went from fruit to paste as the mass of loomgrapes became a thick curdle of deepest purple while the mangoes shone a near-gold beneath the mana core's light.

As this went on, Tequila kicked out with his foot several times, and Shiv wondered why. He got his answer a moment later, as, with each kick, the mango seeds started shooting out from the viscous mixture. The seeds blasted skyward a dozen at a time, and each of them was stacked together, vertically at first and horizontally thereafter. Soon they hovered above Tequila, and Shiv wasn't sure what the orc was doing.

Then, each of the seeds began to twist and wither into dried-out clumps. The moisture ripped out from them, condensing into a dense sphere of water.

Tequila grinned. "Saves me a little bit of Hydromancy later."

"Hydromancy?" Shiv asked. He examined the orc's mixture. The paste looked fine. It glowed soft and pale—The Chef Unwavering was pleased. There was nothing wrong with the paste. "It's moist enough."

"Not for the sauces. For the rice wine." Tequila chuckled. "I'm just waiting on some rice. Now, where'd that goblin run off to... Said she'd be back soon..."

Shiv wasn't sure how the orc intended to ferment the wine in such a short period of time, but he grunted and called Whisper over.

"Here, chef," Whisper said. His expression was entirely controlled. A little too controlled. Shiv's scolding had Whisper on his best behavior, and Shiv thought he could make use of that.

"You're going to help me portion the meat," Shiv instructed. "Here's what we're going to do. Leanest meat on one side—no fat there. Those are going to be our pure-flavored meats. Grape or mango. Then, section out the other meat based on fat. They will be our mixed-flavored meats: mango paste on the outside, loomgrape within. Got it?"

Whisper nodded. "Of course, Deathless. Is that all?"

"For you," Shiv grunted.

Whisper frowned slightly. "I apologize for getting carried away earlier—"

"We're done talking," Shiv said, walking away. "To the task."

Mortar let out a mocking sigh. "Oh, Whisper, look what you've done. You managed to talk yourself out of a proper job. Wait, you didn't talk to him this time. You just acted. That's the kind of mistake I would make."

Whisper scowled at Mortar. "Yes. I did. I suppose you always bring out the worst in me, Mortar."

The large orc regarded his stealthy counterpart and sneered. "You gonna do something about it or just bitch?"

"Knock that shit off," Shiv called out. "We're cooking. Not fighting. Keep it separated."

"Yes, Insul," Whisper said.

"Got it, Chef," Mortar agreed.

The two orcs briefly shared eye contact and bared their jagged teeth at each other.

Tequila just giggled. “Ah. Classic Clique warfare.”

Shiv stared at the sauce-mixing orc. “What?”

“Cliques. Orcs have their own separations as well.” Tequila shrugged. “Most of us belong to one philosophy or another. And being of a philosophy puts you at odds with another.”

“Huh,” Shiv said. That’s interesting. I should remember that. Might explain why the orcs are sniping at each other sometimes. Or maybe it’s just bullshit. Could be anything—they’re godsdamned orcs. Either way, there’s history between Whisper and Mortar. Ugly history.

As Whisper departed to help Shiv portion the meat, the Deathless looked in Band’s direction and nearly did a double-take. Streams of well-roasted cauliflower soared through the air, guided by the currents of air. At the same time, water elementals ran their whip-like limbs across the cauliflowers. Some were infused with a bit more moisture, and others had moisture taken out. Shiv could feel how thoroughly the vegetables were cooked through his Biomancy.

The finished cauliflowers began to spill down into a large ceramic cauldron, some hundred meters wide. After that came the glass peppers, glistening bright after administrations of moisture by the water elementals. Finally, the mushrooms fell as well, with columns of smoke rising from them, releasing a hearty, earthy aroma in the air.

With that, Band pulled on his bow a final time, and his dimensionals scattered, spreading across the sky and awaiting further instruction. The orc dropped in front of the ceramic cauldron and grinned. “Done.”

Shiv hadn't expected this. He thought it would take Band far longer to complete the side dish, but when one could summon an entire kitchen staff of dimensionals using a violin, progress was quick.

"Not bad," Shiv said.

"New. Task?" Band said, showing his pointed teeth in a large smile.

"Yeah," Shiv replied. "Have one of your dimensionals keep the side dish warm. You help me on main. Then we talk."

"Only. If. Food. Isn't. Shit."

Band gave Shiv another broad grin, but his gaze was filled with a slight hint of provocation. He gestured at his fire dimensionals, and he pointed at the side dish. One of them hovered over the bowl and unleashed thick waves of heat to keep the cauliflowers, mushrooms, and glass peppers in prime condition.

Just then, a blade tapped Shiv on the shoulder, and he turned. He saw a small swarm of gleaming knives sorting the basilisk meat in neat rows. The entire rearrangement took mere seconds, and so fine was Whisper's control over the weapons that he used their flat sides to pick the meat up and move them around. Soon, the leanest meats were stacked high at the front while the fattest waited at the back.

"It is done," Whisper shouted. He held his arms behind his back, and Shiv gave him a brief nod.

I'm going to ask him just want kind of Knife Proficiency Skill Evolution this is.

"Good job. You're on standby. I'll call you when there's a need. If anyone else needs help with anything, you call out to Whisper too." Shiv looked at the other orcs and waited to see how they might respond.

"Oh, Whisper," Mortar said immediately. "There's something you can help me with."

"I'm not sticking my head down your throat, Mortar," Whisper replied dryly.

"Chef!" Mortar grumbled. "Chef, I think this one needs to be thrown out; he's not being part of the team."

Shiv ignored Mortar's comment as he turned to stare at the mixtures. There was mango and loomgrape paste. Both tasted different. Both had an exquisite flavor. The mango was sweet, and when properly heated, it would create a slight crusty coating over the meat that should crack upon being bitten. Most of it would sink deeper into the flesh and seep in there as well. This made it ideal for the leanest meat. The loomgrape was the same, except it had a sour aftertaste.

But there was a problem with mingling loomgrape and mango—they both had different temperature thresholds. He couldn't just mix them casually. The fat in some of the meat would also catch the mango paste, preventing it from achieving a full infusion. Meanwhile, the loomgrapes were of a lesser thickness and often seeped through fine. Shiv learned this fact back at the Swan-Eating Toad. Mixing different condiments and seasoning was dangerous business. It was very easy to throw the taste off after getting something wrong.



But now that he was a Biomancer, he could reshape the meat. His current plan was to shift the fat around and have it choked full of loomgrape. The outside could remain dominated by the mango paste. This allowed a full spectrum of flavors, while the fat served as an insulating layer for the loomgrape as well.

This allowed for a perfect fusion in Shiv's opinion. The loomgrape was sweet on its own, but it also had some sour in the aftertaste, allowing it to synergize with both the mangos and meat. If done right, it could become an evolving flavor, something that danced upon one's tongue with each bite. But it needed to be done perfectly to truly reach its flavorful potential.

Shiv explained what he wanted done in detail to Band and the other orcs, and they followed along, offering grunts of acknowledgement. And while Shiv spoke, he observed Band's features. Slowly, that taunting look in the orc's eyes faded, and a sense of focus emerged thereafter in the form of a glare.

"Is there something wrong, Band?" Shiv asked. He looked at the stacks of meat glistening and at the ready, at Whisper standing by, at Mortar still heating the Skysplitter with puffs of Pyromancy.

"No. Chef," Band replied. "But. Meal. Hard. To. Make. Easy. To. Be. Shit."

"Of course it is," Shiv said in agreement, "but that's why we do it right, to make art from food. Otherwise, why move beyond scrambled eggs?"

"Why. Indeed," the orc replied. And he gave Shiv a genuine smile right after. "Fine. Do. The. Hard. Do. The. Art."

"Yeah, exactly." Shiv smirked. He remembered what Angel had said to him, as he considered just what it took to advance his skills. Strain, challenge, complexity. And to Shiv, the sting of failure was an acceptable bitter taste compared to the foul, fetid stench of mediocrity. He was going to be a Pathbearer on the battlefield and in the kitchen as well. If he was going to accept mundanity, he would have stayed a Pathless mortal.

"But if you think it's too difficult, you can step back. I'm not going to force you to perform beyond your level," Shiv said, taunting Band slightly.

The orc's eyes became pinpricks of yellow. He pierced Shiv with a stare. "Bastard."

The Deathless laughed. He learned something about Band—the orc was pretty happy to bite, but not so receptive to being bitten in return.

Yet, before they were about to begin, a voice called out in interruption. A familiar voice.

"Right, hold up, hold up!" Siggi cried. She let out a loud grunt as she and several other Pathbearers lugged a large crate of some kind that ground across the floor. The sounds of wood splintering filled the air.

Shiv blinked. "Siggi, what the hell are you doing here?"

"What do you mean, what the hell am I doing here? I got some of our rice over from the camp! This guy said he was going to make us some booze!"

That's when Shiv noticed how large his audience was. Previously, it was only Adam, Uva, some Umbrals, a few Weaveresses, and a couple of mercenaries. Now, there were well over fifty people nearby, observing this culinary adventure.

"Where the hell did all of you come from?" Shiv muttered.

As soon as he said that statement, all four of the orcs tilted their heads.

"A bit too overfocused, aren't we, Chef?" Whisper said. There was a hidden threat lurking in the orc's words.

Shit. I need to keep my guard up. They're gauging me for weakness even now. They probably have a guess about my Awareness being lacking. Not great.

Shiv shook his head. There was nothing for it now. He still needed to finish this meal. Just then, Tequila waved his wand, and the top part of the crate blew off. Siggie flinched back as the orc rushed over.

"Wonderful!" Tequila called out. Then, with a wave, the water he'd squeezed out from the mango seeds came splashing down. "Now. To ferment this thing quickly..."

"Siggie," Shiv said. "When did he ask you to bring this over?"

"Earlier," Siggy said. "While you were staring at the dimensionals roasting the cauliflower and stuff."

Shiv blinked. "Really?"

"Yeah," Siggy said.

"You were busy watching Band's troupe perform." Tequila grinned as he began casting spells into the water. "It was a good performance, so I don't blame you for being distracted."

"No, it wasn't," Adam snarled off by the side. "And you were whispering. You threw a pebble at her to get her notice."

Tequila ignored the Gate Lord. "My sauces are done. Permission to begin mixing my rice wine, oh, Deathless one?"

Shiv slowly gave the Orc a nod, too stunned to do anything else. Man, I really zeroed in on Band. I need to level my Awareness more. Speaking of Band...

Shiv stared at Band and cracked his neck. "Alright, Band, you ready? You know what to do?"

"Yes," Band said. "You?"

Shiv chuckled humorously. "All right, smartass, let's do this."

## Chapter 126 (II) Competition

A Woundeater flared across Shiv's arm as he reached out with his Biomancy. At the same time, Band leaped back into the air, drawing hard and long on his violin. A scream of notes sounded, and the air elementals washed down, crossing through Band's body and lifting him high into the air. He drifted above Shiv and briefly sneered down, as if a god staring at a pathetic mortal.

But these psychological tactics no longer worked on Shiv. The Chef Unwavering was active, and now all that existed was the meat, the paste, the kitchen, and himself. The orcs ceased to be people in Shiv's mind. They were just variables he had to account for. The whiteness of The Chef Unwavering consumed the world.

Shiv entered a trance. He focused on dipping pieces of lean meat first. He drenched them, massaged them, drew varieties of paste into them with pulses of Biokinetic power. Once more, Biomancy proved invaluable for cooking. He could feel the flavors seeping in, feel the mango and loomgrape juices spreading through the outer layer of the meat—spreading faster as Shiv stretched the structure of the flesh outward, letting the insides soak faster.

But as he did two at once, Band directed water and air dimensionals downward and commanded them to pick up the entire series of lean meats. They sailed through the air, hovering in the neat and evenly spaced rows. And there they stayed, in the grip of the air dimensionals.

At the same time, the water dimensionals splashed down from on high, their bodies like coiling ropes of rushing water. They reached out and used their Hydrokinesis to perform the marination. Thick streams of mango paste blasted high into the air. They directed their fluid jetstreams through each chunk of flesh and sank the flavoring deep with clenching pulses of Hydromancy.

Shiv regarded Band's efficiency ever so briefly. The orc was moving fast—his dimensionals using a combination of Aero, Pyro, and Hydromancy to set up and work quickly. Shiv continued on, focusing on his own task. He made sure his lean cuts were prepared properly and soaked all the way through. His meat retained a faint glow of white, while the meat that Band prepared flickered. Something was wrong with Band's preparations—something that offended The Chef Unwavering—but Shiv was too deep in his own trance to call a stop right then.

The Deathless walked over to the searing skillet with two hovering chunks of meat, each one the size of his head. The skillet was white-hot with heat now, made so by the gleaming Skysplitter planted just below. As Shiv threw one chunk of meat atop the skillet, it immediately began to sear. Shiv worked the mango-soaked cut first, watching it cook and manipulating the cut's shape to let the flames spread out and burn deep.

Rather than using the skillet, Band commanded his fire dimensionals to act, and each of them sent flames upward to burn the meat chunks hovering over them. They cooked fast. They cooked hard. They cooked the cuts inside and out, channeling their fire all the way through the flesh.

Meanwhile, Shiv was just one Pathbearer. He was a good chef. He made no mistakes and gave all of himself to the task, but even with the aid of Chronomancy, he couldn't keep up with an entire concert of dimensionals.

"Need. More. Efficiency. Chef," Band taunted.

Tequila let out an almost mournful sigh as he continued doing something to the soaking rice. "I'm afraid this struggle was never truly fair. He is but one. One against a maestro with an army."

Shiv ignored them. He focused on his own task. He felt how his cuts of lean meat burned with Biomancy. Felt how some patches heated faster than the others, and he shifted the tissues around. He was going to make sure it was even. That the flavor was fully spread out.

Band and his dimensionals worked fast and did good enough, but their cooked food did not glimmer like Shiv's. Rather, Band's finished cuts were coated in fading motes of white dust—unacceptable for The Chef Unwavering.

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Minutes passed. Band fried dozens of cuts while Shiv finished six.

At a glance, it seemed like the Deathless was far inferior—and far too slow to compete with the music-wielding orc.

“Come on, Shiv,” Adam cheered weakly off by the side. Shiv could feel the Gate Lord's body tense. Uva was glaring at Band as well.

They're focusing on the wrong thing. So is Band. Shiv scowled.

Band reveled in his superiority. His violin began to shriek notes of primal triumph. More fire dimensionals emerged into the world. Air dimensionals followed thereafter. Water dimensionals arrived in support. Soon, he was reaching out for the fattened meats as well. Two streams rose from the assortment of flavorings. The loomgrape speared deep into the first chunk of fattened meat, burrowing deep and fusing within the insides of its fat.

And that was when the meat lost its pale luster altogether. Something had gone terribly wrong with that act. It got worse as the mango sauce coated the meat's outside. What followed next was fire and a swirl of concentrated air, both unleashed by varying dimensionals. At once, the meat seared, burning deep, true, and completely as Band finished his first cut of fattened flesh.

As it was done, Band descended and had one of his air elementals hold the fattened piece of meat over Shiv. "Would you like me to take over, Chef?" Band asked, with a slight growl of triumph in his voice. He finally spoke a complete sentence, and it sounded like something was wrong in his throat. "Seems like a struggle on your end. Seems slow."

Shiv ignored Band for a moment. Instead, he held out a hand. "Wait. Stop. Watch me."

Ban blinked, unsure what Shiv was doing. The other orcs stopped what they were doing as well. "You don't stop," Shiv said, shaking his head at Mortar.

The big orc grunted as he continued applying pyromancy to the Skysplitter, managing the skillet's heat.

Shiv worked very differently from Band. Instead of exploiting a variety of magic and going fast, Shiv used his Biomancy as he unfurled patches of leanness from within his chunk of fattened meat. He let the leanness soak in the mango before flipping the fat deposits out. Then, he infused the loomgrape into the fat until all the meat was yellow or purple. The process took arduous minutes. And only thereafter did he use his biokinesis to reshape the cut back to its original form.

He cast the cut down on the skillet, and sweat poured down from Shiv's brow. Slowly, his body shrank as Plaguefueled wore off, but he didn't notice. He was fully entrenched in his actions, in the process of



cooking. It took a full five minutes for him to finish with that cut, but during all that time, Band just watched, his arms folded, unimpressed by Shiv's performance.

Whisper, however, was squinting his eyes. Mortar sniffed at the air, smelling the mixed flavors. Shiv grunted as he used his own Pyromancy in a delicate way, directing some heat away from the fat so the loomgrape wouldn't burn inside. The meat was bubbling, changing, and popping from the temperature. The fat expanded, and the loomgrape swelled with it as well. Shiv used his Chronomancy when things got dangerous—and he still lost a bit of glow. This wasn't his best work.

Shiv growled. "Shit."

But he was going to finish it. No matter what. And he was going to make the orcs try Band's cut and then his to learn the lesson he was about to teach.

At least I know Band wasn't trained by Georges now. He would have never put up with what he just did.

And after a long and arduous process, Shiv finished his cut. He held it up, and though it gleamed a bright yellow on the outside with veins of purple hidden within, the only color he wanted to see was that wondrous soft white. The Chef Unwavering painted the cut with a faint aura, and Shiv sighed.

"It's fine," Band whispered. "Can't be good at everything. Or most things."

"Everyone, stop," Shiv said. "Stop, Mortar."

Mortar stopped channeling his Pyromancy. The orcs gathered around him. "Band," Shiv said, pointing at Band's mixed-sauce cut. "Take a bite out of your fat cut, and then try mine."

Both pieces were the size of Shiv's head. Band frowned slightly, but he accepted. He bit down on his own cut first. His teeth crunched through the mango exterior, but Band frowned slightly as he chewed.

"That missing flavor," Shiv said, trying not to snarl at Band. "Those are the parts of uneven leanness. You missed those with your flavoring. The dimensionals are powerful. Pyrokinesis is useful, but the meat needs different temperatures for different parts. It's not undercooked—it's unevenly cooked. The loomgrape didn't soak in fully, and some of it isn't in the fat. That's the key here. You tried to shove the sauce in and left holes where there shouldn't be."

"Still not bad," Band complimented himself.

He held his meat out to Shiv, and Shiv used his Biomancy to pull away a smaller chunk before putting it into his mouth. He bit down, he chewed, and true to Band's words, it wasn't bad. Sweet came first, then the slightly acidic sour of the meat, then sweet again, and another, lasting sour this time, the grape's aftertaste. It was a journey of flavors, but it was an incomplete one. There were patches where the meat's sour overpowered the grapes, and it felt like a resurgence rather than a synergy—offering an intensifying sourness rather than a lingering one in the aftermath.

"Too much, too fast, too strong," Shiv critiqued. "Just like you. Try mine."

Shiv didn't boast; he didn't need to. And he was on the verge of being genuinely pissed off, so he didn't much feel like it either. Band was about to learn an important lesson about being a chef: not rushing. This wasn't a competition.

Band bit down on Shiv's cut, not expecting much, but as soon as his teeth clicked together, Band froze.

"This..." Band said, blinking.

"Yeah," Shiv growled. "You think about that for now. The rest of you try both." The other orcs gathered round and sampled both Band and Shiv's mixed-flavor meat.

After they did, Whisper spoke first. "It's rushed." He eyed Band and slowly shook his head. "I can taste it, the unevenness. You're supposed to build on the sour, not overpower it, not kill the sweetness entirely."

"Too many cooks under one," Mortar chuckled to himself.

Band continued chewing on Shiv's cut. His face was scrunched in focus. He was trying to find something that was wrong with Shiv's meat—

"If you're looking for a flaw, I already found it. I didn't heat it well enough. Parts are still uneven. Like yours."

The orc grunted in discomfort. "Still pretty good."

"Pretty good?" Shiv snarled. "The felling fuck do you mean pretty good? We didn't get a bonus to any skill from this. Do you know what that means? Means it wasn't good enough. Means it was shit. We're cooking shit right now, Band. Because we are competing with each other rather than trying to finish the food. You think that's domination?" The orc looked away from Shiv. "Look at me when I'm talking to you."

Band did. "No, Chef."

"No. Okay. So you're faster. So you can command a lot of dimensionals and get your cooking done—when was this a race? Tell me. Tell me when it became a race? I want to know."

"It's not."

"It's not. Great. So. Why the fuck are we doing this? Who won when both pieces of meat are mediocre? Who's the better piece of shit? Is that what we're fighting for here? Do we need to go back to scrambled eggs?"

"No," Band said, looking down at the ground.

Again, the orc seemed almost human—and actually felt shame. The other orcs were quiet too.

The scene was an odd one, a shrunken, human-sized Shiv chewing out monsters three times his size, but they took it with uncomfortable grace. "I understand you all want to dominate. I understand that you need to hurt, that you need to fight, to feed yourself, to feed that itch inside of you. But what we just did just now was make a lot of mediocre food. Are we going to get good at cooking by making mediocre food? Are we? Is that what we set out to do?"

The orcs looked at him. None of them spoke.

"Is mediocrity domination?" Shiv asked. He met the eyes of every orc and shook his head. "No. This is what Georges calls passable shit. Passable shit is still shit! If you are a chef, shit is not acceptable. Shit is what a Pathbearer trying to survive in the woods eats. We are not in the woods. We have time. We have the ingredients. We have each other, so the fault is with us!"

"We do not fight," Shiv began, looking at Whisper, "with our fellow chefs in the kitchen, because it risks the dish. We do not rush through the process, either. This is not a race. If you're going to race, then don't do it in the kitchen. Efficiency is one thing. Missing flavors are felling mess-ups for taste." Shiv looked at Tequila and Mortar. He gave them a grunt. "You two did fine. Looking forward to drinking your wine, Tequila. Good job with the heat, Mortar."

"Aye, Chef," Mortar grunted. A slight smirk adorned his face thereafter, and Whisper frowned slightly.

"Now," Shiv said, "we're going to do this together. We're going to start over from where we left off. We're going to do it carefully, and we're going to get this meal done right. It doesn't matter how long it takes. It's going to be properly soaked on the inside, properly marinated on the outside, and it's not going to have any missing patches of taste—or any overpowering flavors. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Chef," the orcs said as one.

"Good. Whisper, you're back in. No more fucking around with knives—just focus on the meat. Band. Use your dimensionals if you want. It is efficient. Just don't have them do this quarter-assed. They are not

the performers. The meal is the performance. The taste is a performance. This is showboating. No one can taste your song. Focus on the godsdamned food."

"Yes, Chef," Band said.

Shiv sighed. "I don't know where you got that knife, but I know it isn't from Georges. He would have never accepted this shit. You would be gone. On the spot. So. We're going to be having a conversation about that knife after we make something acceptable. If. But congratulations—the mystery you tried to build up earlier is gone now. Nice job."

Band flinched.

Silver Tongue 25 > 27

Shiv continued. "This was not acceptable. Showing off skills and humiliating me is fine if the dish is finished and finished well. It felling wasn't! We're going to be chefs, then we're going to do it to the bone. That means that we need to be great alone and perfect together. Not scattered. Not a mess. Tight! Together! Like a fist!" He held out a fist, and he shook it at the orcs. A few of them nodded, repeating the act. He didn't know if they were playing psychological games, trying to appeal to him to make him lower his guard, but right then, he didn't care. The dish came first. "Do it right. Or you're just wasting your time here. There is no dominance in half-assing."

He turned to Adam and Uva, and now they were looking on, both of them seeming entranced by the sight.

"Adam," Shiv said, slightly apologetic. "It's going to take a while longer for me to finish this."

"What?" Adam blinked, breaking from the stupor. "Oh, no, no, it's fine. It's just... Take as long as you need to." He nodded. "Did... did you just chew out a group of orcs?"

"No. I chewed out a group of chefs," Shiv replied. "And they're going to do it right now. Aren't they."

"Aye, chef!" The orcs called out. "As long as it takes!"

"Good," Shiv said. "Let's get this done right now."

And as the Deathless and the orcs attacked the recipe with renewed vigor, Adam leaned closer to Uva. "I think... I think this might work. I think Shiv might be able to control the orcs."

"I don't know about control," Uva said, an equally surprised look on her face. "But compel? Command the respect of? Yes. He... He seems to have an intuitive understanding of their nature."

Both watched as Shiv shouted commands and the orcs obeyed.

Adam let out a breath and rubbed his face. "Ascendants. We're going to be saving Blackedge with an orc army. How the hells did I get here?"

The Chef Unwavering 60 > 62

## Chapter 127 (I) Infusion

As Pathbearers, we constantly evolve. Our skills are engines of metamorphoses. With every experience, every feat, every trial we survive, they grow, watered by the stories of our lives, shaped by our rising legend.

From Initiate to Hero, our Skill Evolutions evolve of their own accord. They are shaped by our choices, by our actions, by what we lived through. But we don't choose what they become. It is an unconscious progression, and that seems to be the case of things. But when you reach the Legendary Tier, everything changes.

You delve into yourself for the first time. I remember when I first descended into myself. I came back less than who I was, or so it felt at first. I thought I'd lost something.

Focus, Udrael. Center yourself.

Legendary. Legendary is where things begin. It's not where they end. Legendary is where you start determining your true path. Your path to the future. No longer can you just let your skills evolve without thinking, without guidance. No. You must become an embodiment of your skill, then. And that embodiment will reshape you utterly. And therefore, a fusion begins. One that allows us to undergo a grander metamorphosis. A spiritual metamorphosis. Greater than anything that came before.

But that is our limit for now. Our ceiling. There is not enough mana in our world to let us evolve faster, to grow stronger, to reach further. But I need it. I need more mana. I need more evolutions. Even with my Legendary skills, it is not enough for my projects, for what I want to achieve.



It's not enough. It's not enough. It's not enough. It will never be enough. It will never. It will never...

I will. I will find a way. I will find a way and make it enough. I will.

I need to consider all my options. I need to consider an incursion. Whichever one I might be able to invoke. The continuation of the project is priority above all.

No matter the cost. No matter the cost.

I will bring her back. And I will break the System.

Do you hear me, System? Do you? Are you even capable of it? I will come for you. I will...

-Udraal Thann's Animancy Notes

The orcs were some of the finest chefs Shiv had ever worked with, aside from Georges. All it took was getting them to focus on the right thing. Everything led back to dominance with the orcs. Previously, they were trying to dominate him, to humiliate him by proving their own skills superior. In the process, they failed the dish, and now their own pride was on the line. Now, the orcs turned their collective efforts to making sure the food was made and made well, because what was the point of being better than Shiv if they botched the cooking?

There was nothing to be gained from shared failure.

And that got Shiv to realize the orcs weren't just cruel monsters. They were also Pathbearers—Pathbearers who desired to grow, to prevail, to achieve, experience, and more. Every one of the orcs was different from the others in major and minor ways, but all of them cared about being competent.

Whatever their personality, the orcs were extremely self-motivated. They didn't shrink away from defeat or discomfort. The only thing that truly stung their egos was shame. Shame that they betrayed their own strength to show up Shiv.

Because I'm just an interesting whetstone to them, Shiv guessed. They're not going to betray their strength just to inflict weakness on me. They're trying to get something meaningful out of this conflict too.

This understanding accompanied Shiv as he and the orcs worked to finish the recipe. After handling a few more cuts, he let Whisper do the leaner ones. The orc's control over his knives was spectacular, but his lack of Hydromancy, Pyromancy, and Biomancy made him best suited for the pure-flavored cuts.

Band, meanwhile, reduced the amount of dimensionals he directed, bringing them down to only ten. Instead of hovering in the air and doing flourishes, he was on the ground with Shiv. And he pulled at his bow as if it was a surgical instrument. His eyes were narrow. And he showed Shiv every piece of meat he finished to make sure it went well—neither of them moved on until The Chef Unwavering painted the meat good and bright.

At the same time, Mortar monitored the skillet's heat. Despite being the most brutish of the orcs on the surface, Mortar was quite the communicator. He persistently and constantly checked with Shiv about the temperature, and did everything he could to achieve the perfect sear.

And off by the side, the sweet smell of rice wine filled the air, as Tequila finished concocting his alcoholic beverage. Shiv wasn't sure how the orc did it that fast, so he must have had a skill, and a good one at that. When he was done, he joined in on marinating the meats as well, and his Awareness of just how suffused every cut was rivaled Shiv's.

Alone, it would have taken Shiv a full day of unceasing work to prepare the pan-seared basilisk with abyssal mango and loomgrape glaze paired with cauliflower, mushrooms, and glass peppers. Together, they did it in around four hours. Check latest chapters at [novelfire.net](http://novelfire.net)

When the dishes were done, pillars of delectable smoke climbed high into the air, folding along the underside of the Court Leviathan and coating it in steam. Two mountains rose high below. The first was made up of neatly cut bricks of meat. Equal portions of purple and yellow meats were stacked high at the center where the lean, pure-flavored meats were. On the sides were the mixtures—the mango and loomgrape blends stored within the fattened cuts. The pan-seared basilisk with abyssal mango and loomgrape glaze was as colorful as it was flavorful, and it proved a radiant accompaniment to the mushroom-crowned and glass pepper encircled hill of cauliflower that loomed nearby.

The Umbrals and Weaveresses moved in to start delivering some of the food across the gate, but the ones who were present received plates and were invited to dig in on the spot. Rice wine flowed as well, and its alcoholic sting proved the main attraction for some mercenaries who came seeking drunkenness.

Meanwhile, Shiv found himself having a stare-down with the orcs again, but this time, he had Adam and Uva by his side.

“So,” Whisper said, skewering a piece of meat with a gleaming blade and holding it up before the Deathless, “it has come to this. Time to see if our efforts have borne fruit.”

"If not, we're all in agreement about blaming the Insul, yes?" Tequila asked. Three cigarettes bounced up and down with his moving lips, and he somehow managed a brief sip of rice wine while speaking as well.

"Yeah," Band growled, grinning at Shiv.

Mortar chuckled. "Can't be anyone else's fault by this point."

"Yeah, yeah, kiss my godsdamned ass, assholes." Shiv snorted. He looked down at the food on his own plate and let out an anxious breath. "Alright. Let's see if this is more than shit this time."

He levitated a piece of fattened meat using his Biomancy and slid it into his mouth. A chunk of yellow-crust and purple-veined basilisk meat vanished behind Shiv's teeth. With each bite, the flavors of the meal danced together upon his tongue, evolving from sweet, to acidic and sour, to sweet again, with a final lingering sourness to seal the deal.

This was the taste he had been chasing. And it had worked. More importantly...

Pan-seared Basilisk with Abyssal Mango and Loomgrape Glaze paired with Cauliflower, Mushrooms, and Glass Peppers has boosted your Toughness and Reflexes and given you Basilisk Venom Immunity.

Skill Gained: Leadership 1 (Common)

The Chef Unwavering 62 > 63

The movements of the world around Shiv slowed slightly, but he felt his flesh harden, felt his nerves ignite with buzzing energy, and felt something swell inside his blood. He guessed the last sensation was him getting venom immunity. That made him frown a bit. Before Plaguefueled, he would have found that to be a spectacular boost. Now, it was getting in the way of one of his best boosting skills.

Need to start adding a section to the recipe list about foods that I can feed other people but shouldn't eat myself. I'm going to have to develop something like a skill diet.

The orcs ate their fill as well, and each of them nodded or let out grunts of satisfaction.

"A job well done," Whisper said. "I can feel my nervous system firing. I haven't gotten that from a meal in a while."

"I can feel my ass getting firmer," Mortar said.

"You don't have an ass anymore, Mortar," Tequila said as he threw down some more rice wine before he finished chewing his meat. "But somehow, I get what you mean."

"Chef. Unwavering." Band growled as he swallowed his piece of the pan-seared basilisk.

Shiv's attention snapped back to the orc as Adam and Uva bit into their food for the first time. "Yeah. You know the skill."

"Yeah. Not. Surprised. Student. Of. Georges." Band chewed on a bit of cauliflower, deliberately ignoring Shiv's glare.

"What do you know about Georges?" Shiv asked.

"Faced. Him. Once." Band coughed, and he clutched at his throat.

"And what's up with your voice? It sounds like you're shitting a knife up your throat every time you speak."

"He's Cursed," Tequila said. "Got into a bit of a fight with a Fae Loreshaper some few years back. Now, he has to use his violin to sing for him. Before, oh, Insul, you should have heard his voice. It was magnificent. And quite devastating. His Physicality was mixed in with his voice, and with each cry came the force of a hurricane."

"And now you have to fight to spit out every syllable," Shiv muttered. He almost felt bad for the orc, but Band broke Shiv's sympathy by just shrugging.

"Just skills. Just a life. Things gained. Things lost. Nothing special."

The Deathless couldn't understand that. Losing a skill was one of the truest fears he still had. He never wanted to be like Valor or Can Hu. "Our skills are what makes us who we are. You don't care about losing them?"

Band regarded Shiv for a moment. The other orcs were staring at him as well.

“You have been starved for much of your life, haven’t you, Insul?” Whisper said.

Shiv went stiff. He may have revealed too much about himself. “I eat fine these days.”

“He’s not talking about food,” Mortar replied. “Experiences. Happiness. Struggles. That kind of stuff. You haven’t had enough. You cling to things like someone who fears losing all they are.”

“Just how godsdamned high are all your Psychology Skills?” Shiv asked.

“Master-Tier,” all the orcs said in unison.

“Why?” Shiv whispered.

“Because learning your adversary from the inside out is the easiest way to learn how to break them,” Tequila replied as if he was commenting on the weather. “And learning about people is interesting. It’s fun to hunt. But it’s fun to know why someone does something. There are so many things about us that are similar. Especially you, Deathless. You’re quite orc-like... But then you’re not.”

“We evolve our skills to climb and live,” Whisper said. “But we don’t fear losing them. It feeds the true mastery.”

“True mastery?” Shiv asked. Uva was leaning, her curiosity was piqued by the orcs as well.

“Yes,” Whisper said. “Our skills give us options and power. But before that, we were already Pathbearers, because there was the want. The desire to grow and become someone else through struggle.”

“You think you’re a Pathbearer now? Because you got skills?” Mortar scoffed. “You lied to yourself, Insul. You were a Pathbearer long before. Even before you knew what you wanted to be, you were doing things to find out who you were. And that’s the truest way to live. Knee-deep in the struggle. Bet it all. Lose it all. Try again. Why else should we suffer if not to enjoy the tension?”

Philosophy 7 > 9

Shiv was speechless. The orcs were getting good at consistently surprising him with their philosophies. If he didn’t know what they were—

No. That’s a mistake. I keep going back to what 811 did. But he did that just to provoke me. And he was likely more vicious because I killed his friend. They’re psychopaths. But they’re more than that. And sometimes they see through me.

“Know. Georges.” Band said. “Georges. Was. Friend. Saved. My. Life. Years. Ago.”



And here came more shit Shiv wasn't expecting. "Band. Can you give me a moment to process my thoughts."

"No. Eat. Shit. Pussy."

The casual, growled vulgarity made Shiv cough out a surprised laugh.

"A few years ago, Band would have sung those lines, and they would have sounded angelic," Tequila declared.

Band continued on, clearing his throat as best he could. "Was. Taken. Prisoner. Interesting. But. Miserable. Considered. Starting. New. Life. Georges. Prisoner. Too."

"Prisoner?" Shiv asked. He didn't know this about Georges, but then again, he didn't know much about Georges at all before he came to the Swan-Eating Toad. All of that predated Shiv. "Who took you prisoner?"

Band grinned. "Fae. Queen. Of. Tongues. Knife. From. Her. Moonsteel. Reward. Given. When. Georges. Won. Asked. For. My. Life. Too."

The Deathless could only blink in response. Georges was a Heroic-Tier chef that had encounters with an orc and a fae queen?

“The fae have queens?” Uva asked.

“Yes,” Band said. “Only at midnight. Not before. Not after.”

“What? That makes—”

Uva’s question was interrupted by Adam shaking his head. “I took a course on the fae, Sister. They work very differently from most races. Frankly, it’s hard to call them Pathbearers at all. They’re one of the few species that can change their Paths on a whim—but they also lose mana levels from performing certain acts and suffer wounds from words. The fae are... capricious in many ways.”

“Yes,” Band said. “Interesting. Taste. Good. Too.”

“And there’s that profundity transformed into raw brutality,” Adam said, looking wearily at Band. “I still need to speak with you about Vivalde.”

“Might. Not. Want. To. Speak. With. You.” Band turned away from Adam haughtily. “Have. Nothing. I. Want.”

Adam closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. “Well, you did it, Shiv. You found a bigger bastard than yourself.

“Yeah, he was waiting to do that to you,” Shiv said. Rejection was an easy way for Band to bother Adam.

“Need. More. Social. Skill,” Band told Shiv, deliberately ignoring Adam. The Gate Lord’s glare could have put a hole through a wall.

“So,” Whisper said, watching a few Umbrals pack away chunks of meat, “what do you have next for us, Insul?”

“Some scouting in the morning, some cooking in the afternoon. What might the evening bring?”

Shiv, Uva, and Adam shared a look.

“We need to keep these guys busy,” Shiv said, trying to keep his expressions controlled. “The orcs are great if they have a task, but if we let them just wander around, the likelihood of them hurting someone rises fast.”

“You still have First Blood prisoners inside your cape,” Uva reminded him. “That, and we need to make plans to deal with the Inquisition and lift the siege of Blackedge. The intellectual difficulty of these tasks should occupy their attention, somewhat.”

A wall of apprehension formed around Adam’s mind. “So, what, we’re going to invite them into the planning process too?”

“They’re experienced,” Shiv said, swallowing the discomfort hidden within that statement. “More experienced than any of us. They’ve lived more lives. They’re all at least True Masters, and if we give them a fight, they’ll throw everything they have at it.”

“Talking about what you’re going to do with us?” Tequila said, looking at the trio. His gaze skipped over Shiv and Uva to rest on Adam. “Oh. You’re the holdout.”

“What?” Adam said. The startlement in his voice betrayed his position immediately.

“You press your lips together hard when you have doubts,” Tequila said, tapping his bottom lip. “You’re used to watching other people, Gate Lord. But not watching yourself. Understandable, but still a flaw.”

Mortar let out a grunt of annoyance and wrapped a fist around the orc’s head. “Talking us out of a good fight again, dumb cunt. Just can’t stop acting like a detective, can you?”

“It was the best job I ever had,” Tequila said, his words muffled behind Mortar’s large, armored fingers.

“Yeah, especially considering you were half the serial killers in the city as well.”

“That’s a lie—I was only three of the ten serial killers active at the time. And I killed most of the other serial killers as well, so my presence in the HKPD was still an overall benefit to the civilian population.”

Chapter 127 (II) Infusion

Mortar shook his massive head. "What the mouth here intends to say is that we shouldn't be idle, yeah? If we're idle, we'll find things to do. Things you may not like doing. But if you point us at a proper enemy..."

Adam let out a breath as he eyed Shiv. "Well. You're just the bloody orc whisperer, aren't you?"

"What? It's not hard to understand. And if we get an army of orcs, maybe the best thing to do is have them maraud or something instead of using them defensively at all."

Mortal laughed. "Isn't it adorable when they learn fast?"

"Fine," Adam said. "Let's..." He looked toward the obsidian tower and thought to himself for a beat.

"Okay. Here's what we will do," he said to Shiv telepathically. "First, You all finish doing whatever it is that needs doing with those vampires. Then, you drain some of them for vitality and mend Can Hu's skills."

"Shit, the cooking made me forget about that," Shiv hissed.

His thoughts prodded at Uva, and hers halted for a moment as well. "Well... Your cooking made me forget too."

“As for you...” Adam said to the orcs, not bothering to pretend they weren't talking privately, “let me get you up to speed about our problems. Our many, terrible, and miserable bloody problems.”

The orcs shared a look, then a collective grin of excitement.

“You sound miserable, Gate Lord,” Whisper hissed. “Tell us more.”

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While Adam and Uva led the orcs off to explain the problems and adversaries on the horizon, Shiv dealt with his vampiric prisoners and met up with Can Hu and Valor again to continue what they started earlier.

“Alright, Can Hu, are you ready for another dose?” Shiv asked. Twenty streams of Vitaemancy surged out from the Deathless, connecting him to the vampires interred within the detention center. The vampires themselves were catatonic—rendered so by Uva to ensure none of them could attempt an escape.

And it wouldn't be an easy escape, either. The detention center was only a temporary structure, but it was established near the obsidian tower where most of the gate's current active forces were, and it was also designed to be an oubliette. This meant that it was built straight down into the ground, and the only way out was up.

Up through a series of magical barriers, dimensionals, and Umbral guards. And that was if they could overcome Uva's Psychomancy in the first place.

Within the concrete cells of the prison were the recently captured vampires—aside from a certain Lucian, who was placed somewhere else at special request of Whisper. The Aviary owl was stored here as well, but on a deeper level compared to the vampires. He was constantly sedated and watched. Soon, he would be moved to Elaboration along with the vampires for further processing.

For now, they would serve another meaningful purpose—restoring the broken skills of Can Hu.

“I am ready, Pathbearer,” Can Hu said, standing across from Shiv in the central hall of the prison. The way the Penitent moved was more effortless than before. Its joints screamed less, and its chassis had fewer cracks as well. Even so, there was something about the Penitent’s posture that screamed with discomfort.

“Something wrong?” Shiv asked Can Hu.

Can Hu stared at the streams of Vitaemancy connecting Shiv to some prisoners. “I have done things like this before.”

“Fixing your skills?”

“No,” Can Hu replied. “Blacksites. Securing prisoners. Making use of them. I remember implanting them with bombs. Bombs so small that few could sense their presence within the prisoner’s bloodstream. I remember using people as resources. Spending their lives. I remember their faces.”

Nearby, Valor regarded Can Hu and Shiv, but he offered no comment. Instead, the Legendary Pathbearer was deep in a trance, his eyes burning with mana as he observed the process.

“Oh,” Shiv said, understanding why Can Hu seemed so awkward. “Yeah. I get it. But these are vampires, so fuck them. They have it coming.”

“Dehumanization has its own cost, Pathbearer,” Can Hu said, voice low.

Shiv nodded. “Can Hu. A few days back, I went to a village near the gate. Village, town, I can’t remember which. You can ask Angelo. He’s the only one I brought back. Angelo and the Court Leviathan. Everyone else was gone. The things they did to the people there—men, women, children... I’m not going to forget that. And I’m never going to forgive it. So. My opinion on vampires is that, unless they’re running from the First Blood, fighting the First Blood, or not associated with the First Blood, it’s on sight for me. So, again, fuck them.”

Can Hu stared at Shiv and let out a mechanical sigh. “This hatred will shape you too, Pathbearer. I previously assumed you were going to use animals.”

“Yeah. And that’s what I’m doing right now. Now. Are you ready?”

The Penitent deliberated for a moment longer and straightened itself. “I request that you do not hollow them entirely.”

“Oh, don’t worry.” Shiv chuckled grimly. “I need to leave enough of them for Elaboration to have their piece.”



Rationally, Shiv knew why Can Hu felt uncomfortable. But after all he'd experienced fighting the First Blood, and what he saw in the silo, he was spent on any kind of sympathy for the most of them.

Mass death happened when powerful Pathbearers fought each other. Shiv wanted to avoid collateral damage as much as he could, but sometimes, things just went wrong. What the vampires did wasn't collateral damage. It was cruelty by culture and choice. At least the orcs had that itch they struggled against—were literally fed by their violence and sadism. The vampires did what they did because they could.

With that thought, Shiv ripped the vitality out from the first of the vampire prisoners before drawing it into himself. Thereafter, he cast his Vitae into Can Hu's soul, filling an absent space. Seconds passed. The emptiness filled, and the shape of something revealed itself. It felt like a mess of jagged fractals to Shiv's senses. It's like running my hand over broken glass.

As Shiv continued feeling at the pieces, Can Hu's body came aglow with white and red. More cracks faded across its shell. And as that skill was restored, Shiv siphoned another vampire to fill another patch of spiritual nothingness. This happened twenty times in rapid succession. By the end, nine skills were restored, and all the vampires glowed dim with weakened vitality.

"It's taking a lot more to fill up some of those bigger skills," Shiv said, frowning. "The smaller ones get fed by just one or two vampires. I think they're Adept-Tier Skills or lower. The Master-Tiers Skills? They require a whole other level of Vitae to patch up."

"This is expected," Can Hu said. "Skill Evolutions increase the potency and mana contained within a skill by many magnitudes. But..." Can Hu looked at its manipulator hands. The digits opened and closed almost naturally. A fluidity was returning to his movements. The grinding screams of metal on metal were fading. "It is working. I am... mending... I did not think this was possible."

“Valor didn’t expect it, either,” Shiv replied, drawing his Vitae streams back behind his Vitaemancy field. A faint weakness washed through him. He spent a bit more of himself than he expected, but still, it was worth it to see Can Hu coming back together. “But it’s working. Your skills are just damaged now. Means we can fix them. I hope.”

“I concur,” Can Hu replied. The Penitent took a few steps toward Shiv, and its articulations were practically human-like with how smooth they were now.

“You must’ve glided through the world back when you were whole,” Shiv said, observing the Penitent. “How fast were you?”

“Master-Tier,” Can Hu said. “Speed was not my specialty. I preferred distance and BVR combat.”

“What’s that mean?”

“To fight beyond visual range.”

“Oh, so you’re an Adam.”

“That is a way of categorizing me.”

“Did you have a Shiv?”

Can Hu considered the question. “No. There were some who fought in close quarters with the enemy, but no Penitent ever engaged targets in your manner. It was not conducive for a Penitent to operate in such a way.”

“You guys didn’t have any frontliners?”

“I would not classify you as a frontliner, Pathbearer Shiv.”

“What would you classify me as?”

Can Hu hesitated for a moment before replying. “Effectively suicidal.”

Shiv didn’t know whether he wanted to laugh or frown. “Effectively suicidal.”

“Your willingness to harm yourself to obtain ammunition for your magic and inflict harm using your Inertial Overdrive moves you from vanguard to something akin to a veteran suicide bomber that has a method of surviving said suicides.”

And it occurred to Shiv that Adam could probably hear this conversation. “Can Hu... I don’t know if I feel flattered or insulted.”

"It is the truth of the matter. But it is also very effective. I recommend you enjoy your uniqueness, Pathbearer. That is good for your ego."

And that got Shiv to chuckle. "Alright. Fine. How are you feeling?"

"Better than the prisoners, I suspect," Can Hu said. Shiv regarded the vampires with his Biomancy. They were all laying motionless within their cells. "But also better than ever before. I... I missed the ease of movement. I have forgotten what it was like to walk without warring against my own machinery. What is lost and regained feels like a blessing. What is beyond your grasp remains a curse."

"Was that a quote or something?" Shiv asked.

"A concept. For a poem," Can Hu said. "It was among the first skills I developed after my crippling. It is among the reasons I survived at all."

As Can Hu said that, Shiv noticed a part of the Penitent flickering. "Wait. Can Hu. Try using that skill again. I want to see something."

Valor emerged from its silent observation as it regarded the Deathless. "Shiv? What are you trying to do?"

Shiv cast another stream into Can Hu. Once more, he poured his Vitae deep within the automaton. A coldness washed into Shiv, but he ignored it. His face turned into a mask of concentration as he waited

for Can Hu to use the skill. “Can Hu. Poetry. Finding the missing skills is easy, but looking for specific unbroken skills is like rooting around blind underwater.”

“Why are you trying to reach his active skills?” Valor asked. He was hovering beside Shiv now, but the Deathless barely noticed him.

“I want to see how they feel. Maybe they can give me an idea about how to put the broken ones back together.”

Valor considered Shiv’s idea and hummed in acceptance. “It is not a bad consideration. But be careful. Do not risk Can Hu’s spirit. If you can restore a skill from being destroyed...”

“I might be able to break an intact skill,” Shiv finished. Then, Shiv reconsidered. “Or... I don’t know, Valor. Grasping at skills inside someone doesn’t feel the same as holding a physical object. They’re there, but they aren’t solid.”

“A conundrum or a path, the Pathbearers do not know,” Can Hu began, reciting words slowly. Just then, Shiv felt a disturbance ripple across his Vitae. He used that to find what he assumed to be Can Hu’s Poetry Skill. “And what lay at the end but... but... questions or...”

As Can Hu tested words and ideas aloud, Shiv found himself condensing his Vitaemancy around a single section within the Penitent’s soul. He traced the pulsating wavelength to its origin. But there, he didn’t find a shape waiting for him. There were no pointed edges, and the sensation wasn’t like broken glass. Instead, it felt like an opening—like running his hands along a frame for an open door and passing through.

“The hells?” Shiv muttered.

“What do you sense,” Valor asked.

“It’s like my Vitaemancy is reaching down a hole or something.”

Can Hu paused and zoomed its optics in on Shiv. “I cannot feel anything, Pathbearer.”

“Yeah, that’s good. I think.” Shiv swallowed. He carefully guided his skill deeper into Can Hu, trying not to inflict damage, uncertain about what awaited deeper. “Damn, these skills go deep as—” And then, there came faint susurrations. Words

. “I... hear something. I think it is a voice or... something?”

“You do?” Can Hu asked, surprised. “What is being said?”

Shiv didn’t respond. Instead, he listened. He focused on his Vitaemancy. And as he reached deeper into the skill, something reached back across into him. A presence infused his Vitaemancy and filled it with a weight. The whispered noises grew louder, and they revealed themselves to be a vast chorus of voices reciting different poems; working on their prose.

Can Hu’s was only one voice among the symphony. And not nearly the loudest, either. “I’m hearing a lot of different people recite poetry,” Shiv said, brow creased. “Your voice is there.” He looked at Can Hu. “But there’s also a lot of other people. Not sure why?”

“The collective experiences imbued with the skill,” Valor breathed. The Legendary Pathbearer sounded stunned. “Shiv. Do you have any idea what you have just done?”

“No?” Shiv blinked.

“You’re tapping into Can Hu’s yet-formed Skill Delve. When you reach the Legendary Tier, your Skill Evolves once more—but it also becomes a location inside of you. It is like an internal dimension formed from every experience you had leading to its creation.”

A slight nervousness swelled inside Shiv. “Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“It is something entirely new. Animancy allows you to edit parts of a soul—reshape portions of someone’s personal legend. But what you are doing here is direct access, if your feelings are true.”

“And what does that mean?” Shiv gasped, shivering. He was starting to shake. Weakness was rushing through him. Don’t have much more vitality to spend.

“I am uncertain,” Valor admitted. He noticed Shiv trembling. “Shiv. Enough. We continue when you regain your vitality. There is no point in overdoing this. Mastery is not to be rushed.”

“Yep,” Shiv grunted in agreement as he pulled his Vitaemancy back. He moved slowly, careful not to break anything, but as Shiv extracted his stream of white and red mana from the Penitent’s being, his Vitae merged with a vibrating presence, and each quiver that ran across the stream was followed by words being spoken.

“What is lost and regained feels like a blessing. What is beyond your grasp remains a curse.” Can Hu’s voice echoed from the streams of Vitae. Valor and Can Hu both turned to stare at the stream as it receded into Shiv.

“Can Hu,” Valor began. “Did you hear that?”

“Yes. Yes, I did, Legend Valor.”

Shiv did as well, and as he pulled his Vitae back behind his field, he felt something enter him and settle like sediment within his being. And thereafter, a notification appeared before his eyes.

Animated Skill Infusion Gained: Poetry — Lyrics Like Flowing Rivers 77 (Adept)

“Uh, Valor,” Shiv said. “Do you know what an Animated Skill Infusion is?”

The Legendary Pathbearer just stared at him. “No. I have never heard of such a thing. Why?”

“Well. I think I have some of Can Hu’s Poetry Skill inside me,” Shiv breathed. And from within his body, the muffled chorus of poetry continued. “And... it’s talking inside me.”



Valor stared at Shiv for a moment and nodded. "Stay here. I'm going to call Uva to connect my mind to yours. Do nothing to yourself. Do not even move."

"I'm... I won't explode, will I, Valor?" Shiv asked.

"I don't know," Valor said. And then he immediately shot out from the prison, leaving a stream of flame behind him. Can Hu and Shiv stared on.

"Can Hu," Shiv said.

"Yes, Shiv?"

"I can hear my Vitae chanting poetry at me."

"As can I."

"It's kind of scaring the shit out of me."

"And I as well. Shiv?"

"Yeah?"

“Please do not self-destruct because you imbibed my poetry. Such a death will offend me greatly.”

Chapter 128 (I) Animated [I]

The core function of Animancy is the restructuring of one's soul. It is the only skill—aside from when one is allowed to delve into their Legendary-Tier Skills—that allows you to shape your own story. You become an editor, so to speak, of your legend, or someone else's legend.

Not everything can be changed, but the soul itself is valuable, and certain details are open to interpretation.

Most treacherously, Animancy allows you to damage the soul, to break its structure through contradictions, or to collapse a skill from within by adding things that do not fit. And then there is raw Animancy mana, what I like to think of as the true potential, the possibility of anything.

It glows the faintest blue. Blue that seems to melt and settle on the surface of the world, but never fully sinks in. It is like an injection of ink, a tattoo on the face of reality.

And if you are unfortunate enough to witness someone consumed by Animancy, then you understand the horrors of the everlasting story. Reality does not kill you, not fully, but it can break you so much that you become part of the world's story, that you are melted in the tapestry of existence itself. There is no you, and there is only you. But where you begin, and the System ends, who can say?

I suppose I can eventually say, I have looked into this many times. I have tried to commune with the soul scattered. Sometimes I can hear them scream, but there are no true thoughts, only feelings, feelings of terror, pain, confusion and loss, and then there are greater feelings, things I cannot even fathom right now.

I suspect that it is the world itself expressed through the narrow funnel of a single being, or maybe it's the voice of the System mocking me, insulting me, taunting me...

-Udraal Thann's Animancy Notes

"Shiv," Uva said, her left eye twitching slightly. "How did you manage to do this, exactly?"

Shiv shrugged, and he gave her an apologetic smile. "Well, I was fixing Can Hu up, I filled a few of its, uh, soul holes, and then I noticed his vitality flickering in a weird place afterward. So, then I thought that I wanted to compare how an intact skill looked and felt compared to one of the damaged skills, so I could figure out how to fix the broken ones."

"And then?" Uva asked as she connected Shiv to Valor. Shiv felt the Legendary Pathbearer slide into his mind, and Valor's presence was at once anxious but also highly excited.

Glad I'm being treated like a magical project, Shiv thought to himself.

"Oh, do not complain, Shiv," Valor said. "This is a good thing. You have not exploded yet. And if you're going to explode now, there was likely nothing we could have done to prevent it."

"Thanks, Valor. That's very, very comforting."

"Jests aside," Valor continued. "I think that unless you are interfacing with the Necromancy Skill, I do not believe you will explode. Vitality has accommodated most skills within you. And so, at least in theory, every skill aside from Necromancy should be stable within the confines of your Vitaemancy field."

Shiv gave a grunt of acknowledgement. He guessed that was probably the case, but he wasn't educated on this matter, so he didn't assume. Frankly, Valor wasn't educated on it either. So in that sense, the Legendary Pathbearer was groping around the dark as much as Shiv was. What Valor did have was knowledge of Animancy, and right now, that was their best bet on understanding Shiv's new skill.

And his memories on that front are all kinds of busted too, Shiv thought to himself. And that brought his nervousness back.

"Again, do not worry too much," Valor said. "I think we are about to gain more benefits from examining your Vitaemancy rather than risking utter destruction."

"Here's hoping," Shiv muttered.

"So you reached into Can Hu," Uva said, "and you grasped one of its active skills." Official source is [novelfire.net](http://novelfire.net)

"Yeah." Shiv nodded.

Uva gave him an uncertain look. "And when you reached deeper, you gained its Poetry Skill?"

"I don't think I gained the skill itself. It's just... an Animated Skill Infusion," Shiv said.

"And what does that mean?" Uva asked.

"What does that mean, Valor?" Shiv asked in turn.

"I have no idea," Valor repeated.

"Well there you go, Uva. He has no idea. So neither do I."

The Psychomancer let out a long, suffering sigh. "Shiv. Dear brute. Wonderful cook, sweet, adorable man." She reached out and grabbed him by the sides of his face. Shiv was grinning, and then his grin faltered slightly as she began to shake him. "Can you, just perhaps, stop unleashing mind-bending and potentially dangerous surprises every day?"

"I was just trying to help Can Hu," Shiv said, wincing.

"I know," Uva said, her voice becoming gentle. "I'm also aware, however, that everything you do seems to result in strange happenings or mass destruction. It's..."

"Tiring," Shiv offered.

"Yes," Uva said, "I'm exasperated, surprised, but also increasingly used to the constant. Depending on how this goes, it might drive Adam insane."

Shiv lifted an eyebrow. "Well, thank the System I figured out how to do this, then."

"Shiv. Be nice." Uva chided. She pulled on his ear slightly, as she would with Ikki, and she frowned as he simply grinned at her.

"That feels kind of nice. Are you pulling hard?"

"Not everyone can have your Physicality," Uva pouted. "Some of us just bend in strange ways and abnormal ways."

"I don't mind that," Shiv said, staring into her eyes. "Sometimes bending is better. Bending is what I prefer—"

Just then, Valor coughed. Which was remarkable considering his lack of lungs.

"Oh, shit." Shiv shuddered. "Uh, Valor, sorry, I, uh..."

"You forgot I was here again," Valor muttered. He sounded slightly insulted.

"Yeah, you know, something like that," Shiv replied. He was slightly embarrassed. Uva, meanwhile, covered her face, horrified that she had gotten carried away as well.

"Well, in the hopes of sparing Can Hu the trauma I endured," Valor said dryly, "I think we should begin experimenting with this Animated Skill Infusion, whatever it is. Can you move the skill inside you?"

"No," Shiv replied, and just then the skill began to rhyme again. "Oh, how lovely the moon, how high its rise, far away from reach, but so close to our eyes. So close to our spirits, yet far from our hands. Above all, and within the knot, you gleam down at the land."

This time, it wasn't Can Hu's voice that came forth. It sounded like a young woman's.

"I remember this," Can Hu said, voice suddenly wistful. "My first pilot. She was practicing her poetry. I think I gained the skill by reciting this poem to myself when she wasn't aware, and I was only beginning to step into higher thought."

"Of course," Valor said. "All skills have a point of inception. Your repetition and constant consideration of its meaning likely constituted the first moment of true strain for you."

Shiv frowned at that. "Wait, so I'm pretty sure I recited a poem once. Why didn't I get a poetry skill?"

"How hard did you think about the poem?" Uva asked.

Shiv blinked. He couldn't even remember what poem he'd recited. Probably something that Georges wanted him to remember, just to increase his vocabulary. "Uhh..."

Uva hummed. "So. You have your answer."

"I guess I need to remember some harder poems or some shit," Shiv muttered to himself.

"Shiv, focus," Valor called out.

"Right," Shiv said. "What do you want me to do now? I can't really move it. It's, uh, it's not like a solid thing. It's just infused inside my Vitae. I feel a presence there. It recites poetry every now and then, but that's about it."

"That's about it, eh?" Valor said, clicking his teeth together. "And it's still inside of you. It hasn't left yet. It's not dissipating. And so why does it call itself an Animated Skill Infusion?"

Valor spoke more to himself than Shiv, and the Deathless stared at Can Hu awkwardly. "Well, either way, at least I didn't explode."

"And I'm eternally grateful for that, Pathbearer," Can Hu said, bowing slightly. "Though I am confused. How did you traumatize Legend Valor?"



"I, uh," Shiv said. He trailed off as he eyed Uva, and she simply shook her head, eyes widening in abject horror. "Me and Uva got carried away doing something. But that's not important right now."

"Secrets held between team members often result in undue friction," Can Hu noted. "I will not judge whatever you wish to conceal, so long as it's not an act of true amorality."

"No," Uva said, face red. "It was more so a moment of accidental and unfocused debauchery."

Shiv coughed in response. "We didn't really mean for it to happen that way, it's just, uh..."

And once more, his soul recited poetry, interrupting him. "Oh heart, long do you beat, loud is the sound. When you pulse, you, uh, shake the sky, and then you fall through the ground."

"What?" Shiv said, narrowing his eyes. "I don't know much about poetry, but that sounded..."

"Terrible?" Uva suggested.

"...Yeah, it sounded pretty bad."

"Failure, too, is a part of one's legend," Valor replied. "We are not entirely composed of triumphs. In fact, triumphs are more like cornerstones or columns, while failures are the leftover material building up to them."

Shiv thought about that, and it made perfect sense. Most of his skills were probably shaped more by failure than success anyway. He died constantly, and that fed his growth more than anything. The reason his Toughness was so far ahead was mainly because he just kept dying, kept getting broken, kept getting beaten down, and getting back up. Very little of that seemed like a triumph. Then, Shiv did something instinctive. He reached out to find his Toughness, searching for his own Vitae.

"Shiv, what are you doing?" Valor asked.

"I'm gonna find out how—"

"Stop," Valor commanded. Shiv did. "We do this carefully. There are a great many unknown variables, and we don't wish for you to rewrite your Toughness skill with an Infusion of Poetry."

Shiv blinked. "That can happen?"

"Yes. Legendary Animancy can achieve such a thing. Imagine leveling Poetry rather than Toughness every time you die."

Shiv shuddered. "Yeah. Wait. Can Animancy work on me?"

"I am... not certain. You are too aberrant. Frankly, anything could happen with you, Shiv," Valor said. "A great many impossible abilities have already come from you. Pathbearers aren't supposed to come back from the dead, after all. Death is also not supposed to make one stronger. Nor is someone meant to simply leave the world and hide from reality by sinking into their own soul. This abnormality is just another natural aspect of your nature, I suspect."

"Thanks, Valor?" Shiv said, unsure if any of that was complimentary.

"It is normal to be nervous about these developments." Valor held out a hand, and a brief crackle of corrosive mana appeared. Shiv took a step back, and Valor didn't move at all. "Do not worry," Valor said, "I do not intend to touch you this time. I merely need to..." Then Valor's eyes flashed with a pulse of mana. "I still cannot observe your skills and Path. Ever since you obtained that Outside Context Problem Skill, much of you is obscured. Can you bring up your own status?"

"Yeah, sure," Shiv said.

Name: Tanner "Shiv" Lowe

Age: 18

Race: Human

Path:

Deathless

Feats [2/2]:

He Who Rises From Ash Eternal (Unique) - Allows the Pathbearer to quickly learn new Skills and advance existing Skills through repeated deaths.

Master of Rage (Master) - Allows the Pathbearer to infuse a skill with rage to increase its effectiveness. Consumes the Pathbearer's anger.

Skills:

Marksmanship 12 (Common)

Baking 9 (Common)

Striking Proficiency 41 (Common)

Barter 10 (Common)

Alchemy 2 (Common)

Engineering 1 (Common)

Lance Proficiency 1 (Common)

Acting 12 (Common)

Dodge 14 (Common)

Philosophy 9 (Common)

Psychology 15 (Common)

Deception 12 (Common)

Riding Proficiency 1 (Common)

Leadership 1 (Common)

Pyromancy 12 (Initiate)

Spear Proficiency 11 (Initiate)

Awareness 15 (Initiate)

Practical Metabiology 38 (Initiate)

Psychomancy 13 (Initiate)

Hydromancy 2 (Initiate)

Whip Proficiency 8 (Initiate)

Analyze 1 (Initiate)

Silver Tongue 27 (Adept)

Dread Aura 94 (Adept)

Frictionless Vector 63 (Adept)

Deepest Edge 64 (Adept)

Berserk 17 (Adept)

Adamantine Adaption 166 (Master)

Woundeater 90 (Master)

The Chef Unwavering 63 (Master)

Gravitic Wrestler 143 (Master)

Strider of the Unbending Path 135 (Master)

The Creeping Void 111 (Master)

Plaguefueled 64 (Master)

Inertial Overdrive 112 (Heroic)

Vitality Drain 54 (Legendary)

Vitaemancy 57 (Unique)

Outside Context Problem 64 (Unique)

Blessings:

Song of the Vigilant - Allows the Pathbearer to maintain absolute focus while the song is active. The song will expand out from the Pathbearer as a web and form a Resonant Perimeter.

Icon of the Paindrinker - Allows the Pathbearer to manifest the icon from their body. The icon will magnify the damage and pain Pathbearer and all nearby enemies and objects suffer.

Curses:



Favored Archenemy - An orc will always be able to sense your presence, regardless of guise or appearance. An orc will always have a sense for where you are. Regardless of dimension, world, distance, or time, you are marked for an eternal war.

Active Animated Skill Infusion

Poetry - Lyrics Like Flowing Rivers 77 (Adept)

As he did, he found an extra section at the very bottom titled Active Animated Skill Infusion. "I still don't get what that means," he said, gesturing at the notification.

"Me neither," Valor replied. "Let's try something. Do you have enough Vitae left to spend?"

"Feeling pretty cold on the inside," Shiv said, "but yeah, I might have a few seconds left. I probably need to go drain something afterward, though."

"Good," Valor hummed as he looked around, and then his eyes fell on the ground. "You said that the world has a film of vitality infused over it."

"Yeah," Shiv said, sounding uncertain about where Valor was going with this.

"And you could consume almost anything, including parts of reality."

"Yeah," Shiv confirmed again, "why?"

"Is there any Vitae veiling the floor?"

Shiv eyed the ground, and it was the faintest glow, only slightly brighter than the layer over general existence itself. "Yeah, but it's not really alive, so. I don't know, Valor, if you're going to have me drain that—"

"No, not drain. Contrarily, I want you to deposit some of your Vitae there. See if you can cast the Skill Infusion like a spell."

Shiv wasn't sure what Valor meant, but he nodded anyway. Instinct was about to guide his hand. "You guys might want to take a few steps back," Shiv said. "Last time when I used my vitality on reality, I tore a bit of a hole open, and magic started flying out. Lightning and fire and stuff."

Uva immediately summoned her shield to guard her. Valor remained in place. Can Hu quickly left the room. "I will return in a few seconds if this prison remains undamaged," the Penitent called out through the door. "If not, someone must remain to inform Adam of your untimely deaths."

Chapter 128 (II) Animated [I]

With everyone ready, a stream of red and white emerged from Shiv's palm, and it poured against the metallic surface of the ground. As soon as it did, Shiv felt something. There was a tremor within his

Vitae, but there was something else: a building pressure. The Skill Infusion was shifting, pressing against the floor. Shiv frowned, and he felt his vitality dissipate, his existence wear thin. He focused on shedding some of his Vitae, and it broke free from him, unleashing a splash of red and white that ignited the ground in a five-by-five-meter patch of glowing Vitae.

As the space below Shiv's feet came aglow, there came a word... "I," the ground said, voice high with confusion. Strangely, it now sounded like Shiv, and its speech came broken and jumbled. "Seek, Vitae, so brief, but then, thus, the end hurrah."

And then the voice vanished, and the glow faded.

As Shiv looked back at his notification, he realized the animated skill infusion was gone, as was the presence of Can Hu's poetry skill within his Vitae. "I have absolutely no idea what just happened," Shiv surmised.

"I think I do," Valor replied. "Animancy allows someone to modify a skill while it is within a soul. It is..." Valor spent a moment thinking of how to explain it to someone not in the field. "It is like rewriting parts of a story and reshaping aspects of someone's being. Evolutions are major peaks. They are, for most intents and purposes, settled, unless absolutely destroyed or carefully reconstructed. Any contradictions in its legend will have the skill break down, and this inflicts immense damage to the Pathbearer, not so unlike being struck by Necromancy. Even so, Animancy does not let the Animancer simply draw out an aspect of a skill and infuse it elsewhere. Especially not an inanimate object like a patch of the ground."

"And it had thoughts," Uva said, blinking.

"What?" Shiv said.

"I sensed a faint trace of mind mana," she said. "There was thought radiating out from that patch of Vitae. It spoke to us of its own accord as well."

"So what, did I just make a self-aware skill with my Vitae?" Shiv asked. A sudden rush of discomfort passed through him. "Was it... alive?"

"Alive?" Valor gave a slight and hesitant hiss. "I won't exactly claim it to be living. But the brief imposition of mental presence must be considered. It could be aware, but not truly living."

"What?" Shiv said. "How does that work?"

"That is complicated to explain in certain ways," Valor said. "There are certain faerie species that know they exist, but they aren't truly alive. They are not organisms, they do not have Paths, they do not develop skills. Some Outsiders are also aware of concepts or people in the world, but they don't truly live. They are more functional and existential entities rather than actual lifeforms. The same way that there are living things that have intelligence but lack consciousness." Updates are released by [novelfire.net](http://novelfire.net)

Shiv tried to conceptualize that. And failed.

"But this has been very useful," Valor said. His voice was alive with deep enthusiasm. He sounded like a boy who got a new toy, and Shiv didn't know why at all.

"Why is it that good, Valor? I'm not even sure what I just did. I just planted some Vitae on the ground, it recited some weird poetry, and then it faded."

"Yes, but the fact that you could is the important part. No one else can, no other skill can take a piece or even a moment, a single act from another skill and infuse it into something. Animated Skill Infusion. I should have thought about its title thoroughly. Animated, meaning that it is active, dynamic, perhaps, skill, denoting a skill, obviously, and infusion, meaning you impart an aspect or a portion of the skill onto something. It was maintained by your Vitaemancy—stabilized within your Vitae, but after you placed it upon the ground, it dissolved. It cannot exist for long without your Vitae or a skill source. How's your vitality right now?"

"Feels like I lost a gallon of blood," Shiv said.

"Not great," Valor replied. "We need to restore you."

"I already drained the prisoners pretty good. I'd do them again, but I don't think they'll survive that. And I promised Null-Mont some people for Elaboration to process, so..."

"So they're not a reliable option," Valor replied. "And to kill them this way is truly ruthless."

"They're vampires," Shiv said, scoffing at the fates of the prisoners. "I don't care what happens to them."

Valor frowned slightly, but just then, Can Hu returned. "You did not explode," it noted.

"I did not," Shiv said with a nod. "Not yet, anyway."

"This pleases me," Can Hu said.

"And my skill, well, it was briefly self-aware, but maybe not alive. Maybe it was alive, and it was also part of the ground." Shiv stared at the patch of floor again.

Can Hu looked at the floor in question, then back at Shiv. It tilted its head. "I do not understand."

"Yeah, same, Can Hu. Apparently, Valor knows better, though."

The Penitent slowly turned to regard the Legendary Pathbearer, but Valor was busy casting spells at the patch of ground Shiv had just infused.

"Oh, right," Shiv said, suddenly remembering. "There are still a few living basilisks left."

Valor paused. "Ah. Yes. Let's go take a walk. I wish to see you shape your Vitae along the way."

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One of the restrained basilisks let out a loud groan, and Shiv gave it an apologetic stare. Behind the restrained monsters, the Abyssal Gateway was dormant and closed, the arch leading into a blank expanse of grayness. "Sorry, girl. I'll make this up to you. Feed you something later."

Can Hu just stared at him. "You feel bad for the basilisk, but not the vampires."

"Yeah," Shiv said. "I feel the opposite of bad for the vampires."

Uva then uncharacteristically spat off to the side. "May they never hear the Composer's song." She gave Shiv an approving nod.

The Penitent stared for a moment longer and then, ever so slightly, shook his head. "This wound is double-edged. They may deserve it, but you may also be blinding yourselves."

Shiv frowned slightly, but Uva didn't respond at all. Shiv made a note to speak with Can Hu about this issue at some point. Seemed that there was a slight difference in ethics between them.

Meanwhile, there were more tests to perform.

"Alright, Shiv," Valor said, "what I want you to do now is to reach inside yourself and find one of your skills. Let us see if you can infuse yourself using your own skills."

"This is some weird shit," Shiv muttered to himself. But then again, his life now was made up of weird shit. Frankly, weird shit was how he kept living. Because no one else really came back to life.

As he reached inward, he found his own Vitae as inscrutable as Can Hu's soul. But then Shiv remembered how he noticed the Penitent's Poetry Skill: there was a flicker in Can Hu's vitality. The use of a skill causes a ripple.

And the ripple made him think of something else.

Shiv clenched a fist, and he pulled on himself slightly using his gravitic field. He lurched up, and a ripple passed through his Vitae. Shiv followed the waves back to their point of origin, and there he found the Gravitic Wrestler Skill. He slowly snaked through its entryway. His skill had more depth than Can Hu's Poetry, and when Shiv reached the very bottom, a heavy power detonated inside his being.

Animated Skill Infusion Gained: Physicality/Grappling Proficiency — Gravitic Wrestler 143 (Master)

This Skill Infusion did not come with a whispering chorus, but rather a membrane of gravity that coated his Vitae.

"Okay," Shiv called out, feeling something rattle deep within. "Pulled it off." It felt awkward to have his soul implanted with a gravitic field. A pressure layered him from deep within. Shiv clenched his teeth, resisting the discomfort. "It worked, I think."



"Well done," Valor said. "Show me your Vitae now." Shiv cast a swirl of Vitae outward, and Valor briefly reached out to touch the red and white mana, only to find his skeletal hands repulsed by a burst of force.

"Sorry," Shiv said, his teeth clattering. "Can't exactly control it. It's like it's planted in me, but it's not actually my skill."

"But you can infuse it," Vailer said. "Shiv, I want you to try something very different this time. How about instead of placing the skill infusion on the ground, try placing it in another object?"

The Deathless grinned. "I got just the thing."

Shiv immediately pulled out one of his bone drills with the flourish of his Biomancy. As it hovered beside him, Shiv narrowed his eyes and channeled his Vitae into it immediately. He repeated the process he'd performed earlier. Shiv pushed hard, infusing the animated skill-whatever that now rested within his Vitae, and with a final surge of effort, it finally unlatched itself as it burrowed into his bone drill.

For a beat, the drill itself shook violently as a film of unstable gravity shrouded it. Shiv's eyes widened, but as the bone drill hovered there for a moment, it turned to stare at Shiv as if it knew he was there, as if—

The drill jerked as its gravitic field spiked in his direction.

It slammed into his chin and skipped off his face before twirling through the air. Shiv stumbled back, startled by the impact. Uva ducked and ended up pooling wide across the ground, becoming a literal puddle. Can Hu flinched, and its shoulder let out a screeching noise as it staggered away.

Valor didn't respond at all. He was simply too entranced by the unfolding scene.

"That was remarkable," Valor said.

"I saw it again," Uva said, her head rising from a mass of flattened Umbral. "There was a presence of mind there in the drill as well. It thinks. It reacts. The skill is animated and aware."

"My bone drill just attacked me," Shiv said, rubbing his face more in shock than pain.

"That makes sense," Valor said. "Maybe it is alive, maybe it is self-aware, and in its final moments, before it dissipated, it turned its ire on you... because you brought it to life?"

Valor's words sounded more like a question.

"All I know is it slammed itself into my face," Shiv spat.

"Why?"

"I don't know!"

"Do it again."

"What?" Shiv cried. "Why would I do that again?"

"Because, Shiv," Valor said, reaching out and grabbing the Deathless by the shoulder, the skeleton's eyes burned with excitement, but also desperation, "this is what it takes to advance the arts. To understand the mysteries of our souls and the System. To get levels."

"Arts?" Shiv repeated.

"Yes, magical arts. Magic requires discovery, and that requires experimentation."

"Yeah, experimentation done to me, performed by me."

Valor held out a finger. "Be brave, Shiv."

"I am brave. I just don't want to be hit by my own drill again. It's godsdamned strange."

"Maybe it won't happen next time."

Shiv gawked at Valor. "Maybe it won't? That's the best you got."

Valor shrugged. "Maybe it really won't."

Shiv repeated his previous actions. He gained an Animated Skill Infusion. He transferred the infusion into a drill.

And once more, the drill came at him. But Shiv was ready this time. He snatched the drill out of the air before it could go through his right eye. As he did, he felt the final remnants of his Vitae vanish from within the drill—and caught sight of a faint translucence hinting at the presence of a mind.

"Why?" Shiv breathed. "Why are you doing this?"

"Alright," Valor said, "Shiv, we make a third attempt."

"No more drills to the face," Shiv groaned.

"Agreed. Try another skill. Put it in the bone drill, keep that part consistent, but this time keep it infused with your Vitae too. See if that makes a difference."

"Alright," Shiv said, "what skill should I use?"

Valor considered that for a moment. "How about a more esoteric skill? See if you can bind your Biomancy to the drill."

And Shiv attempted just that. First, he used his Vitaemancy to scour for his Biomancy. It took a few moments of searching, and he had to feed a Woundeater a slight cut he made on himself to locate the skill. After he did, he found himself with the corresponding skill infusion again. This time, his Vitae pulsed with tissue and cancers as he manifested it. Shiv winced with disgust but felt no true pain affect him otherwise. He stared at the drill hesitantly for a moment, and he let out a quiet breath. "Okay, you guys might want to take a few steps back, or maybe more than a few steps. My Biomancy field's over 200 meters, and I don't know what this might do, so..."

At that declaration, Uva immediately got on her shield and began flying off. A second later, she returned, looped her arms around Can Hu, and carried the Penitent away.

"Thank you," Can Hu said.

Valor, meanwhile, stayed near Shiv without any hint of fear.

"I'm serious, Valor." And then he noticed Valor didn't have any flesh, and remembered that his bones weren't actually made out of bone. "Oh, right. You'll probably be fine."

"This poses little danger to me. Also, I wish to examine every single detail."

Shiv infused his Biomancy within the bone drill. It took a considerable effort on his part to push his Skill Infusion into the drill. And this time, he didn't just leave the Skill Infusion with the drill. He imparted a sustained dose of Vitae as well.

For a moment, it hovered there. It didn't turn toward him, even as the drill began to change. A stretch of wounds opened along the narrow length of bone. Wounds alike to the one Shiv just fed his Woundeater. He blinked, and the drill began to bleed. Bits of flesh and more sprinkled down on the ground, and the drill remained animated in existence as Shiv continued to feed it to Vitae. A second passed, Shiv felt his vitality drain, but the drill didn't attack him this time.

Instead, he felt something echoing from within the drill. He felt—

"Hello?" the drill said. Its voice echoed faintly, and both Valor and Shiv tilted their heads in surprise. "Is... someone there? I... Where am I? Who am I?"

"Why does the drill sound like me?" Shiv asked, slightly horrified.

"I do not know," Valor said. "This is a question I had for you."

And just then, a new notification appeared in Shiv's vision.

Skill Gained: Golemancy 1 (Adept)

“Valor,” Shiv said.

“Yes?”

“I just got the Golemancy Skill,” Shiv said, blinking.

“What? How? Golems require a mana core and... and...” The drill hovered before Shiv and Valor, turning its tip from one to the other. “Oh. Well. This is truly fascinating. Shiv. I think you might have just done something entirely unprecedented.”

“What’s that?”

“Most golems are of a magical lore. They are shaped by a magical field and sustained by a mana core invested with the right Magical Skills. But you... you tapped into a skill. And it is composed mostly of Vitae. So. This drill, then, technically counts as the... first-ever pure Skill Golem in existence.”

“Skill Golem,” Shiv repeated.

“I’m a what?” the drill called out.

Chapter 129 (I) Animated [II]

Reviewing the last few chapters: We know there are two kinds of mana cores, artificial and natural. Most mana cores fall into the natural category. These cores usually serve as the foundations for gates, as they require a significant amount of mana clashing between two worlds to truly begin the process of crystallizing a mana core. On top of this, there must also be an unfolding narrative happening between the worlds. An incursion, migration, or other events will feed a gate's mana core, and over the course of years, it will finally stabilize and become a dimensional space unto itself.

A golem's mana core is, on the surface, not so different than the mana core of a gate. However, when observed at a micro-level, there are several significant factors in which a golem deviates from a gate.

The first is quite simply the amount of mana required. Forging a golem requires a paltry amount of mana compared to that of a gate. However, crystallizing the golem also requires something in particular, Psychomancy. Psychomancy paired with Physicality, for the golem is meant to be an embodied entity—something that interfaces with the world around it, rather than expanding its own dimensional borders and therefore becoming an encompassing world unto itself.

And despite the golem's comparatively paltry mana requirements, it needs to have an active mana field to function, which necessitates the development of a Magical Skill as well. This is not the same as using Psychomancy to crystallize the core. That will not give the core a Psychomancy Skill. Indeed, if you know anything regarding golems, you will understand that non-physical golems, i.e., Golems that do not directly affect the physical world, are the hardest golems to create of all.

And this is not even getting to the actual difficulty of completing a golem's creation.

Just like with a golem, the stabilization of its mana core requires events to transpire. Events and experiences, and not the same kind as a gate's mana core. A golem requires a personality to be modeled on. This process takes years and is why most golems behave so animalistically—with it being easier to impart an animal personality model upon a golem. Pairing this with the aforementioned Magical Skill



requirement means the nurturing of a golem often takes far too long to be worthwhile for most, even if the golem can develop and evolve on its own in the long term...

-The Practicalities and Limitations of Golemancy, Essential Coursework for MAG-TECH 210 at Phoenix Academy

Shiv stared at his Woundeater-infused bone drill. The drill looked back at him, using its tip as an “eye.” His vitality was vanishing fast, so he reeled the drill in with a strand of Vitaemancy and clutched the drill as tight to him as he could. This way, he fueled it while minimizing vitality loss.

As he gripped the drill, it did not strike him, it did not slam into his head, nor did it use the Biomancy infused within it against Shiv in any way. Rather, it merely existed. A vibrant clash of red and white hues danced around its length, while veins of blood and tissue dripped free from the drill’s surface.

“Well,” Shiv breathed. “At least you’re better behaved than the Gravitic Wrestler drill.”

Shiv tentatively felt around the insides of the bone drill. He used his Vitaemancy to search for the Animated Skill Infusion he bestowed upon the weapon. But the skill felt constrained somehow. Shiv got the sense that the skill was uncomfortable, and that the shape it embodied was unnatural.

Like... it doesn’t want to be a drill, he thought to himself.

As he studied the drill, he also observed a translucent dot present at the middle of its length. That was what Uva noted earlier with her Psychomancy, and now he saw it too. Shiv reached into the drill’s pocket of thought with his mind and prepared to discover just how sapient this once-inanimate object really was.

His mind-mana swirled down and sank into that small, translucent dot. Moments thereafter, Shiv felt a connection form between him and the drill. He was also linked to Valor and Uva's well, and he could feel their anticipation climb alongside his own as they awaited a response.

"I am what?" the drill asked again. The way its thoughts washed into Shiv was faint and weak. It felt like grains of sand cast through the wind, dissolving too fast to attain any wholeness. Comparatively, Uva and Valor's thoughts were solid. The drill was an echo of a mind, and a fast-fading one at that. Shiv instinctively gave it a bit more vitality, and though it grew brighter with mana, its mind never felt any stronger.

"Are you alive?" Shiv asked the bone drill.

"Am I alive?" the bone drill asked him in return.

Shiv frowned at that. "Okay. Weird. So. Why'd one of you slam into my face earlier?"

"Why did I slam myself into your face earlier?"

"Not you, the last drill."

"The last drill?" it replied.

"It seems to mimic your words and concepts slightly. But it goes no further than that." Can Hu's optics blinked. "It reminds me of badly damaged automata. Scrambled of thoughts and functionality."

Shiv narrowed his eyes at the drill. "What do you want? Do you want to kill me?"

"Do I want to kill you?" the drill asked. "I'm a what?"

"What is with this thing?" Shiv asked. Then, he caught a hint of a feeling—an impulse behind the drill's words. Shiv reached in deeper with his Psychomancy, and he found an urge there, one for it to be rejoined with his vitality. "Huh. Maybe that's why the last drill crashed into me. It was trying to get back. But why didn't you just reach out?"

"Maybe because it could not," Valor said, his voice heavy with consideration. "Your last drill moved freely of its own accord with its gravitic field. This drill seems lost and confused."

Shiv nodded. "Yeah. But why?"

Shiv cut off his flow of Psychomancy briefly, and he watched as the red and white aura painting the bone drill began to evaporate. As the infusion dissolved, its Biomancy pulsed, and a chain of what looked like lacerations manifested all around the bone drill before the last of its Vitae faded.

"This is just godsdamn strange," Shiv muttered. "No idea what's up with this thing."

"A Unique Skill begets unique results," Valor commented, "and this, my friend, is a result more unique than any I've seen before. To create a golem from a skill itself is unprecedented. Since you have attained the skill, there must be a relationship between your skill infusion, your Vitaemancy, and the creation of a living construct. The question is how. How can a golem exist when there is no mana core?"

"It's wrapped inside my Vitae, isn't it?" Shiv replied. "My Vitae is a combination of both my vitality and my soul. So, using the infused skill as a catalyst or something, maybe it's sustaining itself temporarily? Or something? I don't know, Valor. I'm just guessing here."

"No. Do not apologize. This is quite good, Shiv. Good thoughts. That is very possibly what might actually be happening. Let's use this as our primary theory right now and continue our test."

As Shiv infused a new drill into a Woundeater, they had Uva cast her Psychomancy into it to see if she could manipulate its "mind." For a few moments, she dug around in its depths. Then she shook her head. "It's like a shadow of a person. It is purely reactive. Any decision it makes is on impulse. It has a set of chaotic memories I cannot make sense of. They're all related to injuries."

"Injuries?" Shiv asked. "Like. Injuries consumed by my Woundeaters?"

The Umbral blinked in consideration. "Perhaps so. Yes, that might be it. Despite this, it will not respond to me. It's like it cannot even understand my commands."

"Huh," Shiv said. "Let me try something. Hey, drill."

The drill shifted in his grasp.

"Do you know that you're a drill?" Shiv asked.

"I'm a what?" the drill responded.

Uva joined in. "Why didn't you respond to me when I sent you a thought?" she asked.

"Thought?" the drill replied, sounding absolutely lost about what she was talking about.

Shiv tried explaining things further to see if he could get the drill to respond in a new way. "You're a drill. You're my bone drill. I infused a skill in you, and now you're talking to us using my voice."

"I'm a bone drill," the drill said with utmost confidence. "You infused a skill into me, and now I am speaking to you using your voice."

"Remarkable," Valor breathed. "It's like a—" Valor cut himself off. "No, not a child. More like a puppet. A puppet and a parrot, both. Try to command it, Shiv."

And Shiv did. "Go out fifty meters and come back."

But the drill just shook. Blood and cancerous tissue leaked from it as it splattered against the ground. Shiv repeated his command. And the drill continued to be dormant.

"It can't understand your orders at all," Uva said. There's nothing in its mind that corresponds to what you just said.

"Why?" Shiv asked.

Uva regarded the drill again. "Have it perform an act related to Biomancy."

Shiv grunted. "Drill. Regenerate or something." This time, the drill responded. Shiv felt his Vitae burn itself fast as a dense layer of cancerous growths formed around the bone. "Stop," Shiv said, shaking his head from the sudden coldness he felt. "Damn, that sucks up a lot of Vitae."

"But we know one thing now," Uva said, gesturing at the drill. "It can be ordered to perform actions related to your skill."

"Related to the skill..." Valor mused. "Wait. Then, maybe it doesn't really have a mind." The Legendary Pathbearer thought for a beat before he continued. "Shiv. Try to detach your Animated Skill Infusion from yourself. But don't infuse it into a physical object this time."

"What? Just push it out of my body with the Vitae somehow?" Shiv asked.

"Yes," Valor said. "See if that is possible. I think what we are doing wrong here is that we are treating the drill as a physical vessel. But your Vitae is already solid. It's as hard as adamantite and exhibits aspects from your other skills. Just release your Vitaemancy and let it exist of its own accord."

"Okay," Shiv breathed. "I'll try."

Once again, he reached into himself, connecting his Vitae to his Woundeater Skill. As soon as he gained the Woundeater Animated Skill Infusion, he summoned a swirl of Vitae atop his hand, and he concentrated on separating it from himself—

An explosion of Vitae blasted out of Shiv. He immediately felt part of himself break free. There was no struggle in parting the Animated Skill Infusion this time. It split immediately, without resistance. The suddenness of the separation caught Shiv by surprise, and he let out a cry as he felt his vitality plunge.

Vitaemancy 58 > 59

Golemancy 1 > 4

Shiv was cold. Very cold. Weakness overtook him, and as he stumbled back, Uva caught him and folded around his body. Shiv let out an exhausted groan as he settled against her. The world around him spun. There were spots in his vision.

As he looked up, he blinked as he found Uva's face to resemble a sloping curve. Her head was like a spoon, and her colorful eyes were folding over his face like the lip of a cave, regarding him with concern. "Are you all right?" she asked.

The rest of her body was shaped akin to a lounge chair, from structure to comfort. Shiv shuffled in her embrace.

"Yeah," Shiv replied. "Uva, your Physicality is—"

"Strange?" She finished on his behalf. He tasted a slight hint of self-consciousness from her. He shook his head. "No, it's really comfortable. How many other forms can you shape yourself into?"

She blinked. "I have not had the luxury of time to test the extent of this skill."

"Maybe later," Shiv whispered.

"Maybe later," she replied.

"Maybe later," a third voice joined them. And just then, Shiv let out a gasp. He shot back to his feet with a pull of his gravitic field. But just as he balled his fists, his mind went blank with surprise. Standing across from him was a humanoid shape glistening with streams of red and white mana—the color of his Vitae. At its core was a glimmering Woundeater bearing a long chain of crystallized injuries. Still, it was the humanoid that commanded Shiv's attention, however. It was the same height as him. The same size as him. The contours of its body resembled his, but it lacked any distinct features. It was also dissolving before his very eyes—the Vitae that composed it rising into the air like vapor.

"Holy shit." Shiv gawked at the Vitae Golem. He awkwardly held out an arm, and his Vitae golem stared at him. Then it also extended an arm, mirroring his actions.



Shiv then focused on the golem, commanding it to put down its arm with a thought, and it responded.

"Alright," Shiv breathed, "what else can you do?" NEW NOVEL CHAPTERS ARE PUBLISHED ON Novel-Fire.net

"What else can I do?" the golem asked.

"Still not a very good conversationalist," Uva commented dryly. "But it definitely looks like you."

"Structural composition unknown," Can Hu said, its eyes flashing with the characteristic glow of the Analyze Skill.

Shiv commanded the golem to stand still as he walked over and placed a hand upon its shoulder. Its Vitae-formed flesh was as hard as adamantite and possessed an inertial sheath just like Shiv. Moreover, he could feel its Biomancy mana grinding against him as well. As he ran his hand across the golem, its Vitae began to melt back across into his body of its own accord.

"Whoa," Shiv said, surprised at the sudden rush of vitality re-entering his person. A blast of warmth swelled inside him. A second thereafter, the golem splashed back into him. Once more, his Animated Skill Infusion returned to his possession.

Animated Skill Infusion Gained: Biomancy — Woundeater 90 (Master)

“Feels much more natural than just shoving it inside a drill,” Shiv said.

“Because this is likely its natural state,” Valor said. “Still... I’ve never seen someone absorb a golem into themselves.”

Shiv chuckled. “Yeah, me neither. Frankly, I don’t know the first thing about golems, Valor.”

“I am beginning to have a hard time calling what you just created a pure golem. It is more akin to a... puppet dichotomous soul.” Shiv blinked as he spun to face Valor, and the Legendary Pathbearer intercepted his question. “Indeed. Like what I could do. The splitting of a single soul into different but dichotomous vessels. Vessels that we inhabit and use at the same time. What I think you have here, though, is a limited lifeform shaped from the legends contained within a skill granted animation by your Vitae.”

“Any idea why I can do that?” Shiv asked.

“I am not sure. But since Sullain was aware of my son’s experiments, I suspect it has to do with resurrection. And this resurrection now applies to creating a partially living skill. This is likely the reason why you managed to bring back Lady Van Erren as well. You didn’t just animate a Skill with which you evolved, you animated your soul, and since she was trapped in your Outside Context Problem Skill somehow—Wait, can you infuse yourself with your Unique Skills?”

“Good question,” Shiv said. He activated his Outside Context Problem and briefly vanished from reality. Valor and the others reacted with brief surprise while Shiv tried to find the skill. Yet, despite it being active, he couldn’t locate it. There wasn’t a ripple or disruption. It was just active. “Not unlike my Vitaemancy. I’m using that skill too, and I can’t feel it at all. Wonder why.”

Chapter 129 (II) Animated [II]

Shiv remanifested before everyone in a burst of Vitae and shook his head. "Can't find the skills. Are Unique Skills hidden from Animancy too?"

Valor flinched back in surprise before remembering who Shiv was and answering the question. "No. In fact, Animancy is the most common way people gain Unique-Tier Skills. You cannot find yours?"

"Nope. Other skills give off a ripple. My Unique Skills can't be felt at all."

"Strange. But also exciting. The fact that you can form a golem from your very soul is already a wonder. Golems usually take a great amount of time to build. The composition of their mana cores is not the hard part. Shaping their attuned mana and mental template, however, is immensely time-consuming. Natural golems are more common than artificial ones for that reason. But what you can do is something else entirely."

"I fought elemental golems before. Crushed their cores. They had bodies of stone, fire, water, lightning... All that was connected to the core, huh?"

"Indeed," Valor said, trying to understand what Shiv was trying to figure out.

"Well, my Vitae golem feels different. I can't tell if the skill is the core of the attuned mana. Because it's wrapped in my Vitae. It's sustained by vitality. But something about it feels like it's built differently. Like the skills are more like recordings of stuff that happened in the past rather than a direct copy of the skill."

That got Valor thinking as well. "Yes. The Poetry Skill had the ground and your soul reciting lines. Lines from the past."

"Lines spoken by my pilot," Can Hu said.

Valor nodded. "It is a resurrection of a past event. A repetition. Then, the Woundeater infused within the drill could not perform the same actions as that which was empowered by Gravitic Wrestler."

"Because I never really used Woundeater to move around before. Only did it a bit with Biomancy when I just got it," Shiv muttered to himself. "Okay. Yeah. Maybe. Wait, let's do something else."

"Shiv," Uva said, sounding slightly nervous, "why do you have that look on your face?"

"Don't worry about it," Shiv replied as he used his Vitae to dip down into his Inertial Overdrive Skill. "I'm just going to find out if I can outsource some of the suicide bombings I do."

"Composer, this cannot end well."

Can Hu stared at Shiv. "I regret mentioning that term to you earlier."

"Don't," Shiv replied. "You were an inspiration to me, Can Hu."

"Your praise fills me with shame," Can Hu responded. "What do you mean by outsource?"

The Penitent got his answer as Shiv created a new Vitae Golem. This one vibrated constantly, its body shaking, as if it were about to rupture from an overload of kinetic energy. Its insides quivered, the inertial overdrive skill resembling a sphere of compressed force. A sphere that constantly pulsed in and out, as if it were trying to burst free and detonate.

"What am I?" the golem asked.

"You are a suicide bomber," Shiv told it gleefully.

"I am a suicide bomber," the golem agreed with mutual enthusiasm.

"Composer," Uva said as she pinched her nose. "This is not good."

Shiv began to laugh—then Valor started chuckling as well. "Now, this is wonderful. The number of things we can do. The experimentation we can run."

Can Hu studied Shiv's vibrating golem for a moment longer before it shuffled behind Uva. Immediately, she brought her shield in front of her as protection, and Shiv gave her a thumbs up. She just frowned in response. "Shiv, please don't blow us up."

"Oh, it's not us I intend to blow up," he replied. A feral grin spread across his face. "Hey, suicide bomber."

The golem stared at him. "Yes."

"Charge the Abyssal Gateway, and spike yourself as many times as you can before discharging your Inertial Overdrive."

The golem charged off without hesitation. However, it didn't spike itself. It simply ran, even though it was coated in Vitae. Even though the Vitae shrouding its body possessed Shiv's gravitic field, the golem didn't launch itself through the air. Instead, it just started sprinting. Never once did it use its gravitic field to travel. Still, Inertial Overdrive made it faster with every step. Just before it dissolved, the golem discharged all the built-up kinetic energy it amassed.

The golem vanished in a small explosion of force, casting fragments of dissolving Vitae everywhere.

Shiv frowned slightly. "Okay. So. It did half of what I wanted it to do. I think it's because of my skill."

"Explain." Valor didn't sound confused. From his tone, it was more like he wanted to hear Shiv's conclusion.

"It knows how to move based on my Inertial Overdrive Skill. It remembers moving faster. But even if it had a gravitic field, it doesn't know how because it doesn't have the skill."

"I suspect the same thing," Valor said. "I think it is time we progress with our experiment."

"See if we can stack two skills in the same golem?"

"Indeed."

"Got it," Shiv breathed. But before that. He cast out his Vitae and started draining some vitality from another basilisk. As he refilled the warmth combusting within his soul, he started shaping a new golem.

He planted the Inertial Overdrive Skill Infusion within the golem at first. And as soon as he separated from it, he reached into his Gravitic Wrestler Skill for a new infusion and then dipped a strand of Vitae into the golem. Shiv released his Gravitic Wrestler Skill Infusion within the golem, and, to his satisfaction, it coexisted with the Inertial Overdrive Skill. There was a cost to the additional infusion, however: The Vitae sustaining his golem was consumed even faster than before.

"Shit," Shiv breathed, "it looks like infusing more skills increases the amount of Vitae it takes to sustain you, huh?"

The golem just stared at him. "It takes Vitae to sustain me?" it asked.

"Maybe I need to get an Intelligence Skill for you to do anything more than ask questions. Wait, Poetry had you talking."

"Social Skills probably make a difference on the conversational front," Valor theorized. "But the fact that you can mix infusions indicates that you can create mixed-skill golems."

“Yeah. It just spends a bit more Vitae,” Shiv grunted. Then, a vicious smile crawled over his face as he pointed toward the Abyssal Gateway. “Alright, bomber. Spike yourself ten times and then blast yourself towards the gateway.”

And this time, the golem did surge off toward the horizon. It blasted across the air, spiking itself over and over, going faster and faster. The sound barrier broke against the golem by the ninth spike of acceleration, and an emission of Vitae painted its trajectory. The Golem drew one last time on its gravitic field before it finally discharged its Inertial Overdrive. A second explosion occurred before the Abyssal Gateway, and this one was not a small pop. A three-hundred-meter-wide blast swept across the front of the arch. Chunks of rock and more began to rain down from above.

Shiv threw up a fist. “I can make my soul do suicide bombings for me!”

“Incredible!” Valor cried with equal glee.

Can Hu and Uva stared, wordless.

And that wasn’t all.

Vitaemancy 59 > 60

Golemancy 4 > 5



Inertial Overdrive 112 > 113

Gravitic Wrestler 143 > 144

Shiv's eyes widened at the notification. "Valor. The skills I infused leveled as well."

"Have they?" Valor asked. "Inertial Overdrive and Gravitic Wrestler?"

"Yeah."

"That is odd. But then again, so are you—and your golems. That might indicate a more direct connection. It could be that your infusion caused this. But considering the time you gained these levels, I suspect that the deeds performed by your golem have been attributed to you."

"And that's not normal?"

"No. Golems are usually their own entities. But now there seems to be a crossover between—" Valor paused. The flames within his eye sockets flickered. "Oh. Oh, no."

Shiv noticed the drop in Valor's tone and frowned. "What? What's wrong?"

Valor hesitated for a moment before he started talking again. "These golems... They're strange. Your core is not the composition of its being, as you theorized earlier. Your Vitae is their main driver, it seems. The Skill Infusions, however, guide everything they can do. It's almost like they are replicators or repetitive reenactors of events that happened before."

"Resurrections of past moments related to the skill," Shiv surmised.

"Past moments bound to a skill," Valor muttered. "So. Vicar Sullain has your Vitae. And he is an Omnimancer. And he only gained that Skill after he fused his Animancy to all the other magical Skills he had. And if your Vitaemancy golems work by resurrecting feats recorded in the history of a skill... He might be able to recreate an Animancy Core himself."

Shiv blinked. His mood went from excitement to a plunging dread. "Oh, shi—"

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"Shit!" Adam roared. He slammed his fist down on the table. He did it several more times until the table shattered into splinters, casting wood across the room. "Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!"

"Yeah," Shiv replied. "I kind of reacted the same way."

Nearby, the orcs watched Adam's breakdown with wry amusement writ upon their faces. They were on the ground level of the obsidian tower where they had the briefing a few days ago. New boards had been dragged in, with battle maps of Lost Angeles partially drawn upon them. There was also a mess of

books and other files scattered across the floor. Scattered, because the desk they were just on was reduced to something less than rubble beneath Adam's fist.

"Why?" Adam cried. "Why must you always do this?"

"Really, you're blaming me?" Shiv replied, partially offended.

"Yes, I'm blaming you. It's because of your bullshit

. You are bullshit. And it is because you're bullshit that this bullshit happens to us!" Adam's tone was more exasperated than genuinely angry. "You keep evolving stranger and stranger skills. What was the point of everything we did with that Animancy Core?"

"We managed to kill the Recollector," Shiv noted.

Adam opened his mouth, then he closed it again and shrugged. "Yes. That was useful. But now Sullain has a replacement."

"Potentially," Valor said. "This is just a theory. And one that he will have to uncover on his own without a renewable source of Vitae. Or someone that can naturally wield it."

"Right. Potentially." Adam let out a breath. "But he can still control it. He managed to capture Shiv's exploding Vitae with his Omnimancy. What's to stop him from shaping it himself?"

"A great many factors. I suspect his ability to manipulate Shiv's Vitae comes from his power over Animancy and a Vitality Manipulation Skill. But his understanding will not be natural, and he will need to perform a very specific series of actions to discover what we have. Shiv only learned of this while repairing Can Hu."

"So. Ideally, he might not discover this at all?" Adam asked.

"It is important never to be overly optimistic," Valor replied. The Gate Lord groaned. "He had contact with my son. And so he must have some suspicion about how Vitae functions. But it is also very possible that the Vitae he clutched is too damaged by Necromancy to function the same way. Or that it has dissipated entirely by this point. Shiv's golems constantly expend vitality to exist, after all. But it is best to be sure. And best that we strike at the vicar first, before he learns to make use of the gift he possesses."

Adam sighed. "Right." He gestured at Oldsmith's notebook, which was splayed open on the floor. "Well. He isn't our only problem. The Inquisition is dispatching a force to our gate. They're looking for the Animancy core too. I've tried to delay them with excuses and partial truths, but Sijik has run out of patience. Pretending to be Oldsmith isn't going to be helpful for much longer, as the Inquisitor has named the Master-Advisor a traitor to the Republic and demands that the automaton meet with him at Fortress-City Diego within the next three days."

"And I don't have Oldsmith as a Perfect Semblance anymore," Shiv said.

Adam nodded. "It wouldn't be that useful anyway. Oldsmith was spent. We're going to have to deal with a small army of Republic soldiers ourselves first before the main Inquisitorial force arrives."

Uva cocked her head. "This sounds less like a problem to me and more like an opportunity." Everyone turned to look at her, and Adam, in particular, looked curious about what she had to say. "The

expeditionary force will not be large, I suspect. We should scout them out first. Learn about their composition and intentions. And then it might be useful for Shiv and me to assume a role in their force. He with his mask. Me with my Psychomancy.”

The Psychomancer walked over to the board, picked up a marker, and drew a line between the Inquisition and Vicar Sullain items. “Additionally, I think it would be best if we could trigger an engagement between the dispatched expeditionary force and the Necrotechs.”

“I concur,” Whisper said, offering Uva a nod. “This might also give you an opening. If the Inquisition and the Necrotechs find themselves in active conflict, they will have to divert forces to face each other—and we might have a window to access Blackedge, then.”

Adam narrowed his eyes as he contemplated the suggestions. “Yes. That might work. But we’ll need to hit the Inquisition’s forward deployment first. There’s no guarantee we’ll be able to stop them in a direct engagement, either. A small dispatch separated from an army one hundred thousand strong could be a few hundred Master-Tier Pathbearers.”

“Afraid of a little fight?” Mortar taunted with a laugh.

The Gate Lord glared at the orc. “Of the fight? No. But I would prefer not to kill any loyal soldiers of the Republic who are here just because of—”

The ground beneath them shook. The vibration felt familiar to Shiv. He felt it many times.

“Something just exploded,” he said. “Something close by.”

Adam's eyes flashed with light as he activated his skill, but even before he learned why the gate was shaking, a notification appeared before everyone's eyes.

Quest Gained: Hey, fuckers! Why aren't the assholes who stole my gate and bombed my realm dead? THE FUCK'S TAKING SO LONG YOU RAT-CUNT-FUCKS? HUH? KILL THEM! KILL THEM NOW! I'M LAUNCHING A RAID ON THEIR ASSES! SOMEONE KILL THE FUCKERS WHO BOMBED MY WORLD FOR FUCK'S SAKE!

Rewards: +25 Levels for a Selected Skill; +10 Levels for a Selected Skill; Three [Hidden] Master-Tier items; two obsidian dildos for use on "ADAM ARROW" and "THE CORPSE SHEDDER" until they get pregnant with my corpse-babies; Adept-Tier Skill Evolution—happy now???

Failure: I WILL NOT ACCEPT FUCKING FAILURE! WE'RE RAIDING THE GATE NOW! THE FIRE IS COMING! KILL HIM OR I BURN EVERYTHING!

A loud screech of straining metal filled the air. The temperature began to climb.

Adam let out a breath of utter exhaustion. "Shiv. I think you're going to need to do that orc army ritual to change our gateway. Let's solve the Lord Scorn problem first."

As if to mock him, the sound of a metallic seal being broken followed, and sounds of combat arose soon thereafter.

Chapter 130 (I) Breach

"What is the matter, Scorn? I can hear you raging across four different dimensions. What has angered you so, dear boy?"

"Fuck off. I don't have time to hear you flapping your cunt lips at me. I need to get to my gate. There are people I need to FUCK to death. I'll show those cunts the price for detonating an Animancy bomb in my dimension, for taking my gate away from me, for killing my Vultegs."

"Oh, Scorn, we both know you care little for your spawn."

"It's the fucking principle of the thing! I don't care about them in the sense that I think they matter. I care about them and the gate in the sense that someone killed and stole what is mine."

"And not yours much longer. You see, Scorn, that gateway you're planning to send your soldiers across is about to lead someplace very different."

"What the fuck did you just say?"

"I mean that it will soon be connected to a certain Tutorial, which means you will be dealing with my orcs if you do not sever the gateway, or seize Gate Theborn, right now. In fact, I suspect that at this very moment, a certain Gate Lord, Adam Arrow, and his delightful friend, the Corpse Shedder, are going to enact a Bloodrite to alter the Dimensionality of the gate. The Bloodrite of the Vaketh-Insul."

"You... you ratfuckcuntFUCK! Have you been planning this?"

"Planning? No. But the opportunity presented itself, and I seized it. Quite the opposite of you, actually. You sit atop your tower as you suckle and feed and hide. It's pathetic. You can thank me for bringing some entertainment into your life."

"Are you trying to provoke me, you shit-stained gray-skin?" THIS CHAPTER IS UPDATE BY novelfire.net

"Of course I am provoking you, Scorn. Do invade your former gate. Do burn your divinity to enhance the rewards offered by this pathetic Quest. The System offered it only to taunt your impotence, I am beginning to suspect. For you will never, ever regain Gate Theborn. It is lost. It is lost because you are a coward. And it is lost because you are a petulant, scared child. How you became a god is beyond me—"

"Someday I'm going to hollow out your piss-stained eyes and FUCK YOUR SOCKETS!"

"—but I know that you will continue ranting and raving in your little dimension, hiding away from the rest of Integration. Godhood is not immortality, Scorn. If you wish to live forever, you must be the strongest. But the strongest cannot fear death. Throw your tantrum. Waste the lives of your Vultegs against the Deathless. Entertain me. You know you cannot help it. You understand that you are flinging your forces into a provoked trap. But you cannot turn from this. Your pride is a poison. And it is your nature. Just as cruelty is nature for an orc. I am taking my leave now. I don't need to say anymore. Goodbye, Scorn. Struggle. Embarrass yourself. Amuse me."

"Challenger! You cocksucking, motherfucking, piece of SHIIIIITTTT! CHALLENGER! COME BACK! I'LL—FUCKING! VULTEGS! HEAR ME! WE'RE MOVING ON GATE THEBORN RIGHT NOW! GET ME THAT GATE BACK! BRING ME THE HEAD OF ADAM FUCKING ARROW! AND—THE CORPSE-SHEDDER? What the fuck kind of name is Corpse-Shedder? Why do I always have to deal with the fucking freaks..."

-The Challenger and Lord Scorn



Shiv and the others emerged from the obsidian tower to see an eruption of molten fluid rise high into the air. It was the very same molten fluid that once ran as rivers at the base of Gate Theborn. Now it was spewing free from the cracked barrier built over the Vulketh gateway. Meters of reinforced alloy had been fractured, and more tore open with every passing second. More importantly, the Dimensional spell patterns layered over the reinforced barrier were also failing, flickering out one after another as a building flood of dimensionality overflowed into the gate. A puddle of static-covered blackness shivered beneath the mana core's azure light.

At the same time, another explosion rocked the gate. Shiv bit back a curse as he watched the bridge connecting the Surface Gateway to its district collapse. A groan of metal paired with a scream of distant voices echoed through the air. Above the crumbling bridge were fast-moving silhouettes that unleashed balls of fire upon buildings and encampments built atop the surface district.

Shiv blinked at one of the shapes in particular. "Is that a felling Jealousy?"

"Godsdamnit all," Adam growled. "How did it get in? How?"

"You deal with the surface district," Shiv said. "I'll make sure nothing gets in through the gateway."

"Right, Uva—"

"I'll go with him," Uva said as she leapt aboard her shield. "We'll handle matters there and return as soon as possible." She made eye contact with Shiv and cast a thought at him. "Die well. But don't stay dead."

The Deathless smirked. "Have fun. But hurry back. No guarantees there will be anything left when you get back."

The Gate Lord gave Shiv a brief nod before he fired a Veilpiercer. A dimensional pathway opened before him, yet before he accelerated across, he shot a look at Valor and Can Hu.

"Go," Valor said, flaring a blade forged of Necromancy. "We will be here and serve as Shiv's backline." Can Hu built on his words by creating a rising wall of stone, shaping a small fortress around the breached gateway. Shiv and the others rose high into the air as they found themselves standing on the newly risen battlements.

"Don't worry about me," Shiv said to Adam. He spun his Skysplitter in his hand. "I'll be fine. Go."

Adam clenched his jaw and accelerated through. Uva followed thereafter.

By now, dimensionals summoned to guard the gate were swirling overhead, composing spells in anticipation of the coming invaders. At the same time, the first responders of the Arachne Order arrived. Umbrals and Weaveresses emerged from spatial pockets and took their positions atop the towering battlements Can Hu hoisted from the ground. Immediately, they began casting spells of Portomancy and Dimensionality, trying to reinforce the failing spell patterns layered over the Vulketh gateway.

Shiv had a feeling that their actions were too little, too late.

True to his expectations, another jet of molten fluid blasted through the fracturing alloy barrier, and just then a shape burst free from the rising spray—the shape of an armored Vulteg, who emerged with a

roar as he dove out from the burning fluid. He drew his obsidian axe back as he sailed through the air, and a dozen other Vultegs followed him.

"Lord Scorn!" he screamed. "Witness my—"

And that was as far as he got.

Temporal armor flared over Shiv's body. The Vultegs froze. Everyone froze. Only he remained in motion. He blasted toward the enemy. Shiv noted that his armor looked impressive. Tragically, it did nothing to spare the Vulteg's life when Shiv drove the tip of his Skysplitter through his bright-blue eye. Deepest Edge sent Shiv's stab all the way through the Vulteg's skull. Blood erupted from the back of the axe-bearer's head—and the Vulteg's body disintegrated as Shiv spiked himself another dozen times. Shiv's Inertial Overdrive thundered in delight as he sought new victims.

The members of the invading Vulteg vanguard were all clad in enchanted armor and bore heavy weapons. A few even had powerful Magical Skills. But none of them were Chronomancers, and as Shiv fell upon them with might and metal, Vultegs died without ever knowing who killed them.

The Skysplitter sang a screaming song as Shiv used it to split armor and break bone. He stole the mass of some Vultegs, increasing the weight of the blade in his hand, but he kept its size minuscule. This allowed him to hammer and hew with a near-ton of mass in his hand. What he couldn't cut well was crushed and pulped. A few of the Vultegs had Master-Tier Toughness. They died all the same as Shiv pierced eyes and split skulls. A pulse came from a temporal warding. Shiv backhanded the approaching counter-mana with his Magebreaker, and the cascading field of golden mana went off course due to his Frictionless Vector.

Frictionless Vector 63 > 64

Distant Vultegs were bombarded with laceration spells. Their Magical Resistances shattered. They split apart within their own armors, coming asunder as they were betrayed by their own biology.

As Shiv killed, he added his Vitaemancy into the mix. Streams of white and red speared through other Vultegs. At first, he simply sapped their vitality, but then, using the halted pace of time to his advantage, Shiv crafted a Vitae Golem, and he infused within it both Inertial Overdrive and Gravitic wrestler. But the golem hovered frozen beside him, and Shiv frowned as the cold touch of weakness chilled his exhausted being.

Why—oh, shit, Chronomancy. Right.

He infused it with his Chronomancy as well, and suddenly a golden shell flashed around the golem. Shiv grinned in delight as the golem shifted to regard him. Shiv pointed at the building rupture splitting the broken barrier just as his Chronomancy field began to crack.

"Get through that crack, spike yourself as many times as you can, and then discharge your Inertial Overdrive before you break or evaporate."

The Vitae Golem didn't hesitate. Immediately, it blasted off, spiking high into the air at first, before plunging straight down through the dimensional chasm lining the breaking barrier. More cracks spread across Shiv's temporal shell, and he dismissed his Chronomancy. As he did, the second group of Vultegs blasted out from the Dimensional blackness welling out from the broken blockade. Yet, rather than arriving ready for battle, they were flung out from the dimensional chasm. Several were already dead, their bodies blasted apart, a few were missing limbs, and even the toughest among them seemed stunned and dazed. They died stunned and dazed as Shiv struck their head clean from their body with a flick of his elongated Skysplitter, beheading three Vultegs at once.

Before Shiv could go for the other downed Vultegs, bolts of Dynamancy smashed into them. Instead of splattering them across the ground, the bolts swallowed Vulteg in fields of gravity and began collapsing inward. The Vultegs screamed as their bodies were compressed into small singularities that promptly collapsed. The Vultegs burst apart and turned into smears of red—balls of twisted metal and flesh.

Shiv turned and found Tequila with a foot planted high on the parapet. The orc spun his twin wands as he gave the Deathless a joyful chuckle.

"The thing about gravity," Tequila said, the cigarette between his lips bobbing up and down, "is that it can collapse even the strongest body."

Shiv made note of the orc's wands. If he was ever going to fight Tequila, he would make sure the Orc was disarmed first.

Just then, Shiv felt a resonant vibration pass through his Chronomancy. There was another Chronomancer approaching. The Deathless instinctively triggered his Strider of the Unbending Path.

And just in time, a temporal shell fused over Shiv as a massive Vulteg shrouded in a ten-meter-wide veil of golden mana exploded free from the dimensional chasm lining the ground.

The Vulteg moved in an aberrant manner. Rather than traveling normally, as Shiv did, he skipped across existence, flickering from moment to moment with every ripple of his Chronomancy. His field wasn't very wide, but it wasn't nearly as compact as Shiv's dimensional armor. It only oscillated a single meter away from his body, but it seemed to propel him, to cast him forward with every passing half second.

The Vulteg jumped from place to place, going for one of the Weaveress groups casting from the walls.

Shiv intercepted him. However, as he collided with the Vulteg's body, he felt a heavy impact slam against his temporal shell. Pieces of golden armor broke free from Shiv. He felt himself lose five seconds of time. Yet, in the clash of Chronomancy, it was his adversary that came out worse. Their Chronomancy field burst open, partially tearing. A brief scream escaped the Vulteg's vertical jaw. Then they went still before Shiv, unable to use their Chronomancy to influence time.

As the veil of gold faded from the Vulteg's body, Shiv saw that the Vulteg was at least three meters tall, blessed with rippling muscles and barely any armor. In fact, aside from a leather vest that glowed with revolving spell patterns, the Vulteg had nothing else guarding his body. He also used no weapons, aside from a few metal studs that were wrapped around his knuckles.

A brawler, Shiv realized.

Before the remains of Shiv's temporal shell could break away, the Deathless dismissed his armor. Chronomancy had been a lifesaver in his past, and he needed to preserve it in case there was another Chronomancer coming his way.

Time resumed. Shiv slammed his blade into the Vulteg's gut. The large enemy let out a cry of pain, but rather than folding over, he reached out and seized Shiv by the neck. Shiv responded by throwing himself backward with a tug on his gravity field. The Vulteg was ripped off balance. Shiv twisted his body and swept the Vulteg's leg from under him before slamming them against the ground.

Shiv landed on top of him and immediately began stabbing and slashing. Yet, as Shiv cleaved into the Vulteg, who flinched with every slash, the large, single-eyed Pathbearer didn't die. Rather, he developed slight lacerations, bruises, and no more. Every injury he sustained was reduced at best.

A barrage of spells crashed down on the dimensional rupture. Roaring blasts of artillery screamed down from above. More Vultegs arrived. Shiv tried to finish his current foe.

As Shiv brought his blade down again, the Vulteg reached up, caught him by the wrist, and, rather than physically struggling against Shiv, he screamed. The noise made Shiv's bones rattle. Something burst within his inner ear. Equilibrium vanished. Shiv tumbled backward, unable to maintain his own balance.

For the first time, the Vulteg hit him instead. Shiv was ragdolled through the air and felt himself tear an ugly gash through the battlements, confusing his broken balance even more. And somewhere in the middle of all that, the Vulteg caught his leg and flung him back down to the ground.

Shiv impacted the floor—and the Vulteg smashed knee-first into the Deathless's chest before he began hammering him in the face. The first punch fractured Shiv's helmet. The second blow left a bruise on his neck. The third landed under Shiv's armpit—and bounced off due to Adamantine Adaption. Shiv groped blindly, trying to figure out where the Vulteg was, trying to steady himself so he could get back into the fight.

It felt like water was pouring into his skull, unbalancing him. Shiv pulled blindly on his gravitic field and felt himself slam into the Vulteg. He was briefly freed, but he also felt himself rolling along the ground. He shaped a Woundeater, and it slid inside his skull, devouring the wound. At once, something popped inside his ears.

The world stabilized; things stopped bobbing up and down. Shiv found himself lying face down on the floor, and there was a shadow descending upon him. He turned, whipping his Woundeater high, but the spell passed through the Vulteg as the cyclopean Pathbearer dissipated into a splash of misting shadow. He reformed right in front of Shiv and lashed out with a heavy kick.

The Vulteg was fast.

Shiv was faster.

He caught the Vulteg by the leg, but then the Vulteg dissipated into mist again. He appeared behind Shiv, only to miss his next punch entirely as Shiv activated his Chameleon enchantment and ducked down. Pure instinct saved the Vulteg as Shiv swiped his blade up. The Vulteg laughed, reveling in his own skill—only for Shiv's Woundeater to crash into the back of his head. A blast of mana swallowed the Vulteg—then he vanished from Shiv's sight.

For a beat, he thought the Vulteg had used a Stealth Skill. But then the enemy warrior burst back into view just a few meters away, with several gleaming knives lodged in his thigh and armpit. Blood poured free from his body, but rather than gush, it only ran as a trickle.

A Dimensional barrier burst beside Shiv as Whisper revealed himself. He was stumbling, smacking his right ear with an annoyed expression on his face. "That was loud," the orc commented with a chuckle of his own.

As the Vulteg pulled a few of the gleaming blades out of his body, he turned and glared at Shiv. Behind him, the erupting jet stream of molten metal intensified as the alloyed barrier succumbed entirely. Plates of metal furled like a blossoming flower as a flood of new forces broke through. Spells descended from above, the defending Dimensionals responding only now due to their lacking Reflexes.



"Deal with them," Shiv called out. "I'll have this one."

"Aye, Insul," he heard Mortar reply from above the walls, and then came a concussive blast. An arcing projectile sailed through the air as it struck the emerging Vultegs in a cataclysmic impact. The world trembled. Bits of burning flesh joined the molten metal in a rain of fire and destruction. But more Vultegs came, spilling out faster and faster. They slipped out from the building eruption of molten fluid in proper formations, stepping out in teams of five.

Yet, before they could truly amass any momentum, the sounds of a violin squealed, and a small army of new Dimensionals entered the scene. They crashed into the Vultegs as a rain of gleaming knives followed behind them. Bolts of Dynamancy descended as well, scattering teams and creating openings for the defenders to exploit.

While the orcs, Umbrals, and some dimensionals worked to bottleneck the Vulteg invaders, Shiv eyed his adversary and briefly disabled his Chameleon. "Interesting Toughness Skill you got there," he said to the Vulteg brawler.

"You as well," the Vulteg replied, assuming a fighting stance. "Just a Scratch. Master-Tier"

"Adamantine Adaption," Shiv replied. "Master-Tier."

The Vulteg did a double-take. "Adamantine Adaption? How?"

"Die and find out," Shiv taunted.

## Chapter 130 (II) Breach

The Vulteg shot toward him, jumping into the air with a twirl of his body. Shiv flung himself off the ground. As he did, he extended ropes of Vitaemancy, trying to secure the Vulteg. However, the Vulteg danced between the lashing limbs of red and white. He drifted toward Shiv as a patch of blackness, and the Deathless awaited the coming of his enemy. A Woundeater flared along Shiv's right arm, and crystallized laceration spells flooded its insides.

The Vulteg had substantial Magical Resistance. Not nearly as much as Confriga, but still substantial. Shiv guessed it would take at least ten more spells to crack the Vulteg open.

Problem is getting him to stay still long enough, Shiv thought. Between his stupid Toughness and his ability to turn into a gust of mist, he's kind of a pain in the ass.

Of course, the Vulteg wasn't the only one that could be a pain in the ass. Shiv immediately activated his Chameleon enchantment again, but also projected a Minor Illusion just a few meters away from himself. To Shiv's satisfaction, the Vulteg went for the Minor Illusion, materializing to unleash a spinning kick that tore right through the Illusion and cleaved a deep slash into the surrounding walls.

Three Woundeaters slammed into the Vulteg right after. A detonation of mana consumed everyone within 50 meters.

The Vulteg staggered back, and Shiv blasted into him, carrying them high into the air and away from the others. Before the Vulteg could respond, Shiv stopped time again. The enemy reactivated his Chronomancy Skill as well. Once more Shiv's temporal armor fractured apart, but this time the Vulteg's time mana was reduced to torn tatters, trailing dissipating tassels of gold from the broken field. The Vulteg's oscillating mana field split in half entirely.

The Vulteg cried out again—and went still.

Yeah, sorry, friend, Shiv thought. System's a piece of shit, and you ran into the wrong Pathbearer.

He launched another Woundeater into the Vulteg one after another as he drained him of vitality. Then, he spiked himself a dozen times, and then a dozen more. He dragged the Vulteg high into the air before he discharged his Inertial Overdrive.

Shiv let time resume. A beat passed. Shiv smashed down like a meteor, crushing a Vulteg under his boot as chunks of the slain brawler rained down with the falling dollops of molten metal. Before the other Vultegs could respond, the Inertial Overdrive discharge washed over them. The weaker ones burst into bloody mist. The stronger were flung off their feet. Only the greatest stayed standing.

And just then, it seemed like the Vultegs were going to be pushed back.

Well, not much of a fight, are you guys? Shiv thought. He stared at the shattered barrier, at the unstable pulses of Dimensionality spewing out more Vultegs, and frowned. Alright, Challenger. Let's get this shit over with. I'll do the damned ritual. Connect your Tutorial to this gate.

At that, a notification appeared before his eyes, and with it came the Challenger's laughter.

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

Ritual Conditions: Slay [44/50,000 Vultegs] to align the Dimensional frequency of the Vulketh Gateway to the Tutorial.

Shiv blinked. "Fifty-felling-what?"

Just then, another bombardment of spells crashed into the dimensional rift.

Ritual Conditions: Slay [51/50,000 Vultegs] to align the Dimensional frequency of the Vulketh Gateway to the Tutorial.

The Deathless breathed and gripped his Skysplitter tighter. "Well, this is gonna take a while. We should still push them back. Better to keep them contained if we can."

The orcs were doing a good job keeping the Vultegs boxed in. Between Whisper's rain of gleaming blades, Mortar's bombardment, and all the dimensionals Band was summoning, something of a stalemate had formed. An impasse that the Umbrals and Weaveresses were trying to exploit. New Dimensionality spells were forming around the compromised gateway. A massive ring of static blackness swirled around Shiv. It expanded wider, running for around a hundred meters before a second layer of rings was constructed.

The spell patterns ran counter to each other, and Shiv noticed how each of the rings was connected along singular bridges. The amount of coordination required to shape such a large spell left him staggered. And he realized he didn't really know that much about magic, aside from what he could use and shape with his intent.

Just then, a Vulteg burst into existence beside one of the Umbrals. This enemy held a crossbow, and its tip glistened with Pyromantic energy. However, they teleported again just as Tequila blinked into existence across from them, flinging a spell from a Dynamancy wand. As the ambushing Vulteg vanished, so too did Tequila, using his temporal magic to keep up with his enemy's Portomancy.

Good thing we have our own skirmisher, Shiv realized.

A crash of thunder and a flash of lightning drew his attention. Overhead, a chain of electricity descended upon the emerging Vultegs. As the chain crashed down, Shiv's eyes widened as he realized each section of the chain was focused around a metal quill. It sank into a Vulteg Pyromancer trying to cast a spell. And she died with a scream as the thunderstorm erupted out from her body. The other quills detonated as well, consuming patches of space and burying the emerging Vultegs beneath the condensing tempest. Blackened clouds rose from the smoldering remains of the invaders. They condensed in the sky above, blotting the mana core's brightness from sight. Not only that, it proved a functional barricade against the spraying molten metal as well.

Lightning whipped down, slashing at any Vultegs that emerged through the dimensional rift. Above the cloud, Shiv saw a Weaveress. Her body flickered with static electricity, and behind her, two air dimensionals channeled more lightning into the metal quills running down her limbs.

Shiv blinked. Is that Null Mont? he thought to himself. He shook that thought from his head as he dispatched a new Vitae Golem. However, he did something differently this time. Previously, he installed Gravitic Wrestler, Chronomancy, and Inertial Overdrive within the Golem. Now he added something special: Vitality Drain.

"Let's see if this makes you self-sufficient," Shiv muttered to the Golem. As it ripped free from his body in a splash of red and white, he felt a rush of enervation sweep through him. And so, his anticipation rose as he yearned to see what this golem could do. "Go get the bastards. Cross through the rift, fight as long as you can. Burst yourself when you're about to break or run out of vitality."

The golem shot forward. It moved just like the last golem did, spiking high into the air before stabbing down. A bolt of lightning accompanied its path on the way down, and as it slammed through the breach, several Vultegs were shredded apart from its sheer acceleration. Yet, before the Vitae Golem could pass through entirely, something crashed into it, knocking it aside. A group of Vultegs descended on the downed Vitae Golem with spell and steel.

Meanwhile, a new group of enemies entered the fray.

They arrived as a trio. The head Vulteg's eye gleamed like an orb of golden fire, so brilliant it stood apart from all the chaos and carnage. His armor ran in crenulated scales, each section glistening with gold, further enchanted with Chronomancy.

Behind, two other Vultegs followed. One held a colossal blade, while their body was shrouded in dense chunks of shuffling stone. Another, smaller Vulteg, skipped into battle behind them, bearing a sphere of oceanic blue. The sphere that reshaped itself into a spear, just as they glistened with dense Hydromancy.

All three of them were Master-Tier mages at the very least. Shiv could feel that from the mana fields they exuded. The first was a Chronomancer, and their golden armor formed a twenty-meter-wide sphere of radiant mana around them. Shiv wasn't sure what kind of Chronomancy they had, but he suspected his temporal shell would take more than a little damage once he passed into this threshold of their pocket. The second, Shiv suspected, was a Geomancer from the moving landslide they wore as armor. The third was a Hydromancer, and that one's power reached far and wide, spreading for well over a full kilometer—beyond Shiv's ability to observe.

A series of spells came at them. Lightning-infused quills of metal descended from above, bolts of Dynamancy curved through the air to strike the trio. The sphere of golden mana pulsed bright around the enemy Chronomancer. Every attack froze just as it splashed against the first Vulteg's Chronomantic

threshold. And there the spells and projectiles stayed as the three Vultegs walked past them without a care.

Shiv glared. This'll be interesting.

As the battle raged in the backdrop, the leading Vulteg looked upon Shiv, and his gleaming eye flared brighter. "You are the Corpse Shedder. You wear the visage of death."

His sphere of Chronomancy drew closer toward Shiv, but it stopped five meters away from the Deathless.

"Oh," Shiv said. "Finally noticed I'm a Chrono too."

"We knew. You slew Shatterhand. Thus, I, Squadhead Kastiglier, have been dispatched to eliminate you."

"How did you assholes manage to get in, anyway?" Shiv asked.

"As if we would speak such secrets to an enemy," the Vulteg Hydromancer hissed. Her voice was sibilant, but there was also a reverberating quality to it, as if she were speaking underwater. "Now, we come to claim your life. Yours and Adam Arrow's. We come for you. And we come for him. And we will please Lord Scorn with your heads."

"Yeah, about that, do you know if I can get the Quest rewards if I kill myself?" Shiv asked.

All three Vultegs fell silent. Their eyes widened as one. The rock-clad Vulteg looked at the two others. "Did he just promise to kill himself for the Quest rewards? Does that work?"

"It does—"

As the Chronomancer Vulteg spoke, Shiv formed his temporal shell once more.

Time halted.

The Chronomancer continued speaking. "—n't. Wait. He's activated his Chronomancy skill." He pointed at Shiv, and to his surprise, the three Vultegs held within the Chronomantic sphere were unaffected by his time stop. Stranger still was how the sphere gnawed hard against Shiv's temporal shell. It didn't break his Chronomancy field immediately, but it felt like a layer of abrasion was being emitted from the lead Vulteg's Chronomancy.

And that's when Shiv realized that the sphere wasn't actually a sphere. Rather, it was like an inner field, and from it emerged an outer, weaker layer that slowed the outside world to some extent before it impacted the inner layer.

Felling weird ass Skill Evolutions, Shiv thought to himself.



Shiv dashed to his left, and then he went right as he triggered his Minor Illusion alongside Chameleon again. However, while the Chronomancer and Hydromancer Vultegs were fooled, the rock-armored Vulteg continued following Shiv, his single eye gleaming purple.

Oh great, a Diviner, Shiv thought to himself. Looks like you're dying first. Shiv increased his chaotic tactics. He flung a body at the Vultegs, launching it out from his cape. As it sailed, he began to construct a new Vitae Golem. He infused his Gravitic Wrestler Skill in the golem at first, and then winced as he watched the Hydromancer drive a spike of water clean through the head of his corpse

Broken Moon, she packs a punch. She put a clean hole through adamantine.

Yet, as she did that, something slammed into the Chronomantic sphere protecting the Vultegs from behind. It arrived as a flash of white, red, and gold, and all three Vultegs pitched forward as the unknown enemy clawed at their final threshold of protection. Shiv had to do a double-take as he realized just who came to his aid. Holy shit, Shiv thought, that was my last Vitae Golem.

Parts of its red and white shell were cracked. Even so, it still seemed bright with vitality. It had four skills inside its body, and it constantly turned through Vitae. It should have vanished sooner than any other Golem, but it was still fighting, still active. Shiv's face widened into a joyful grin. Holy shit, Vitality Drain worked! I got self-sustaining golems! I think... And then he refocused himself and began constructing a new golem to support his first.

The golden shell preserving his Golem shattered apart as it entered the inner Chronomantic field guarding the three Vultegs. But the inner field was also ripped asunder by the sheer magical abrasion inflicted by the golem's approach. Shiv's first Vitae golem became as if a dagger breaking itself to pierce armor.

The Hydromancer responded immediately. She whipped out with her spear, and to Shiv's astonishment, he watched as she took a significant chunk out of the golem's skull. A wound three centimeters long opened a slit along the right side of the golem's face. Broken chips of red and white sprayed through the air. And still, the Hydromancer wasn't done. She swiped her spear three more times, each time the blow cleaved harder, deeper, truer. Her weapon flowed around the golem, wrapping and slicing at its body, opening up a dozen wounds in mere moments.

Only then did the Vulteg Chronomancer respond.

Comparatively, the Vulteg Geomancer still hadn't reacted at all.

Useful, Shiv thought to himself. Hydromancer's fastest. Chronomancer second, Geomancer third. He updated his priority targets. Go for the Hydromancer first. It didn't matter that the Geomancer was also a Diviner—if he couldn't react, he wasn't an issue.

Right then, Shiv finished infusing Chronomancy, Gravitic Wrestler, Vitality Drain, and Inertial Overdrive within his new golem. He sent it out to crash into the Chronomantic sphere from the other side. At the same time, the Vulteg Chronomancer made a gesture, and an invisible blade manifested, slashing through the golem's chest.

Yet the golem didn't split in half, even as a blast of razor-sharp wind passed through it. Only the faintest scratch lined the golem's torso compared to the wounds the Hydromancer was inflicting. And before the Hydromancer could capitalize, it reached out, seizing the Chronomancer by the wrist. Vitality flared within the golem, and the Chronomancer let out a gasp of pain as he was drained. His Chronomancy sphere flickered, and just then, the other vitality golem slammed into it, tearing the field from the other side as well.

The Chronomancer let out a shriek of agony. Shiv's eyes narrowed. And that confirmed something for him. Shiv's Chronomancy worked differently from other Chronomancers. His shattered and regrew fast. It only had ten seconds of use at baseline, but it didn't hurt or strain him like it did other Chronomancers. Meanwhile, they used their field like a limb. They could keep using it, but it hurt them when it broke.

Must be some time dragon shit,

Shiv thought.

"Spike yourselves! Explode!" Shiv called out to his golems. Both of them responded without hesitation. Their gravitic fields pulsed violently, and their inertial sheaths responded in kind. A shroud of rippling violence built as the last fragments of their temporal shells finally broke away.

The first golem discharged, and a cleaving flash of light swept through the world. A blast of fire consumed the inner sphere created by the Vulteg Chronomancer. The trio of Vultegs vanished into the light. And then came a shockwave of force that flung the three Vultegs out from the flames.

The second golem's detonation followed, and that shattered the Chronomantic sphere entirely.

Strider of the Unbending Path 135 > 136

Inertial Overdrive 113 > 115

Vitaemancy 59 > 61

Vitality Drain 54 > 55

Shiv felt his time armor nearly crumble, and he dismissed his Chronomancy before he lost his magic entirely. He did it just as the massive blast swept through the area. The Geomancer Vulteg was flung back through the dimensional chasm, splattering some of his allies as he crashed through them. The Chronomancer was nowhere to be seen, but a second later, a leg slammed into Shiv's chest—a smoking leg glistening with gold.

Poor bastard, Shiv thought to himself. Needed more Toughness—

A spear of water slashed wide across the air. He barely dodged in time, ducking his head as it split clean through the top of his helmet.

Dodge 14 > 15

The Hydromancer dove out from the jet of water, uninjured but furious. She let out a snarl as she shaped a Hydromancy spell, drawing all the moisture in her surroundings to her. Her field was vast. Her magic was powerful.

He felt the moisture in the air condense—felt her pulling at the very water within his body. And he heard her scream and shudder as he broke the spell forming in his hand with a punch from his Magebreaker. As the spell exploded, the Hydromancer's back arched. And as she screamed, Shiv reached out and gripped her by the neck before he slammed his Skysplitter into her gut and dragged it up. He got two centimeters before she seized his grip with both her hands. Blood sprayed from her mouth. She collapsed against him as they struggled.

In the backdrop, more spells crashed down on her allies, and a massive tentacle exploded out from the gateway, reaching high into the air.

Shiv ignored that for now. Instead, he grasped the Hydromancer by the back of her head-tentacles with his free hand, trying to pull her up. As the Vulteg looked up at him, she let out a rasping groan, then breathed hissing poison in his face. A rush of toxins flooded Shiv's body, and she continued spewing corrosive acid at him. Shiv blinked in surprise at first. He felt some of his skin itch and burn from the substance. His insides tingled as well. It was like he was shedding the flesh on his face.

Then, his Plaguefueled triggered, and Shiv's armor began to break around him as he grew larger and larger. Soon, he loomed three meters tall, holding the Vulteg Hydromancer as if she were a doll in his hands. His armor hung off him in tatters. Shiv just grinned, indifferent to the broken pieces falling from his body. The Vulteg's eye widened. She looked on in abject horror as Shiv began drawing out pieces of bone from within his cape to rebuild the parts of his armor that had just broken.

"Now that was an unfortunate mistake," Shiv muttered to the Hydromancer. "But I do thank you for feeding me. Got any more?"

"I—you—" The Hydromancy tried to shape another spell, but Shiv ripped his knife out from her. She shrieked. But before she could finish, he grabbed her by her legs and pulled in two directions. "NO—"

Those were her final words as her body came apart along her midsection.

A rush of terror washed into him. His Dread Aura rose by two levels just as he noticed how all the surviving Vultegs were stumbling back, flinching away from him in fear. Their formations were battered but holding. They had created their own barricades to advance, and now they were hiding behind them, gawking at the Corpse Shedder's brutality. But before they could even consider retreating, a huge, looming eye rose behind them. A purple eye. An eye that glistened with Psychomancy and baleful ire. The angular head of a Jealousy pushed free from the gate, and the rest of its body materialized in a pulse of psionic energy.

"Corpse Shredder," the Jealousy cried. Its voice was deeper than the jealousy Shiv had killed before. "Come for you. Come for Adam Arrow. Lord Scorn will be pleased. Lord Scorn reward Mrpegia."

Shiv just laughed as he magnified the size of his Skysplitter in response. "Oh, look. The meat's starting to deliver itself!"