

Deathless 136

Chapter 136 (I) Assimilation [I]

As some of you might already know, monsters and individuals are separated into different categories of Pathbearer. The main separation between individual and monster is debated, but the core differences are experiential, origin, and metaphysical. Though there have been questionable experiments conducted by ancient empires to raise “Feral Pathbearers” who might be able to access a monster’s Path, thus far it takes a significant alteration to an individual Pathbearer’s nature for them to gain Monster Skills.

Individual Pathbearers will notice that their skills grant them more abilities to interface with the world, applying more control or delivering more sophisticated attacks. This isn’t to say that Individual Skills are not potent, but taking Toughness Skill Evolutions for example and the fact that most Individual Pathbearers rely on equipment and armor, most skills in such a category develop toward prevention, reduction, or nullification of damage rather than raw durability.

Such is not the same with monsters. Most monsters do not develop sapient intelligence until a far higher tier—if at all—and as such their skills lend to more brutal and overwhelming capacities.

Such is why the Storm Giants tend to evolve their Aeromancy toward skills such as This Storm My Soul, which allows them to store a massive storm inside themselves and drink in lightning while an individual Aeromancer might achieve something like Architect of Descending Storms, which focuses less on raw mana output, but spread their mana field further and wider while allowing for delicate controls.

Regardless, it is not impossible for one to gain Monster Skills. But most means to attain monster Skill Evolutions will usually require significant acts of Biomancy, in which the Individual Pathbearer’s body is reshaped, a blessing that allows you to tap into a monster’s nature somehow, or a skill transplant, which is extremely experimental at present and will require a Master Animancer to perform.

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

Woundeater 90 > 94

Vitamancy 67 > 69

Vitality Drain 59 > 61

Practical Metabiology 38 > 40

Multi-Tasking 1 > 4

Memorization 1 > 6

Awareness 21 > 24

Getting Biomantically assimilated was a captivating way to die.

For one, there wasn't a lot of physical pain involved. The entire process was more characterized by a sudden feeling of absence than anything else. One moment he could feel his hand, and the next moment it wasn't his hand anymore. Nested within the Court Leviathan's flesh, Shiv resisted the invasive Biomancy possessed by the massive beast—further amplified by Helix and his cohort of orc Biomancers. They didn't smash through his Biomancy field or rip it apart immediately. Instead, they showed him how mages fought. Technically. Strategically. Taking advantage of mistakes and or misunderstandings to pass through his field and directly twist his flesh.

Strings of shifting biomass danced within the Court Leviathan and washed over him, gripping and pulling at him. He repelled them at first, but then came subtler and subtler touches, subtler and subtler spells. Eventually, his aforementioned hand rebelled of its own accord. It stopped functioning in accordance with his nervous system and detached itself from his wrist. It sprouted ant-like legs made from its bones as it skittered off and melted into the Court Leviathan's biomass. More glancing touches of Biomancy passed against him, and with each dip against his body, treason was whispered into his flesh.

His legs left him next. Then one of his eyes. His tongue. His organs. His ears. Until he finally, he was but a spine, a brain, a heart, a larynx, and two lungs. Still, he remained alive, painless, aside from how strained his Biomancy felt. He tried to direct his intent, but it was far harder without hands. But still, Shiv kept going. Because despite everything, this was fun. He was finally learning in the most hands-on way possible.

And for all his haughtiness, Helix wasn't a bad instructor.

"Alright, pull him out," Helix's muffled voice sounded from above. The quivering folds of animated flesh shifted around Shiv. They went from being a cage of cartilage meant to hold him in place to active muscle and pushed him upward. As he emerged, he felt the ground solidify into a smooth surface of bone, and over him stood the bespectacled orc.

"So. Better this time. But still not good. I once again must spit on whoever deliberately crippled your learning. You're missing far too many essential skills. Not even Adept-Tier Memorization or Multi-

Tasking. It's getting in the way of your efficiency. It's probably the main reason you're so incompetent at responding to minute or multi-pronged spells."

Shiv tried to say something, but realized his tongue was absent.

"It's fine," Helix sighed, brushing off his coat. "I am not blaming you. I suspect you will be evolving your Woundeater first. That makes you a horrifically inverted Pathbearer in terms of development, which, I suppose, fits someone of your aberrant nature."

Shiv grunted in agreement. The other orcs looked down at him with appreciation and amusement. Most of them still had fear-chains connected to him, and a few had grown thicker when Shiv exposed his willingness to suffer torment and death to grow. But more than fear, he noted a glee to their expressions. Most of them genuinely liked him. It wasn't the kind of liking where some Umbrals and Weaveresses saw him as a hero to their city. No, the orcs liked him as a person.

They considered his mortality and ethics flaws, but aside from that, they treated him as something of a neighborhood celebrity. And despite Shiv's best efforts, he enjoyed it. He valued it. After a lifetime of being a pariah, positive attention was like an oasis in a desert for Shiv.

But they're still orcs. Never forget, Shiv. Never forget what they do to people. What they'll do to the people you care about the moment they get a chance. He reminded himself of this time and time again.

But knowing was one thing, and feeling was another. And there he noticed another weakness in himself that the orcs could exploit—that they were exploiting.

He had Shape of Monstrosity. That was his edge in terms of social dynamics. That, and his willingness to break or kill them—his indifference toward death and pain. But their grasp over psychology and social dynamics far exceeded his, and in the hours he spent in the Tutorial, he found himself laughing with the orcs. Amused by them. Mistaking them for companions.

And I can't let them charm me. Not completely.

Psychology 26 > 28

And so, intermittently, he applied his own psychological updates. He reached back and reminded himself of memories and emotions. Memories of what Band did, of how 811 crushed a child's skull before Shiv's eyes just to mess with him. Time and again, Shiv fed himself doses of slight rage to center his thoughts and taint his feelings toward the orcs. It had some effect. But it wouldn't be enough in the long run. He would need to ask for Uva's aid in bolstering his defenses.

Psychomancy 14 > 16

"Insul... Insul!" Helix called out, snapping his fingers in front of Shiv's face. He blinked, realizing he'd sunk into his own thoughts again. "Ah. Your attention span is also too fragile. You should ask that Umbral of yours to show you how to tether your mind to the present. That will make up for more than a few of your deficiencies."

The Deathless tried to nod, but as he was just a few pieces of bone and meat on the ground, he ended up using his Biomancy to wiggle himself instead. At least Helix wasn't pestering him about letting orc Psychomancers "optimize his mind."

Biomancy was one thing, but letting orcs touch his thoughts and memories? Yeah. Haha. No. More than even odds were they would mentally twist him into some kind of cannibal chef that delighted in the taste of human flesh.

“Again, let us finish this off the classical way! We’re going to tear your mana apart again, and then we’re going to do terrible things to your body. Fight all the way.”

Shiv let out the closest thing to a snorting noise that he could as he sent a telepathic thought at the orc. “Well, then hurry up. I’m tired of waiting.”

Helix let out a quiet laugh. “Hurry up, he says. Very well. Biomancers. Field first. Then, let’s see how he handles hyper-accelerated aging again.”

A few, large gray heads popped into Shiv’s periphery. There were a few hundred orcs around him on the bridge of the Court Leviathan. Most of them were fused into the walls, but a few directly assisted Helix, leering down at him with vicious glee in their eyes.

“Ten mith says he still doesn’t scream,” an orc called out.

“No one’s stupid enough to take the bet anymore, you dumb bastard. He didn’t do anything more than growl when we castrated him; he’s not going to do anything now.”

Helix stepped back and let the lesser Biomancers tear into his field as a collective. It hurt. A lot. But Shiv didn’t think too much about pain by this point. It kind of got boring after a certain point. Repetitive. Maybe in the future, if someone managed to top what the Recollector inflicted on him, or someone set his soul on fire again, Shiv might consider going back to screaming.

For now, Shiv simply twitched his remaining eye and dealt with the hurt.

He still resisted, of course. He pushed back with his field as much as he could—and he even held them back for a moment thanks to all the magical amplification he got from his Shape of Monstrosity. But his triumph lasted for only a second. The orcs—mainly Adepts—concentrated their mana, pooling their Biomancy together, and pierced through his field. It was like someone driving a sword through his stomach.

So... One out of ten.

Even as their Biomancy sank its teeth into his body, they didn't tear him apart. Instead, they destroyed him on a fine level. He noticed it at first in his cells—and a sudden onrush of lethargy hit him. Even with so little of his body remaining, he could feel his bodily functions slow to a brutal halt. Every breath was harder. His eyesight got immensely worse. What few muscles he had left shrank. His heart twitched and spasmed painfully, barely able to sustain its own beats. But they didn't kill him. Not immediately. The orcs worked to accelerate his aging, and once they were done, they simply stepped back.

Shiv lay on the ground and regarded himself using his broken Biomancy. It hurt to move the field, but he did anyway. His organs were shriveled. Spent as if after eons of use. He tried to think, but his mind felt sluggish, and a tiredness washed through him, pulled him closer to the embrace of slumber. Time slipped away from him as if water running through his fingers. Just as he started trying to undo some of the damage, he...

He...

Wait... Where's the Swan-Eating Toad? Why am I here? Where is my body?

"Psychomancy and Biomancy are tied," Helix declared, standing over Shiv. He pushed his spectacles up with his thumb. "The material mind is the foundation upon which the metaphysical intellect is crowned. With the former compromised, the latter is doomed to collapse as well. Such is why Biomancy is the most foundational magic that all organic entities can learn. Granted by the System to shape your own evolution. To ensure your own growth. Truthfully, I pity the non-organic Pathbearers. For they must build and maintain themselves constantly at the lowest Tiers, while we are installed in our own self-directing miracle. And all we need to do is make it better."

Shiv blinked. He barely recalled Helix's existence, and everything was hazy. He... Where was he again?

Helix rubbed his chin. "Ah. The mental degeneration is getting worse. You see now the more insidious threat of Psychomancy. A great many of my foes fell to me this way, they—"

But then, Shiv's ruined flesh began to twitch and grow. His lungs refilled. His pupil dilated. Streaks of white in his strands of hair turned back to black as he shuddered. The dense haze choking his mind broke apart, and once more his thoughts flowed free. It was like his biology got unblocked in some way, and more importantly, Shiv felt amazing. And that feeling only grew as his physical form swelled larger and larger, until he was a five-meter stretch of spine and flesh.

Plaguefueled 64 > 69

Helix blinked. A few other orcs leaned in as well. "Oh, you have Plaguefueled. I see. Well, of course you have that. You live life by letting the world kill you over and over again. It would make sense that your body is absorbing all the aging disease pathways." Shiv let out a gasp of pleasure, and some orcs began laughing at his response. "Well. This will come in useful when you enter another battle, I suppose. It

shouldn't be hard to teach you how to do this, either. Aging is a simple thing to induce... Hard to repair, however."

Shiv barely heard Helix. The only thing that matched aging was the basilisk venom. And—

Helix waved a hand. A flash of crimson mana pulsed over Shiv. "But here is something adjacent that you won't be able to resist quite so well."

Just then, Shiv felt the blood inside him ignite. His organs seared, and his body tensed. He went from euphoria to agony as he felt like he was coming apart from within. He used his Biomancy field to observe himself again. It felt like the insides of his cells were dragging against themselves. Some kind of biological friction? I—

And Shiv's death came in a sudden instant. His Vitae avatar burst free from his corpse and hovered over his body. He watched as his flesh combusted from within and began degenerating into vile paste at a rapid pace.

"What the hells did you just do to me?" Shiv asked Helix.

The orc just laughed as he placed one hand on his hip and raised the other with two fingers extended. "Two things. The first was hyper-accelerating your metabolism. The second was damaging your blood code; the helices that hold your structures together, so to speak. That was the rapid degeneration we saw just now. It is a more targeted form of attack than something you might experience from a Pathbearer who can wield atomics or radiation. But the effects are much the same."

Plaguefueled 69 > 72

Multi-Tasking 4 > 9

Memorization 6 > 11

Chapter 136 (II) Assimilation [I]

As Shiv regarded his new levels, he sapped vitality from nearby orcs. As his body was stitched back together, he frowned at the distinct lack of any Practical Metabiology levels. Yet, here were Multi-Tasking and Memorization shooting up. When he asked the orc why that was, Helix narrowed his eyes.

“I suspect it's because you're being failed by sheer ignorance alone. Your skills in the practical studies advance from your learning. But your deaths now persist to be a matter of ignorance. It will not grow because you do not know where you are going wrong. But Memorization and Multi-Tasking matter because they could have helped you respond to our attacks. After all, spells are patterns, are they not? Specified shapings of one's own mana and intent.”

Shiv considered that for a moment and grunted in agreement. “Great. So maybe we can change the approach here? We focus on something that I understand theoretically, but might have a hard time fixing practically?”

“That's... not a bad idea,” Helix said. “Yes. More experimentation will be useful here. But that will be for the longer term too. Something we can consistently drill into you every time you have a free moment. For now, we push your Biomancy further. We stress your field to the extreme as much as we can—and have you assimilated over and over once you are on the verge of a Skill Evolution.”

“And after he’s done with your Biomancy, me and the other Heroes want to take a crack at your Toughness,” Bonk called.

“You just want to smack me in the head for fun,” Shiv shouted back.

“Yeah. But it’ll make you stronger. So, why not?”

“You know what, you oversized—” Shiv pulled himself up into the air to stare at the massive orc. Death removed Shiv’s size-boost, and the bridge of his Court Leviathan was crowded with Heroes and Masters that came to watch. Ridges of bone had emerged from the surrounding biomass, and some orcs had even created personal thrones made from enamel that they were now lounging on. They were also slapping each other atop these thrones in displays of childish merriment. Bonk and the more physical of the orc Heroes were gathered near the center of the large chamber, and between them—

“Oh, shit,” Shiv cursed. He launched himself across space and went for Bonk’s group immediately.

“Insul? Where are you going?” Helix called after him.

Shiv didn’t answer, for among the martial orcs was someone who was very obviously not an orc. Someone who bore a sullen expression and a gaze of indifference. Someone who was being thrown up and down like a ball without resisting.

“Put him down!” Shiv cried. “Put the poor bastard down!”

The large orc currently juggling Angelo between a few balls of bone froze, and the vampire dropped. Shiv caught him just in time, preventing him from falling on his head. He hovered in the air and looked down at Angelo—and soon noticed every orc on the bridge was staring at him. Slowly, their eyes fell upon the vampire thereafter.

“Great.” Shiv scoffed as he dropped Angelo on his back. The midnight-haired vampire simply landed and lay there, giving no reaction and making no effort to rise. “What the hells are you doing here?”

“The Court Leviathan moved. I came with it.” Angelo’s voice was hollow. Devoid of passion and emotion. But his face was still the most beautiful thing Shiv had ever laid his eyes upon.

“Why didn’t they get you out first?” Shiv asked. “Did they felling forget about you?”

“I was inside one of the sculptor pods.”

“The what?”

“The things you call the womb-rooms.”

“Oh. Were you just... sleeping inside there, or—”

“I was trying to get the Court Leviathan to digest me.”

Helix forced his way through the crowd and stared at the vampire. After a moment, he grunted. “Ah. Yes. Male-Pregnancy told me that he found a stowaway down below. We had him moved.”

“And you didn’t inform me—” Shiv’s mind did a U-turn just then. “There’s an orc named Male-Pregnancy.”

“It’s what he calls himself.”

“Felling why?” Shiv moaned. Helix didn’t answer. Instead, his expression twitched, and slowly, a smile crept across his face until it went ear to ear. Shiv sighed. “Broken Fucking Moon, you guys are complete freaks.”

“It is a viable means of psychological warfare,” an unseen orc in the crowd said. “It is also my psycho-sexual fetish. I make no apologies. I’ll do it again. I will never stop.”

Several other orcs coughed awkwardly. Bonk sneered and leaned closer to Shiv. “Listen. I want you to know that we think he’s a degenerate too, and that we don’t want anything to do with him. He doesn’t represent the rest of us. We—we don’t even have those things you do.”

“Morals?” Shiv asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Well, yeah. But also cocks. And thank the Challenger for that. The fuck kinda god was that much of a jackass to give you poor fuckers external genitalia?”

Shiv pushed past this immensely miserable topic and grabbed Angelo by the shoulder. “You’re not staying here, buddy.” Angelo didn’t fight Shiv, just as he didn’t fight the orcs. He just let the Deathless drag him along. “You’re going back through the gate. And—”

“And what?” Angelo asked, interrupting Shiv. “They do not care for me there. The Umbrals and the spiders despise me for my blood. They do not come near me. I suspect they wished to be rid of me by sending me over. Or they simply didn’t care enough to check. And I was not strong enough to resolve myself alone.”

“I could help,” the unseen orc Shiv suggested helpfully. “I know a spell—”

“Male-Pregnancy,” Shiv said, waving his Skysplitter at where he suspected the orc to be without turning around. “One more word, and I’m going to start ripping souls in your general direction apart. I’ll Band you shits. This is my only warning.”

The other orcs snarled and hissed. A series of “shut the fuck up”s and “if he doesn’t kill you, I will”s followed.

“It doesn’t matter,” Angelo muttered.

Shiv glared at the vampire. “Yeah, look, Angelo, your suicidal depression aside, I also don’t want to discover what kind of spell that orc’s going to cast on you. There is shit I would like to go an eternity or two without seeing, believe it or not.”

Angelo just stared at him. For a moment, it seemed like the vampire was going to say something, but he didn’t respond. Shiv shot out from the gap lining the Court Leviathan’s skull and left with a shouted declaration. “I’ll be gone for a bit. If I come back to the Leviathan pregnant, I’ll do godsdamn things to your souls. Helix! You get that freak off my Courtney.”

“But you regard the Court Leviathan as female—” Helix began.

“Fucking—Doesn’t matter! Get him off! I don’t want him near me!”

“That’s very judgmental of you,” Male-Pregnancy called out, sounding slightly hurt.

“I’m sorry, motherfucker, I’m not the one fucking impregnating men!” Shiv snarled. He accelerated faster then, plunging down as he made for the gate. Just then, another basilisk was brought over in a splash of dimensionality. Shiv could see Psychomantic threads connected to the basilisk’s mind.

Good. Uva. I’ll hand Angelo off to her and... Shit, I need to think about what to have her do with him. The Order probably hates him way more than the orcs.

“Why are you so intent on keeping me alive?” Angelo asked.

Shiv looked down at the vampire and pulled his gaze away before the Charm Skill could kick in. "Because I feel bad for you."

Angelo stared. "That's it?"

"Yeah. You might be a vampire, but the First Blood badstards are the ones I hate. The things they do are disgusting. The things they do to ones like you. To me. The people in your town. I don't know who you were before, and if you deserve death for whatever reason, but I don't have an interest in seeing you hurt or dead now." Shiv frowned. "I guess I feel you deserved better. That you should have gotten to live in your little town and not bother anyone. Too bad the System is determined to be a shit."

Angelo let out a quiet laugh. "You have an apt way with words."

"Yeah, look, I'm not refined, but—"

"I'm serious," Angelo cut him off. "You were concise. It was good."

Shiv landed atop the basilisk, and Uva's strand coiled out to sink into his mind. "It was?" he asked.

"Communication is all about conveying intent to someone else," Angelo said. "And you conveyed what you thought quite clearly to me. It let me understand who you are as well. What you value and what you think. Perhaps you could be taught to speak better and with more eloquence, but your basis is good."

Shiv blinked. "Right. Thanks. You, uh..." He coughed. "Uva. We have a stowaway. I'm sending him back."

"Who—Oh, the vampire." Immediately, Uva's enthusiasm plunged. "Yes. I will... We will see what we can do."

The Deathless frowned. "What do you mean, see what you can do? Just put him somewhere and make sure he doesn't try to kill himself or something." Shiv glanced at Angelo again. The vampire was already staring off into the distance again. "He's a mess."

"Yes. I examined his mind earlier. He is immensely traumatized." But there was something she wasn't saying.

"Listen. The First Blood destroyed his life. You get that, right?" Uva remained dead silent, so Shiv pressed on. "Look, I'll figure out something with him. Just don't let Null Mont send the poor bastard to Elaboration. You guys already got a bunch of vampires, Vultegs, and two dead Jealousies. Leave him be."

"I will try and see if proper arrangements can be made," Uva said. "But he may be in as much danger from some of my Sisters and the Mothers as he is on your side."

"Are any of you planning to get him pregnant?" Shiv asked without a hint of sarcasm.

Palpable incredulity flooded over from Uva's end. "I... What?"

“Because there’s an orc here who goes by the name of Male-Pregnancy, and he hinted that he wanted to do some stuff to Angelo.”

A long pause followed. Uva’s mind felt like a crumbling stone. “I... Male... Pregnancy?”

“Yeah,” Shiv said. “The other orcs don’t seem to like him much either.”

“Has he tried to do something with you?” Uva asked, her mind tinged with malice.

“No. And he never will. He’s being removed from my Leviathan right now. He’s banned for life. For all his lives.” Just as he said that, an orc was thrown out of the open slots of bone lining the top of Courtney’s head. In two pieces. “Well. The other orcs might’ve dealt with him for me. Or maybe they’re just screwing with me too.”

“Be wary of them,” Uva said. “They are manipulators of the highest order.”

“Yeah. About that. I was going to ask you later to help me harden myself against their Social Skills. They might be murderous bastards, but they’re pretty damn charming when you talk with them.”

“You didn’t let any of their Psychomancers access your mind, did you?” Uva asked.

“Hell no.”

“Good. Never let them touch your mind. I spotted a few Heroic-Tier Psychomancers among them—none of whom I would face in direct combat. Few are subtle, however. Which is our advantage. I will see what kind of Psychomantic regime I can prepare for you to ward off their influence. For now, be mindful. They are psychopaths. Do not let them make you one.”

“Right.” Shiv watched the two halves of what he hoped to be Male-Pregnancy strike the ground, and a thought occurred to him. A thought he couldn’t help but voice to Uva. “Hey. Uva. Listen. If an orc got me pregnant, and I gave birth—”

“This is not a theoretical, Shiv. You have already given birth to Adam’s mother. And no. I will not raise Adam’s mother as my own child, for you somehow gave birth to a fully grown woman, and this is a deeply unappealing topic that I will entertain no further.”

Shiv closed his eyes and tried not to cringe. “I, uh... I was just trying to tease you.”

“Shiv. Dearest. Your life is so full of what Adam describes as ‘impossibly weird shit’ that teasing me requires a level of absurdity I am not sure you will be able to reach with your imagination. Now. I’m going to be moving the other basilisks over. Meanwhile, Adam is gathering as much intelligence he can on the Inquisition, the First Blood, and the Necrotechs. Expect him over in a few hours—and make sure no one eats him. He will be giving a briefing about the grand strategy and threats we face. He also wishes to ask if you’re alright.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Because he said you looked exceptionally terrifying and furious while you were screaming at him earlier.”

“I wasn’t—I just don’t want the orcs to target you or him or anyone else, okay?”

Uva paused. A quiver of worry came from her. “And I don’t want them to do anything to you, either.”

Shiv sighed. “I’ll be fine. I think I kind of get them on some level. Some really murderous, fucked up level.’

“And that worries me,” she replied. “You have goodness to you. A sweetness. You care for people. You try to do what’s right. There aren’t enough people who really try. Protect your heart.”

Her words settled in Shiv and sprouted seeds of affection. “Yeah. Yeah, I promise. Tell Adam I’m sorry too. I wasn’t mad at him. I was just agitated dealing with the orcs.”

“Good,” Uva said. “Now. We’re building additional defenses over the gateway. A bunker, in fact. We’re going to consider how we can connect that to the exit of the surface gateway to make sure none of the orcs have easy access to the gate itself, but I was thinking that the bunker can also be our residence here.”

“What about the tower?” Shiv asked.

“Best to keep that separate. Let our Gate Lord have his own abode. The bunker might protect him from us, wouldn’t you agree?”

Shiv thought back to the temporary apartment he had in Weave and nodded slowly. “I think Adam would appreciate that very much. You are very kind and wise, Sister Uva.”

“Why, thank you, Bruiser.”

He physically flinched as she used the Challenger’s nickname on him. “Nope. Nopenopenopenopenope. Don’t call me that. Nope. Gods, no.”

The Umbral laughed. “I will talk with you soon.” And then she hesitated. “There is... something else as well. But that—I’ll tell you later. I need your advice.”

“My advice? What are you trying to cook?”

“Ah. No. But, yes, I would like to keep learning when we get the chance again. If we get the chance again.”

“We will,” Shiv replied without hesitation. “Don’t doubt it.”

She injected a dose of warmth inside him before releasing his mind. At the same time, Shiv gestured for Angelo to cross over. “Follow the thread. She’ll take care of you. And... Look, give it a while longer. I’ll

come and talk to you about stuff. I don't know what I can say or how I can make things better but... Well, when things get hard for me, I just do stuff. Maybe that can help you too."

Angelo didn't respond. Not immediately. Slowly, his eyes slipped past Shiv at the gate, and he let out a breath. "Do stuff," he echoed. He let out a quiet laugh. "I see. Thank you."

Shiv nodded. "Just... Do what you can or something, you know. That's... You really should... Yeah, shit, I got nothing. Just keep yourself busy."

The vampire began walking along the back of the basilisk, approaching the gateway in a trance.

Shiv kept his eyes locked on Angelo until he crossed over.

"Alright," Shiv said, soaring back inside the Court Leviathan. "Who cut Male-Pregnancy in half? Whoever did it is going to get the first taste of grilled leviathan steak later."

"It was kind of a group effort," Bonk said.

"Everyone's going to get some grilled leviathan steak," Shiv declared.

The orcs pumped their collective fists and resolved to commit more murders on each other for free food, and Shiv couldn't help but chuckle.

Shit, they're getting to me again. They're going to end up making me feel like one of them before long.

And worryingly, there were parts of that thought that didn't seem so bad.

Helix stood among the orcs with both arms behind his back. "Ah. Finally. You return. Now that you've had your break—"

"Hey, don't give me that shit. You know I would have kept going."

"Yes. Instead, you allowed yourself to get distracted with saving your pet vampire."

Shiv glared. "He's not my pet."

The orc's expression turned downright vicious. "Oh. But he's not a whole person anymore, is he? One does not need to be a Psychomancer to read the ruinous misery in his eyes. Yet, you still care so much. Even though it seems you barely know him."

All the orcs stared at Shiv. He just scoffed. "Yeah. I care about people and things. And you're psychopaths. But that's why there are no people here. Just things."

“Ouch!” Bonk laughed. “You got him agitated, Helix. Not wise.”

Shiv flung himself across the room and landed beside Helix, brushing past the orc. “Now. Back to getting eaten by Courtney. You guys better put some effort in your Biomancy this time. If I don’t get an evolution when I hit the threshold, I’m kicking your asses.”

Helix smirked. “Oh, Insul. I promise to make this as much of a struggle as I can.”

Chapter 137 (I) Assimilation [II]

Hydras are curious creatures in the way they evolve. When they finally hit the threshold for sapience, their centermost head will be the first one that becomes truly self-aware and intelligent on an individual level. This usually causes some level of insanity for the hydra, as the centermost head will then be held back by the others due to their bestial nature.

This phase of the hydra’s existence is typically called “The Tearing” as it characterizes just how severely they are torn between the monstrous and the individual. And so large is a hydra’s brain that it can often conceptualize a great many ideas at a rapid pace—but this is often followed by its predatory instincts overwhelming it. There have been instances of hydras suffering a mental breakdown after they tore through a village, discovering the people it is feeding upon to be self-aware, like it. Subsequently, the hydra usually suffers an existential crisis, with the centermost head going catatonic while the others fight to control its body.

Another interesting occurrence is with their souls. As the hydra transitions between the boundaries of the monstrous and the individual, their clashing, tearing nature grants them access to a few Skill Evolutions that few other beings in Integration have access to. These Skill Evolutions have close cousins to certain Monster Skills, separated only by slight deviations that veer ever so closer to something an Individual Pathbearer might get.

As such, it is not surprising to see a hydra develop an Adamantine Reinforcement Skill and learn to wear armor rather than a pure Adamantine Scale or Adamantine Adaption Skill...

-Monsters and Individuals (Essential Reading for ZOO-101 for Phoenix Academy)

Woundeater 97 > 99

Practical Metabiology 40 > 41

Memorization 11 > 13

Multi-Tasking 9 > 12

Awareness 24 > 26

Plaguefueled 72 > 74

It took two more deaths for Shiv to finally notice what the Court Leviathan was actually doing to him. More accurately, what its field was doing to him. The Court Leviathan's Biomancy was powerful, but it was also subtle. Every time it crashed against his magic, it left a trace of itself and slowly bled into his

field. And there it stayed, like a piece of foreign magic lodged in place. The was so subtle that Shiv didn't realize it was even there until a mere second ago.

Every time the orcs struck at his mana field, they hurt him. They split his field open, but they weren't doing that just to torture him, just to strain him. No, they were pushing the foreign mana deeper inside his body.

And that was the most fascinating thing of all about the Court Leviathan. Its mana field seemed capable of independent movement, or at least some level of separation from itself. It glided through his field as if a spiritual pathogen of some kind.

And the subversion began there, before it assimilated his flesh, made his bones and meat come to life of their own accord, so that they could part free from his body and join the Leviathan's biomass. There was a subtle sickness, a virus that took hold. And it was this very capability that allowed the Court Leviathan to also store diseases, toxins, and other pathogens. It wasn't just an assimilator of flesh; it was an assimilator of biology.

Helix described it as an organic hacker, so to speak. When Shiv asked what a hacker was, the orc went into detail about how automata could sometimes hijack each other's minds by transmitting specific codes. This led to another diatribe on the part of the orc, where he proclaimed the supremacy of the flesh once more. While he did that, Shiv finally caught sight of Mortar through the crowd, and he noticed how the large orc was constantly shaking his head and letting out billowing sighs.

As Shiv resurrected again, he stared at the orcs and demanded they restart the assimilation process anew without any delay.

"See what you're doing now," Shiv said, speaking directly to Helix.

The orc Biomancer simply smirked. "Oh, do you? Or do you only glean a small facet? I think we'll find out soon enough."

"Have the leviathan swallow me again. I'm gonna see if I can stop what it's doing this time."

It drew him under in an instant, the bone at his feet parting, tendrils of flesh wrapping around his body, pulling him down. Once more, a layer of bone fused over him. It was like being inside someone's ribs, and the flesh around him hardened. The air grew hot and humid. Crystallized Biomancy mana crashed against his, but rather than continuing to grind, it drifted over him, splashing back and forth like a tide. He would liken it to a magical stomach acid in that moment, one slowly trying to dissolve its way through his field.

And he focused. He paid attention to the Court Leviathan's mana as best he could. He let the orcs tear into him, even sacrificing some of his attention, as they opened patches in his field. Despite the pain, the orcs were merely a distraction. He was here to get a specific kind of skill evolution, one that would only come if he learned. And that would only be less lengthy if he learned exactly how the Court Leviathan's skill worked.

As ruptures and trailing tears lined Shiv's mana field, the Court Leviathan's mana began to intrude, pouring inside, pressing against the gaps and clefts it discovered. Just then, he felt the tingle, the first hints of hostile, foreign mana pushing into him. They were so small, mere glints of slightly denser red within his own field, but he saw them this time. His Awareness rose, as did his Multi-Tasking.

Multi-Tasking 12 > 13

Awareness 26 > 27

"I got you now," Shiv thought to himself. He seized those particulates, and he pressed against them. Using his Biomancy, they shot free from his field in an instant, emerging like shrapnel squeezed out from a wound. But before they could go back, Shiv clutched them, holding them in place. He struck at them using his Biomancy in an attempt to break them. However, his field was far too soft comparatively. As Woundeaters flared bright around his body, he found himself squeezing against the Court Leviathan's mana, but he was like wind trying to erode a stone. Perhaps he could do it given enough time, and if the orcs weren't actively hammering him from a few meters above, but under present circumstances, he lacked the force to break them outright.

Even so, he didn't surrender the fragments back to the Court Leviathan. He held the pieces there for as long as he could, even as more gaping holes were left in his field. The pain he suffered was barely noted, and he managed to hold on for a full five minutes before the orcs finally burst his mana field apart again. It felt like someone was ripping an internal limb free from his body.

Shiv frowned. It took the near-total destruction of his Biomancy before the Court Leviathan finally flooded his body with assimilating particulates, unlatching his skin from his bones, infusing his bones with animal instincts of their own, and stealing his organs by granting them life to finally end him.

He perished once more, but as his Biomancy was allowed to ascend back to the bridge, he found Helix looking upon him with a hint of pride. Shiv wasted no time in threading his Vitae out among the orcs and draining them of vitality.

Woundeater 99 > 100 (Skill Evolution Imminent)

Memorization 13 > 14

Multi-Tasking 13 > 15

"Well done, Insul. That took four deaths, but you finally saw it. Or did you?" The orc narrowed his eyes. He adjusted his spectacles before taking them off. Shiv stabbed him in the gut slightly, and the orc Biomancer let out a grunt. He held back a grimace as Shiv began to drain from him, but otherwise, Helix surrendered no true expression of pain—mainly because he applied his Biomancy to himself. A flowing set of spell patterns swam through the orc's flesh and mended the damage Shiv inflicted in an instant while the Deathless resurrected.

"Tell me what you saw," Helix demanded.

"Fragments," Shiv answered, "particulates, small pieces of mana that burrowed their way through my field and eventually got into my body."

"Good, good," Helix said, nodding. He looked back at the other orc Biomancers, and Shiv noted how they, too, seemed gleeful about his progress. They were genuinely pleased with his growth, pleased with him as well. And there was the damnable thing about the orcs again. Every now and again, between moments where they let their psychopathy be known, they were plenty encouraging, and they genuinely wanted you to succeed, if only to dominate you later.

"There is a reason why I wish for you to have Chimeric Assimilation," Helix said. "It is useful for you. It allows you to settle pieces of your body in someone else, to transplant your biology upon them, or potentially to draw their biology over. Greater still, it allows you a means of intrusion against a rival Biomancer, or a subtle way of infesting certain populations."

"It doesn't work so well against someone with Magical Resistance, though," Shiv replied. "Not without a concentrated strike."

"Ah, but you're thinking too bluntly again, Insul. You should consider this. Rather than slamming your Biomancy against someone's mystical protections, you grind at it, over and over, from afar. You launch out your mana and drag it against them, make it so powder-fine that it constantly stresses their field, yet escapes their notice."

Shiv nodded slightly as he tried to picture how that might work. If he did get this skill evolution, he might become the biomantic equivalent of Uva. But then again, that wasn't exactly so. "What else does chimeric assimilation allow for the mana field?" he asked. "I understand that it allows me to absorb traits from things I assimilate."

"No, no," the orc said. "It's more like a biological archive. It is the reason why you still need to study to level your Practical Metabiology, why you need to have a proper model of what you are doing. When you assimilate something into your field, your field will grow stronger."

Shiv blinked. "That's how it works?"

"Correct. It is a monstrous evolution. Quite different from the standard static field or dynamic mana waves used by most Pathbearers."

"So if I just assimilate a bunch of organic tissue—"

"Biomass," Helix corrected. "And yes, that would be your next question. If you assimilate a bunch of organic tissue..." Helix wriggled his nose. "...a bunch. Once again, not being very specific. But still, if you assimilate a great deal of organic tissue, it will technically increase your mana. In a sense, it... You will understand it better when you evolve. You will learn to distribute your mana as you wish once that

happens. But just know that gathering more biomass within you makes your mana stronger, as becoming a Chimeric Assimilator makes the mana at your disposal one-to-one with how much biomass you can wield." The orc paused. "It is more like having a functional mana ceiling."

"Mana ceiling?" Shiv repeated, not fully understanding.

"Yes, mana ceiling. As in, there is only so much mana that your skill can accommodate. You cannot go beyond that. It increases every time you level, every time you evolve. But still, there is a limit. And that limit is drastically amplified because of this Skill Evolution. So you will need to assimilate a great deal of biomass, perhaps as much as the Court Leviathan itself, to fully hit capacity. Yet, the more mass you absorb, the more you must suffer."

Shiv blinked. "Okay, so I was wondering about the catch. Is that it? Are there other problems?"

Helix just barked a laugh. "A great many. When you assimilate something into your mana field, it is stored within you as well. It will strain your field constantly, and because of how chimeric assimilation works, your field will be rooted directly against your body, and any instability inflicted upon you may result in a series of," Helix considered his words, "mutations, or more likely cancers."

Shiv let out a sigh. "Great. So, if I don't absorb a lot of biomass, I don't get a lot of mana."

"Not a lot of usable mana. Think of it as activating the total mana you do have. It works differently from most fields. Magic is a thing of... symbology, sometimes. It must be signalled by the physical world."

Alright? But I don't have that much mana if I don't absorb biomass?"

"You have some, Insul. You are made of biomass, after all."

"But not as much as I could."

"Correct."

"And if I absorb too much, and I can't control it well, or I don't understand how to remove the cancers and fix the mutations..."

"Exactly," Helix said, snapping his fingers. "So, now you understand why it matters so much for you to learn Practical Metabiology. For though you might be able to chimerically manifest, say, an orcish arm using your mana field, more likely than not you will give your body cancer during the process because you don't know what you're doing. And that is unavoidable for us due to the lack of Lineage Cores and means of avoiding true effort."

At his own mention of the Lineage Core, Helix looked aside and spat on the ground. "The vampires are pathetic creatures. Everything they do is to avoid responsibility, avoid actual effort and labor, which is why so many of them lack proper supplementary skills, such as Awareness, or Memorization, or Multi-Tasking. They don't need to worry about their body; it will just be regenerated, restored to its original state, or the state imprinted upon them by their initial progenitor. I can barely consider them Pathbearers at all in that regard. No proper Pathbearer avoids struggle, avoids learning the nuances of their magic in and out."

"You take Biomancy pretty damn seriously, don't you?" Shiv asked.

"I take all magics extremely seriously," Helix corrected. "In this life, I have dedicated myself to Biomancy. In the next, perhaps there will be something else."

"You always say that shit!" Bonk cried out. He waved his massive club through the air. "And every single time you go back to Biomancy anyway!"

"Because it's useful," Helix snarled. He pointed a finger at Bonk. "Because my Biomancy allows me—"

"Yes, yes," Bonk interrupted him. "Look, I get it. You don't need to give me the speech again. Now, can you finish torturing the living shit out of the Insul using the Court Leviathan, so the rest of us can get a chance to fuck with him?"

"I am not fucking with him!" Helix's voice rose an octave. "I am instructing him on the fundamental nuances and the finer bits of a proper mage!"

Bonk's nod was as slow as it was sarcastic. He looked at Shiv. "Hey, listen, Insul. Later, when we're hitting you, that's just because we want to hit you. You can fight back. In fact, we prefer it if you fight back. But, uh, I'm not going to give you this woo-woo bullshit about us training you to be a better warrior. I use this club because I like hitting people with it. And, considering that you don't die, well, shit, I think I want to get some Physicality levels out of this."

Chapter 137 (II) Assimilation [II]

Despite his best efforts, Shiv knew he was going to get along a little too well with Bonk. "You may get a few Toughness levels out of it as well," Shiv said. The orc grinned savagely at that. "And all the more reason for me to get a new Skill Evolution. For Biomancy, it'll help me fix up your wounds afterward, or so I hope."

"Don't worry," Helix said, pinching the bridge of his nose. "It won't remove your absurd little Woundeaters. That capability will still be there."

"But I don't think I'm going to be needing that," Bonk said, as he winked at Shiv. "I heal pretty quick."

"How quick?" Shiv asked. His curiosity was piqued, and his hands were clenching and unclenching in anticipation of a now-certain brawl.

"I think you should find out later for yourself," Bonk said, a taunt in his voice.

"Bonk," another orc cut in. "Before someone distracts him again, I think that we Heroes and the Insul here should have a proper meeting and go over what we expect of each other—and other potential topics."

Shiv turned and saw a large orc standing on what looked to be a huge, flying origami bird. The orc wore black, scholarly robes, and he had one of those graduate hats Shiv had seen in newspapers on him. Weirdest of all, he was holding what looked like a large, golden egg under his arm.

"We're always going to have time for that, Bookworm," Bonk called out. "Besides, the Insul told us earlier about how the Gate Lord intends to give us a briefing. How about we wait for that and do everything all at once?"

Bookworm grimaced. "That seems terribly inefficient. Besides, the Insul is but one person, and certain orcs," Bookworm lifted his nose at Helix, who barely regarded him with a faint harrumph in return, "are

colonizing all his attention. While some of us are going to be more useful for the Insul, others will simply waste his time with meandering things and pointless trivialities. Besides, the Insul barely understands his own greatest Magical Skill. What do you think you're going to get from him in terms of theory or strategy?"

"Hey," Shiv said, slightly offended.

Helix narrowed his eyes. "Oh? You have something to say? But please, Insul, do tell him. What can you offer in terms of theory and strategy? What scholarly topics are you truly versed in? For me, what formations will be most conducive to our efforts in battle when we finally take the field? I understand we'll be fighting on the surface, yet where? What's the terrain? What do you know about the airspace? What does the meteorology imply about the weather? Who are the critical enemy commanders our shadows, assassins, and thieves are to dispatch?"

With every sentence, Shiv's mouth closed tighter and tighter. "I... I can figure some of that out."

Helix let out a sigh. "Do you see, Bookworm? We face one problem after another. We must resolve one limitation after another. He is untrained and ignorant. His attention span is broken and stuttering. His focus is questionable and easily parted."

"And your Toughness needs work," Shiv reminded him. "Not the only one with flaws."

Helix coughed as the fear-chain between him and Shiv thickened. "But he has no truly bad habits, and he is perfectly moldable, like clay. And mentally—"

"I'd prefer a sculpture," Shiv corrected again, "because clay indicates that you're going to shape me however you want. You can kill that thought if you think you're going to change me into an orc."

"You're already kind of like an orc," Bonk noted. "That's the reason the Challenger decided to do this with you. You must be blinder than Helix thinks if you're missing that."

"I'm not," Shiv said, slightly annoyed.

"Regardless," Helix continued, "this is the perfect opportunity for us to build him up, and for him to be as optimally built and evolved as possible when he leads us into the next pit of chaos that finds him. That way we can all benefit."

Shiv looked between Helix, Bonk, and Bookworm, and he thought about why they were all trying so hard to occupy his attention. He then noticed all the other orcs as well. Their interested stares, their unwavering smiles. The Heroes and the Masters aboard the Court Leviathan weren't just here to join in on a fun war. No, they had a much more personal interest in the matter.

Shiv sneered as he finally made the connection. "You bastards want in on the System's favor." It was the only thing that made sense. They knew he was favored among System-favored, and by staying close to him, they were hoping for some of that favor to infect them as well, as it had Adam and Uva.

All the orcs around him let out laughs, and glowing chunks of mithril exchanged hands once more. Mortar threw up his hands. "By the Challenger's infinite wisdom, he's not blind or stupid, he's just incredibly slow."

"Think about the bright side," Whisper said as he suddenly appeared beside Shiv. The orc placed a warm arm around his shoulder and moved his other hand through the air like he was trying to make Shiv imagine a scenic view. "If we all start advancing at just half the pace you are, consider what an effective army we'll be once it's time for the big fight."

Shiv thought about that. He thought about a few hundred hyper-powerful orcs, and then he thought about them being right next to the gate.

Ah shit, Shiv thought. This is... He wanted to say it wasn't good, but they were going to war against a Legendary Mage and his incredibly powerful army soon. A few hundred of him? Yeah, that might be enough to do some serious damage to the Vicar's forces. More importantly, with what they had now, maybe it was already enough to utterly overwhelm and destroy the Inquisition. Adam said they only had a hundred thousand troops, Shiv recalled, and right now I've got just under three million orcs.

"Now," Helix said, snapping his fingers in front of Shiv's face again and pushing Whisper off of him. The Deathless blinked. "Are you ready to try one more time?"

Shiv regarded his Woundeater level, and he clenched his teeth. "Yeah, let's see if I can get over that limit."

And that brought a wide smile to the orc Biomancer's face. "Good human."

Once more, the Court Leviathan swallowed him. This time, Shiv felt its mana splash against his own immediately. His field still felt tender, barely recovered from the last time. That was the point, though. He was one of the few people in existence that could be strained repeatedly, have his field broken time and time again, and continue. It was a mixture of his constantly regenerating cognition and the benefits provided by his Path.

Shiv rolled his neck as he pressed back with his Biomantic field. This time, instead of waiting, he intercepted. As particulates of red mana splashed against his, he briefly let his outer field soften before he clenched it tight again. The mana shrapnel got stuck within him. The Court Leviathan's particulates were in his grasp once more.

The orc Biomancers began to bombard him with spells. He held against them but used only a fraction of his focus. He ignored the pain as they ripped his field open once more, tearing it where his previous wounds had barely come back together.

While they did that, Shiv decided to prepare a surprise of his own. As the orcs lashed at him, he pieced the Court Leviathan's mana together, assembling its particulates into something the size of a pebble. He couldn't crush them; they were too solid for that, but he could move them, and so he moved them together.

And as one of the orcs launched their field against his, he pushed the pebble of mana out beyond the exterior of his field in the direction from which the orc's spell came. It crashed against his field, and the orc's spell did Shiv's desired work for him. It shattered the pebble into motes of mana, and the leviathan let out a shriek. Its body trembled, it twisted from side to side, and the Deathless laughed as he heard orcs shout and howl with laughter as they were rocked in their seats.

Deception 18 > 20

From above, he heard a muffled cry. "Oh! Trickery! Deception! Well done, Shiv!" For the first time Shiv could recall, Helix sounded genuinely and truly proud. The other Biomancers laughed as well. Of course, a moment after, they began striking at him again, and they tore at him with renewed vigor.

He heard Helix command the other orcs to redouble their efforts. "Rip at his being! Rip his field apart! Pull it asunder! Let the Court Leviathan flow all the way and settle deep. We want him to be changed

this time. We need another monster of Biomancy in our midst! We need him ripe and strong for what is to come!"

And the orcs began to strike at him in ways they never did before. Their Biomancy did not come from multiple directions. Instead, they pulled together, becoming enormous constructs of deepest red. These constructs were unleashed upon him like falling bombs. They washed over him in a confluence of mana, a confluence that sheared through his own like a wilting wind. His external layer was swept clean by brutally dense concentrations of mana. Then came the subtle touches. They splashed against his damaged field as salt would against an open wound.

Shiv let out a hiss. The pain he felt here was unique and novel. It was a pain he was unfamiliar with, and so he welcomed it. He relished in it. He learned from it. Shiv felt his Woundeater level just then as he fought back. He tried to push the orcs away, but their overwhelming barrage crashed through him utterly. Devastated him.

And as he was being ravaged, Helix finally took action himself. The orc's mana speared into him.

As it did, Shiv's eyes widened. The Heroic Biomancer's mana was unlike all the other orcs'. It was subtler, yet it hardened at the final moment. It formed into a solid shape once it had already pierced deep into Shiv. It struck so suddenly that he barely had time to react, and it spread all the way through before he could blink. It, like the orc's wings, resembled his namesake, the helix. But rather than being a concentration of crimson energy, it expanded through Shiv, twisting in multiple directions, weaving itself, and cleaving his very magic in twain. With a single move, Helix unzipped Shiv's magic utterly.

His field came apart in spewing motes of brilliant red. The Court Leviathan sank into him thereafter, infesting him. And then all the other orcs hammered into him as well. They fed diseases into his bones. They accelerated his metabolism. They unleashed chaos upon every organ, every function sustained by his biology.

His age accelerated forward. He grew old, and his Plaguefueled, already exposed to such an ailment, swallowed it immediately. His body grew larger, so big that his cage of bone and flesh couldn't encompass him anymore. But as he pushed out, the Court Leviathan accommodated, expanding the chamber and squeezing tight.

At the same time, Helix did something to Shiv, something so subtle that the Deathless didn't feel it at first. But he kept his focus on his body, for he knew his mana had already been compromised. Death was coming. The question was, what aspect of biology would kill him first? And the answer, once more, was the blood code; his genes. They betrayed him from within, a rapid onset of tumors and a cascade of other diseases that swept through him. His Plaguefueled ate the diseases, and it leveled as well.

Plaguefueled 74 > 75

But his genes still collapsed, his body began to melt, his bones crumbled, his skin peeled away, falling away in layers. Layers that came to life a moment thereafter, as they were promptly assimilated into the Court Leviathan itself.

And it was in that chaos, as Shiv was dying, that he felt a flash of inspiration wash through him. He felt connected to the Court Leviathan on a whole other level. And just then, he froze time. He held this instant so that he could better understand what was happening to himself, to his utterly shredded mana field.

As he saw a chain of mana motes fusing together, he noticed how fine the grains between them were. It was almost as if a stream of dust particles pouring into his body. But the stream was twisting through him, solidifying within him in ways he saw, ways he perceived. He turned his gaze away from physical reality entirely and studied only the magic, feeling it as deeply as he could.

The sediment wasn't sediment at all. No, it was countless small spell patterns. They were finer than he could conceive, yet he noticed the shapes at their center. They resembled his crystallized wounds somewhat, but they were minute, barely more than dots. Each one was a spell or a micro-spell, and each one was connected to another along chains of glowing mana-grains.

The particulates he held in himself earlier were also made up of these small spells, and he finally realized he was looking at it the whole network wrong. It was not just particulates, not just something he could move around. Helix hadn't been fully transparent when describing the Court Leviathan's magic.

No, the Court Leviathan's Biomancy was like a body unto itself. It was a simulated biosystem shaped from magic. Every single spell, no matter how small, was a simulated representation of blood, of sinews, of bone, and more, and it was connected to Shiv, spreading through him and assimilating him just as was being done to him on the physical plane.

Awareness 27 > 29

Practical Metabiology 41 > 42

And there, at the point where it was bleeding into his body, he noticed there were other micro-spells. Spells the color of Biomancy that were only halfway lit. And that was when Shiv realized what he was looking at again. This was what Helix described as the potential mana, the mana that hadn't been used yet.

It was always there, and it needed to be colored, colored by him. He was joining the network, joining the great cloud, and so it was shaping him using its spells. He was becoming a spell unto himself, and that was how it wielded him. That was how it changed him. That was how it intruded into his mana field in the first place.

Cracks spread across his temporal shell, but Shiv just laughed. It was beautiful.

Magic is felling awesome, Shiv thought to himself. And just then, he let everything go. He let time resume, and he let the Court Leviathan swallow him whole. Death came, and with it, notifications. More than anything, Shiv received an epiphany, not just about Biomancy, but magic itself. Magic was symbology.

Magic was lore.

It was the representation of existence reinterpreted.

And now, he was—

Woundeater 99 > 104 (Skill Evolution Reached)

Awareness 29 > 33

Multi-Tasking 15 > 18

Plaguefueled 75 > 76

Skill Evolution: Woundeater (Master) > Aegis of Assimilation (Heroic)

Chapter 138 (I) Regenerate

It is known that the Descenders are an insular group; a conservative faith that holds high barriers in place to ensure that only those vested and a part of their elite order may be properly regarded as a knight.

Yet, the Descenders are also warriors of honor, and for all their stubbornness and cultural conservatism, they have accepted some of the most unusual of monsters and individuals as knights of their order.

Among the most well-known is perhaps Tall Ben the Hydra-Knight, who, though once a vicious beast of ravenous appetites and merciless brutality, evolved into a healer and guardian of pilgrim villages in the Deep Abyss. Where once Tall Ben was a scourge to civilization, his evolution into sapience, paired with a life-debt to an elderly Biomancer, changed his nature toward justice and nobility.

In the years after his ascendance to sapience, Tall Ben performed the duties of a roaming hedge knight and healer without the title. He fought off other monsters that sought to devour the weak. He found lost children and vanquished plagues. His chronicles and his crusades against the First Blood are now things of folklore and legend.

And thus was how Tall Ben earned his greatest Skill Evolution and Knight Title. For at the battle of Low Aidenhold where the First Blood sought to seize a gate from weakened Descender forces, the Hydra-Knight intervened. He entered the fray with blades of melded bone, cartilage, and venom and faced a Court Leviathan of his lonesome might. For three days, the noble hydra raged within the colossal beast, slaughtering the court sheathed within. When the leviathan was finally struck from the sky, Tall Ben emerged changed and glorious, clad in an armor composed of magical biomass that resisted and consumed the foul flesh-shaping magics unleashed by the vampire vermin.

And in the aftermath, as Tall Ben slew Third Elder Zeneth of the Utorodi Bloodline, Sir Kenneth the Corpulent gazed upon the noble monsters and proclaimed: “Hark, brothers and sisters. Behold and see—for the measure of a knight is a noble spirit, not bound to boy, girl, or even beast...”

-The Ballad of Tall Ben the Hydra-Knight For

Aegis of Assimilation 104 (Heroic)

Feats [2/3]

The hells is an Aegis of Assimilation? Such was Shiv’s first thought as his mana field began to evolve. His thoughts collapsed at the same time his mana field did, crashing back toward him in an instant.

Compression. That was what Shiv felt next. Every last bit of Biomancy he could once cast outward was pressed tight against his body. As the mana tightened against him, it twisted and changed, shifting from a faint, spherical projection to dense limbs of crimson magic that resembled enlarged Woundeaters. Twelve enormous serpents shaped from Biomancy coiled around Shiv, and each of them remained interconnected to one another as well. Only a small membrane of faint mana separated Shiv from being directly bound to the mana serpents.

He felt like he was the core of some kind of magical beast—a Biomantic hydra, if he was to describe it exactly. And as the evolution continued, he felt his mana grow denser but also strangely fainter around him, cocooning him in a protective cage shielded by winding serpents.

The flesh of the Court Leviathan shifted. The biomass transformed once more. Yet, as it drew Shiv up, its flesh made contact with his Biomancy field. The moment it touched his altered field, his mana came

aglow—and it glowed with the very same micro-spells and mana patterns that characterized the Court Leviathan’s Biomancy. The bits of the Court Leviathan’s flesh that passed into his mana were superimposed with a magical rendition of its existing structures. The microspells representing skin, fat, bone, and more were all different. And within those microspells were even smaller crystallizations of mana. Shiv could feel them, but he couldn’t see them.

No wonder Helix was so annoyed with me for lacking a good Practical Metabiology and Awareness Skill Fusion. This Skill Evolution’s capabilities are incomplete without other stuff supporting it. Kind of like having extreme Physicality but no Toughness or something. Maybe a little less extreme than that, but still, skills don’t stand on their own. They need other things to support it.

Other things like Multi-Tasking, Memorization, Practical Metabiology, and more.

Even so, his mana was far more sophisticated than it was before. If the Woundeaters were just transplants capable of shifting injuries from one body to another, this allowed him to affect entire biological architectures. Architectures like the Court Leviathan’s biomass. It had layers of mana embedded in its flesh as well, pressing against Shiv’s coiling mana, but even so, he pulled on the mana-infused parts of the biomass. The microspells there shivered, but remained pinned in place thanks to their mana.

A pocket opened above Shiv. The ground elevated him back onto the bridge. Helix and the orc Biomancers beheld him with rapt attentions and bated breaths. The bespectacled orc frowned for a beat as he regarded Shiv’s Biomancy Skill Evolution. At the same time, Shiv began sapping vitality from orcs around him, bringing his resurrection underway.

“This is most certainly not Chimeric Assimilation,” Helix muttered. “But I have seen this somewhere. I just can’t quite recall...”

Shiv tried moving his new “field” and found that the serpents could extend free from his own body. It wasn’t the cloud-like particulates that the Court Leviathan was composed of, and it was far too thick and obvious to be compared to Uva’s mana strands. Instead, it was like a massive limb he could move, that lit up with it pressed against someone else’s biomass and immediately rendered their organic structure with magical symbology.

The serpent stretched across the entirety of the bridge in an instant. It washed through hundreds of orcs and kept going thereafter. Shiv continued pushing his field out as far as he could, but soon found himself unable to see where it was going as it rushed past the horizon. He guessed his reach now went well beyond a kilometer, though. At the same time, the other hydras shrank as their mana melted into the extending limb. So, my reach isn’t infinite. But still pretty far. Seems to be more for close-quarters, though. They’re naturally coiled around my body.

Streams of Vitae parted around Shiv as he returned to life. He drew his mana back, and the mana serpent slammed against him, splashing against the thin mana membrane just as the other serpents expanded once with mana once more. He stopped trying to move his “hydra field,” and it immediately coiled tight around himself once more.

“Well, I got something to do with assimilation, just not Chimeric Assimilator,” Shiv breathed. “Says it’s Aegis of Assimilation.”

All the orc Biomancers responded with astonishment and surprise. A flash of recognition passed across Helix’s face, and he let out a bark of laughter. “Aegis of Assimilation? Is that what you managed to get?”

“Is Tall Ben still alive?” one of the orc Biomancers asked. He looked around. “Where’s Lungthief? He’s the last one that fought the Hydra-Knight.”

“Still missing,” another orc called from the corner of the bridge. The speaking orc sailed across the ceiling on an enamel seat as he raced other orcs in an upside-down tooth-throne race circuit. “Probably in some kind of nightmarish dimension fighting for some stupidly hopeless cause. He’s always doing that.”

“Hm. Shame. He would hate to miss this.”

“Who is Tall Ben?” Shiv asked.

“A Hydra-Knight that serves the Descenders Union,” Helix said as his expression contorted into one of maniacal glee. “And you share his Biomancy Skill Evolution. A Biomancy Skill Evolution meant specifically for someone that walks the cleft between monster and individual. How useful. And fascinating. Your nature is quite the enigma, Insul, for I am certain you are no beast by flesh.”

“Yeah,” Shiv replied. “Me too. I think it might have happened because I saw how the microspells came together. The patterns and all that. The Court Leviathan’s mana is like a cloud, and I saw how it was coloring me with it. Like it was priming its dormant magic using my biology rather than just consuming me. It converted me to magic first.”

“Ah, good,” Helix replied. “This both pleases and amuses me. Mainly because the skill you have is quite novel. I have only faced it in battle once before. Its main power isn’t intrusion or influence, but resilience. With the way it reacts with organic materials, I do believe it remains a sibling skill to Chimeric Assimilation, however. Still close enough to serve our interests and needs.”

“That’s all fun and nice,” Bonk said, yawning as he stomped closer. He was nearly two heads taller than every last orc Biomancer, and he regarded Shiv with faint interest. “But what’s it do? I heard him say Aegis. Does it let him take a hit better?”

"I can take a hit pretty good on my own," Shiv said, eyeing Bonk's tree club.

Bonk followed Shiv's line of sight. "Sure. But how many whacks you think you can eat before—"

"Bonk." Helix sighed. "Away with you. We are not—" Then, the orc Biomancer stopped talking. He let out a loud hum of consideration as he regarded Shiv once more. "No. No, this will be good for all of us. We should begin field tests soon. You like field tests, don't you, Insul?"

"Sure," Shiv said without hesitation. "If by field test you mean trying to figure out what I can do with the Biomancy while Bonk tries to bash me to death."

Bonk almost teared up at Shiv's casual willingness to indulge in violence. "The Challenger truly loves us. If all the humans were a bit more like you—" Bonk blinked and chuckled. "Well, we'd probably try to kill you little pink-skins even more. As it stands, many of you put up a good fight, but the whining afterward is such a bore."

"Yeah, but that's probably because most humans don't come back to life," Shiv said.

"Oh. And that's my problem."

"No, you asshole. It's their problem. You're complaining about them being traumatized by what you do? Maybe fix the fact that they die first. If all the humans reincarnated like orcs, they'd be more willing to fight you for fun. They would be more like me." The orc grinned at Shiv with naked doubt in his eyes. The Deathless wilted slightly. "Okay. Maybe not entirely like me. But a lot more willing to do risky shit."

“Perhaps,” Bonk said slowly. “But for a lot of humans, it’s the pain that breaks them. The loss. Some of them are more than just brave. They’re willing to die with a smile on their face. But war takes things from them. Struggle costs them more than it gives. And I find that to be disgusting.”

Shiv scowled. “You’re really doing your best to make sure I never forget that you’re an orc, huh?”

“Yes,” Bonk replied. “Don’t see why not. See, some of my kind might play with you a bit more socially, but I don’t really care about fucking with you that way. I don’t think it’s necessary. Frankly, you’re kind of a raw, undeveloped lump in terms of Social Skills. Not real battle there. Not struggle. But Physically? That’s what you’re all about. And personally? Well, I just want to take a few swings at you soon. See how you react, and what fun I might get out of it. I’m gonna be straight about that, and you can be straight with me. We can get bloody over and over this way. Honest enemies and that shit.”

“Honest enemies,” Shiv responded with a slight snort. “Alright. Helix. What do you got in mind? I think I might be able to pull some biomass into my mana field. It rendered the Court Leviathan’s flesh in magic. Your flesh too.”

“Yes, I noticed,” Helix said, squinting at Shiv’s hydra-like field. Though the mana-hydras were coiled tight around Shiv’s form, they still towered over most of the orcs, forming a compacted field of around four meters. “Hm. The representation of your mana also seems to indicate that it was a Hydra Skill to begin with. Makes sense, but I’m quite sure that some Dragon-Knights managed to achieve it as well. Still. Rare. And rare is good.”

“So, how should we start this field test off?” Shiv asked.

“By seeing how your mana interacts with unprotected organic materials, of course,” Helix said.

And before the orc could continue, Shiv was already reacting. He directed his mana into his cape, and one of his mana hydras reached in. He sought a set of his armor, but as his new mana field drew out the bones, Shiv blinked as a full set of bone armor emerged, layered in gleaming patterns. He could still grasp the biological matter that composed his bones, but it felt like his reach went deeper now too. There was the physical organic matter he could move with his field, but there was also the spell patterns themselves.

“Ah. The ability to assimilate still remains. How lovely.” Helix grinned. “Pull the patterns into your field. Let us see if the process mirrors Chimeric Assimilation’s or not.”

The Deathless did just that. He pulled at the constellations of microspells rather than the physical matter itself. At once, the bone armor burst apart in a flash of crimson mana. Its physical matter vanished, and Shiv’s Biomancy field glowed brighter than ever. And there he saw it—the patterns constituting his bone armor trapped within his mana in a crystallized chain of spell patterns. When he cast a laceration spell, that was a single injury trapped inside a cage of glowing mana, contained by his intent and reshaped into a spell.

The conversion of his bone armor wasn’t just a spell. It was a spell made up of spells connected to other spells. There were small spells making up larger spells. There were patterns connected to other patterns to create an overpattern. He was looking at a system of spells working together, something of multiple complexity magnitudes higher than anything he dealt with before.

Shiv’s mind went blank, and more than any of the times before, he realized just how undereducated he was. He thought he would be able to figure out how to recreate all wounds and shape a few viruses, but this was like bearing the blueprint to an entire biological object in his mana, and he hadn’t the slightest clue as to how to properly wield it.

“Quite overwhelming, isn’t it?” Helix asked.

“That’s a lot of spells,” Shiv muttered, nodding. “This is going to take a while.”

“Centuries,” Helix said. “Even if you pursue this magical discipline, it will take centuries upon centuries. More time than you can possibly imagine. But it will give you more power and influence than you ever imagined as well. And insight. Not only into yourself, but the foundational nature and aspects of existence. Such is the great gift of magic. Comprehension.”

A breath escaped Shiv. There were so many moving parts. And there was a weight pressing on him, grinding against his mana. “It feels a little heavy too.”

“Heavy?” Helix asked. “Elaborate. Don’t just spit out the first word to describe your feeling. What kind of heavy? Specifically, what do you feel?”

“It’s like the very beginnings of mana strain,” Shiv said, narrowing his eyes at the spell patterns containing his bone armor. He moved the spell patterns around, and he watched them glide through his mana field. “I can move it without difficulty. The strain’s just there. It’s not really building that much more. Not changing at all. But it’s not going away either.”

“Interesting,” Helix said. “Then, it must be a bit like Chimeric Assimilation. But your mana doesn’t need to be primed. It’s already activated. It just assimilated the material without—Ah! I understand now. Insul. Try pushing a section of the spell patterns out from your field. Don’t try to move it. Try squeezing it out of its current crystallized configuration.”

Shiv focused his intent and squeezed the spell chain representing his bone armor. It burst and from it emerged his leg armor, bone white and perfectly preserved. However, lengths of spells were now missing within his field, and his mana was dimmer than before.

“Very good,” Helix said. “And your field... It’s not directly anchored to your body, is it?”

“No,” Shiv replied, studying the thin layer of separation. That was the only part that resembled his old mana field. Just a faint membrane of redness. “There’s a gap here connected by an inner field. It’s like my old field.”

“Yes. That’s a partitioning layer more commonly used by individuals. I have it. Most orcs have it. But most monsters do not. In fact, most Biomancy-inclined monsters are deeply infused with their own Biomancy mana. As such, a monster’s flesh shifts when they use their magic, as their way of wielding it is instinctive. Individuals, comparatively, are more manipulative. We interface and use the field to move things. Monsters use their bodies and fields in tandem. Most times, they fail to separate the two entirely. As such, they often also fuse Physicality and their favored Magical Skill more often than not.”

Helix’s explanation made a lot of sense to Shiv. But he wasn’t done yet.

“The skill you just evolved, however, is somewhere in between. Not quite individual. Not fully monster. A bit of separation from both. There is a great deal more instinct guiding it. I wanted you to have Chimeric Assimilation for that reason—so you can actively study and interact with the spell chains in your field. This works too and perhaps even better in some ways, though I suspect its mana ceiling is quite a bit lower than Chimeric Assimilation.”

That took Shiv by surprise. “Why?”

“Because your current mana is constantly activated. I suspect you will be able to create entire biological constructs within its expanse if only you knew the specific spells and patterns. Which you don’t, but that can be corrected in time. Comparatively, the Chimeric Assimilation Skill requires you to assimilate a certain amount of biomass before you can even begin casting or altering spell chains. Of course, its main benefit is a lack of mana strain. When you overdraw on mana, the organic structures stored within break, and you can simply replace them, thus accelerating your education without leaving you vulnerable to constant mana exhaustion.”

“Wait,” Shiv said. He blinked rapidly as he connected Chimeric Assimilation’s capabilities with his Strider of the Unbending Path. “My Master-Tier Chronomancy works a bit like that. I don’t get stressed. It doesn’t last long and the field breaks fast, but I don’t get tired at all.”

“Yes. Another difference between monsters and individuals. Monsters usually suffer mana destabilization rather than strain for a reason. That is because they are not thinking beings at baseline—complex thinking, anyway. They are instinct-driven and unleash their power subconsciously. There is little mental exhaustion to their magical lore.”

The Deathless just stared. “You know something I don’t much get, Helix?”

“What?”

“How are the monsters getting this whole magical lore thing if they can’t think?”

Whistles sounded from all around him. Shiv looked around, and he saw every orc mage in the room bouncing a bit on their feet. “What?”

“You asked the question,” Bonk intoned.

“The question,” Mortar echoed.

“The great theory,” Helix said, holding a finger, “is that lore is shaped by gestalt.”

Chapter 138 (II) Regenerate

“Gestalt?” Shiv asked. He didn’t remember ever hearing that word before.

“It means by collective consciousness, to some extent,” Helix explained. “Effectively, it is the biggest reason why most mages suspect that the System is something of a hivemind. Or a unified subconscious that takes from our knowledge and shapes our skills based on collective experience.”

“Huh,” Shiv said. “Are there other theories about the System? If it's shaped from everyone's thoughts—”

“Yes. It would be influenced by you as well. Everything you do. Everything you believe. Lores of magic are separate because there are unified beliefs and an ordered structure to their patterns within Integration. Consider Cryomancy and Pyromancy. From a non-magical perspective, they technically fall under a unified theory called thermodynamics, yet they seemed so different to the collective understanding of beings that they forked in opposite directions and became parted lores. Thus, beyond the natural state of the world, belief also reorders these natural patterns. Psychomancy as well, for the mind, even more so than the body, is chaotic and varied, but has a unified lore encompassing all its intricacies. Biomancy, comparatively, simply had to be a Magical Skill. It could not be anything else. It was impossible for it to be anything else, because biology is a complex lattice of patterns. Of patterns within patterns. Of patterns upon patterns.”

The entire topic was still a bit esoteric for Shiv, but he felt like he understood things a bit better than before. Magic always seemed a bit weird for him. That's why he wanted it so bad when he was young. That's why he wanted to get into it. Because it was the ability to affect the world, to change things beyond himself.

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"Well," Bonk said, poking at the leg of adamantine bone drifting in Shiv's field. "You wanna—"

Shiv assimilated the front section of the orc's club into his field. The strain grew heavier, but there was still a lot more Shiv could hold within his mana before it finally became unbearable.

Bonk frowned. "Hey. Spit that back out. I was going to hit you with that."

"You still have most of it left," Shiv said. He licked his lips as instinct provoked him to try something. He took the spell patterns rendering the wooden club and pulled them into the patterns that made up his bone armor. As Shiv brought the chains of spells together, there was a brief clash as parts of both architectures lit up while other microspells remained dim. All the orc Biomancers leaned in.

"Oh, look at him," one of the orcs breathed. "It's like watching a One figure out how to slit his first throat. He's figuring it out using instinct alone."

"Quiet," Helix said. Shiv looked at the orc, but he just got a nod in return. He wasn't sure what Helix wanted him to do, but the Deathless continued following his instincts. He carefully pulled the glowing chains and tried to move them closer. As spell patterns from the bone armor were drawn into the

vicinity of spell patterns that made up the wooden club's tip, they suddenly magnetized together, as the glowing chains snapped tight to one another.

"Broken Moon," Shiv grunted, taken aback by how sudden and violent the joining was. But when it was done, he found himself looking at a bounded pattern. For a few seconds, he just studied the once separated spell chains. Then, he pushed them out from himself and watched as a club that seemed to be made from both the texture of wood, bone, and adamantite emerged. "Oh, shit. Didn't know I could do that."

Helix laughed as he gestured at the new weapon Shiv just created. "And now you behold the great gift of assimilation. Certain biological architectures can be easily combined. And even unlikely biological patterns can fuse together if enough effort is applied. And if one can handle the cancers that follow. But you... The field is projected out from you. So, strain will be your issue so long as you don't use your mana on yourself."

Bonk pushed the rest of his club into Shiv's field. "Fuse the rest of it to your bone stuff."

"So you can hit me with it?" Shiv asked.

"Yeah. Of course. Adamantine's better than just ironwood."

The Deathless considered that and nodded. That made sense. If he was going to increase his Toughness, he might as well give the orc the best weapon possible for the job. He assimilated the rest of the orc's club into his mana, but did something different this time. Instead of just fusing the brightest chains together, he compressed everything into a unified shape. Some of the spells deformed, and, rather than breaking apart, they shattered and folded over each other. Then, they began to mutate before Shiv's very eyes. They filled with glowing dots of Biomancy, and the gaps left in them came aglow.

As Shiv cast the new creation out from his field, his eyes widened as a dense lump of adamantite cancer with small patches of wood and bone emerged into physical reality.

“What the hell did I just make?” Shiv muttered to himself.

“Cancer, Insul,” Helix said, folding his arms. “Everything is cancer if you push it hard enough. Utter cellular instability and chaos. Such for the body, so too for Biomancy. Except you managed to avoid the worst of this yourself. How fortunate.”

“Yeah,” Shiv said. He directed two of his mana hydras to straighten out the club as best he could, and he offered it back to Bonk. The orc took it without complaint and tested it on his own head a few times.

“Damn,” Bonk said as the club bounced off his face. “Adamantine Adaption. Real useful skill. Good thing you had that instead of some worthless pussy-shit individual Toughness Skill to make their armor better. Good club. Gonna thank you by whacking you with it.”

“Sure, but wait, is this why the Court Leviathan doesn’t develop cancer?” Shiv’s head snapped to Helix. “Because it didn’t have any Biomancers, and it regenerated fine. Is it because it integrated regeneration-capable biology into itself? Like... from a basilisk?”

Slowly, Helix’s face spread into a wide smile. “Maybe. Do you have an idea, perchance?”

Shiv’s heartbeat picked up. “Yeah. Yeah. For a moment there, I was thinking about cancer bone armor, but now? I wanna see if assimilated biomass from a basilisk lights up with everything.”

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“It motherfucking does!” Shiv cheered.

The orcs around him cheered too. The only thing that didn’t cheer was the basilisk he assimilated a whole chunk of flesh from. Already, its body was regenerating. The missing tissue was fusing back together, and Shiv noticed strings of mana pulse between the spell patterns from the basilisk’s flesh.

“Regeneration comes in a few forms,” Helix said with a proud smirk on his face. “The first is the rawest, crudest, and stupidest way: imprinting. You have someone constantly cast their stable-state body architecture onto yours so your body always knows how to rebuild itself. This is what the vampires do with their Lineage Cores. Each of their bodies references an elder that came before them, and so they just rebuild that way.”

“Is bioelectric signaling another?” Shiv asked.

“Correct,” Helix said with a nod. “Complex bioelectric signaling. Hydras have this. Basilisks have this. Certain demons and lizardfolk have this. For whatever reason, their body has developed a natural capability to communicate and signal complicated commands for its cells. This allows them to regrow limbs and regenerate parts of their body outright. Even if they are not consciously aware how.”

The other four basilisks had been delivered in the interim, and to Shiv’s surprise, the orcs had started taking care of them. Some orcs were actively scrubbing the large monsters down, others were cleaning their teeth, and a few others were bringing them food in the form of corpses. The orcs didn’t torture the

basilisks at all. This caught Shiv's attention as much as the wonders of basilisk biology did. But he didn't mention it to the orcs. While he studied the new spell organism he'd assimilated, he also studied the orcs.

They were fine with killing and hurting people, but monsters didn't seem to provoke their urge to torture as much.

Maybe it's the misery and fear that feeds them. Maybe it's just the fact that someone has to lose an emotional struggle against them as well. Shiv frowned slightly, but his expression brightened again as he watched the spell patterns rendering the basilisk biomass come alight—and his new set of bone armor lit up slightly as well.

"I think I can make a set of regenerating armor," Shiv declared.

Bonk chuckled as he tested a few swings. "Well, this will be fun. Insul. Let's do this on top of Courtney later. I want to see how far I can send you flying."

"Yeah, sure," Shiv said. He wasn't even really listening to Bonk right now. They could do all the goofy stuff later. Right now, he wanted to see what might result from this fusion. As he pulled the spells free from his mana, what emerged was a set of armor that held multiple qualities at once. First, the armor was now gridded with gleaming basilisk scales, but instead of gems, they had wedges of jutting adamantine bone. Shiv pulled out his Skysplitter and slashed at the armor once. The cut passed through and left a series of chips across the armor. Chips that fused back together a moment later.

"Yes!" Shiv cheered. "It worked! It felling worked!"

“And here was another reason why I wanted you to get Chimeric Assimilation. So you can—” Before Helix could finish, Shiv sent out another mana hydra. It dissolved a chunk from another basilisk’s body, but with how assimilation worked, the large serpent just shuddered slightly.

Right after, Shiv drove the piece back into himself—but this time, he used it to breach his inner membrane protecting him from the hydra. The membrane tore. Shiv snarled in pain. But he pushed on, watching as his own body ignited into spell patterns for the first time.

Helix blinked. Practically every orc near the gateway gawked.

Shiv let out a rasping chuckle as he watched the hydra biomass light up with his own bio-mana architecture, and he pushed the basilisk’s flesh into himself. As soon as he did, he felt his body shift and twist from the inside. Something slithered under his skin and through his cells. A static undercurrent ran through his person, and the faint outlines of scales appeared all across his body.

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“Yes!” Shiv cackled. “Now I have—” And then his insides ignited in agony as he felt his stomach twist violently. Shiv clutched his chest and groaned.

Helix pinched the bridge of his nose. “Well. You’re likely going to die from severe metabolic dysfunction in a few seconds, so I might as well explain this to you now: regeneration isn’t the only thing you need to consider, Insul. It’s only part of the complexity of your biology. You can likely heal from a great deal of things now, but your mitochondria and energy production are not quite congruous with those of a basilisk. Or most creatures, for that matter. Again: no easy power. Stop trying to emulate the vampires—you’re losing out on Practical Metabiology.

“Yeah,” Shiv wheezed. He tried to pull out the basilisk’s spell chain, only to realize he couldn’t separate it from himself. “Shit. Helix—”

“No. I will not help you. Perish. It will be a good lesson.”

Shiv winced but agreed. “Yeah. Teach me to be impatient again.” He paused. Then he turned to Bonk. “Hey. What say you see if you can kill me before my body does?”

Bonk drew in a long breath and closed his eyes. “Finally.”

“Have all the other Heroes join in too,” Shiv added. “I’m gonna put on my regenerating armor. Let’s get my Toughness a few levels if we can.”

An orc raised a hand in front of his mouth and gave a sarcastic sob. “He’s the best humie ever.”

Chapter 139 (I) Leveling

Alright, boys and girls. A lesson on fast-healing adversaries. You're going to run into them, and some of you, if you're lucky, are going to develop a skill that will allow you to heal much faster yourself.

When you face someone like that, use fire.

Now, some other instructors might advise that you use acid. That could work. Just one problem. How many of you keep acid on you? How many of you are Biomancers, specifically specializing in flesh-melting acid? Yeah, that's what I thought.

Additionally, you're probably facing a Biomancer or someone Biomancer-adjacent if they have elevated regeneration. So when you use an acid, they likely know the specific compound of its composition better than you do. However that works.

Why am I so against acid? Because once upon a time, a certain young Sergeant Irons threw a vial of acid at a Biomancer. It splashed off like water as she laughed at me and gave me a series of fast-acting tumors. As I lay dying, she walked over to mock me, telling me that she had turned its specific composition into a neutralized substance.

While she gloated, a Pyromantically-charged artillery shell hit us both.

I had the Toughness and the armor to survive. She didn't. Well, she survived for a bit.

But the flames? A little bit of advice when you're burning to death. Put it out or put yourself down. Burning to death is no way to go.

Anyway. With that happy bit of advice administered, get back into your squads and pin that adolescent hydra down. No fire for you kids today. You get to learn the fun of trying to beat down a regenerator head-on.

-Captain Harry Irons, TacStrat 101, Phoenix Academy

Adam drew a long and deep breath as he took a moment for himself. It had been a day and a half since they left Shiv in the Tutorial. Almost two days of preparing, rebuilding, intelligence gathering, and reinforcing. Parts of the gate had been restructured. The wounded at the Surface District were still being treated. And certain threats had been issued by Inquisitor Sijik, who now promised Master-Advisor Oldsmith damnation and imprisonment.

A promise he said he would personally deliver upon the—unbeknownst to him—long-dead automaton in but three days.

The Gate Lord had left through the Surface Gateway and observed Blackedge from afar on the second day. He'd found the Necrotechs more passive than before, doing little more than intermittent bombardments. Then, the Gate Lord had projected his senses toward Fortress-City Diego and encountered the inquisitorial forces halfway there.

They numbered around two thousand, mostly High Adept and Low Master Pathbearers. All of them bore the insignia of the Inquisition, and they were moving fast. Adam guessed they would be at the gate in less than another day or so.

Too bad for them, they were likely going to be marching into the jaws of oblivion.

And too bad for Adam, said jaws of oblivion were the orcs.

"Gods," Adam breathed, currently back within the gate. "Starhawk. Hear me. I really, really would like a more reliable army. And a few minutes just to breathe." There came no answer. "I haven't even gotten to rename this damned gate yet. Or the tower. Or anything. Not a single moment between all these problems. I can't believe I ever thought being System-favored was a good thing."

Then, Adam thought about Blackedge again and pushed his mental exhaustion away.

"Come on, Adam," Adam chided himself. "Your father has been fighting for weeks straight. Weeks. You have so many people supporting you. Shiv's literally occupying the orcs' attention by himself to make them stay away from the gate. Get yourself together. Stop being a coward. The orcs are the only ones that can help you save Blackedge. The only... Oh, for the love of—orcs. My army consists of three million orcs. Ascendants, what is my life..."

Adam turned around and grimaced at the thick, alloyed door leading to the Tutorial. It was sealed for the other side, only to be opened from within the gate once his identity was vetted, and Uva ensured he wasn't mind-controlled. And speaking of Uva, she was practically the only person who could come in and out of the damned checkpoints just by squeezing herself between the cracks. And she still wanted more defenses for the bunker, because the orcs unnerved her that much.

Adam couldn't blame her.

The entire reason why the Vulketh breach happened was because of one of the orcs, a power play on their part, to deliberately force Shiv's hand and accelerate the ritual. And these were to be his allies. This was the army he was expected to lead. No, not lead, just point. Point in the general direction of his adversaries and let them run amok. Adam didn't think leading the orcs like a traditional force was even possible.

Perhaps Shiv could pull it off. Or maybe he was just there to keep their attention.

And Adam pitied him for that. He knew the orcs were bad, cruel, psychotic creatures. But during his brief time with them, they'd seemed so... Well, he wouldn't say charming, but interesting. Their Social

Skills influenced even him. But beyond their skills was an ever-present urge to hurt, to dominate, to inflict harm on both mind, body, and soul.

And then there was Band, that orc which had a connection to Adam's mother, that orc that Shiv broke so brutally. Adam watched him die with a joyous smile on his face, despite his soul being mutilated. Never once did he beg or even whimper. Adam shuddered at the memory. Orcs were—

"Adam," Uva's voice sounded in the back of his mind.

The Gate Lord froze, then shook his head to clear his thoughts. "Yes, yes, I'm going across right now. I just needed a moment to—"

"Take your time. I am not rushing you,"

Uva said, her voice soft. She infused him with a dose of calmness, but also alarm. Adam shook as his anxiety rose, but slightly transformed. He wasn't worried anymore. Rather, he was alert, waiting to intercept something, prepared to engage.

"What was that for?" Adam asked.

"That's to help you in case there is an ambush on the other side. You never know what they're like. There is always an undercurrent of malice and violence flowing from their minds. Shiv wasn't lying about the itch. It is hard to resist. It makes you want to hurt and break. It took more than a bit of focus to remove the urge from myself."

Adam grimaced. "You're good at making me reconsider going through." But he had to. Someone needed to brief these bloody orcs, and it was going to be him. He had been interfacing with Inquisitor Sijik. He was the one who knew the key Necrotech observation posts and defenses all across Lost Angeles. More

importantly, he was the one who was going to lead the rescue efforts for Blackedge. He was going to be at the front of this fight, and so he would need to greet his army eventually.

There was no way he was going to let a group of orcs run amok in his hometown. That would likely be a more brutal massacre than simply letting the Necrotechs breach its walls and put his people to the flame.

"I can't trust them. But I need to have their measure."

"Lean on Shiv if you need to," Uva said. "You know you can count on him."

"I think I count on the big bastard a bit too much," Adam replied.

"There is no too much with him," she insisted. "And it will be good for him as well. If he spends too long with the orcs, I worry how that might affect his mind. We ground him."

"Right," Adam said. "Good for him too. Well. Time to cross."

"Don't worry. I will be with you. I will make sure your mind remains untampered and your person untouched."

With a final breath, Adam stepped through the Tutorial Gateway. He clutched his bow tight and tapped the wand on his hip. It was potent with Hydromancy, capable of briefly letting him shift his physical form

into a current of water, good for if the orcs expected easy prey. More than that, if they tried to cast anything—

A thunderous blast shook the air. As soon as Adam arrived on the other side, he was launched off his feet and flung down that mountain of—

Adam crashed shoulder-first against an edge. He realized the corpses making up the mountain were all gone. Rather, he was landing on a series of stone steps, his Legendary plate chipping the rough edges as he bounced down the long flight of stairs. He manifested his vector wings and hovered up into the air, recovering. As he shook his head, trying to get his bearings, he drew a Veilpiercer and saw a massive encampment sprawling out all around him.

The orcs had set up large tents and started fires as they gathered here. Stone fortresses, bunkers, and fighting rings had been set up as well, extending far beyond the horizon. It looked like a crude forward operating base. And that's what it was. A forward operating base right outside his gate.

"Shit," Adam muttered.

Furthermore, the mountain of corpses that once stood as the foundation of the gateway was completely gone. Instead, something akin to a ziggurat remained in its place. And that was when Adam realized it was likely always a ziggurat. It was just that the orcs had placed all the bodies on top of it to demoralize him.

"Bastard creatures," Adam muttered under his breath.

As he took in the orc encampments, he saw most of them were standing outside, gathered around large fireplaces, but they were waving gleaming pieces of metal in their hands. It looked like mithril. It gleamed like mithril. It was mithril. Why were they waving mithril around? Were they betting on something?

He got his answer when a faint silhouette shot overhead, tearing through parting clouds. Adam's eyes widened as he watched a bone-armored figure shoot further and further into the distance, away from the Court Leviathan parked just two kilometers away from the gateway. Shiv spiked his gravitic field and righted himself. He came accelerating back the way he was flung, and a collective cheer went up among the orcs.

"Smash! Smash! Smash!" some of them cheered.

"Bonk! Bonk! Bonk!" others cried.

"Shiv! Shiv! Shiv!" more called out.

"What in damnation is happening here?" Adam breathed.

Adam cast his awareness up into the air just as Uva asked him the very same question. "What is happening?"

"I have no bloody idea," Adam said with a sigh.

Just as his Seer of Horizons snapped into place, granting him a panoramic view of the land, he watched as Shiv charged a large orc standing atop the Court Leviathan. The orc held a strange weapon. It was a club that resembled a mass of tumors, but its texture was familiar to Adam. He remembered seeing that somewhere. Was that adamantine bone? And wood?

Shiv blurred across the air just as the orc swung his massive club. Adam's breath got stuck in his throat as he watched the orc smash his weapon into Shiv's skull. The weapon vibrated like a gong, and the vibrations shifted over into Shiv's shaking head. The world went still for a moment. Then, The Deathless was blasted across the sky again.

A massive shockwave splashed out from atop the Court Leviathan, spreading far across the land. It washed over the encampments; the flames lighting the camps shivered and danced. Adam had to accelerate his vector wings to avoid being flung away.

Adam cast his awareness after Shiv, just as he prepared to loose a Veilpiercer at the large orc atop the leviathan. Adam hesitated, however, due to two factors. The first was the fact that he was surrounded by a few million orcs, and that if he shot his arrow right now, he was very likely to be swarmed.

The other thing was Shiv's bone armor. There was something wrong with it. Parts of it had cracked away, and it trailed blood for some reason. But before he could assume Shiv was the one who was injured, the bone armor knitted itself back together. Missing sections healed. Veins of biomass extended outward and grew over absences inflicted upon the plating. The armor was regenerating. And it looked strangely scaly. A bit like a basilisk's hide.

"What is happening?" Uva repeated.

"I..." Adam stared on in confusion as Shiv spiked his gravitic field once more. The air around him shivered, his inertial sheath thundering with kinetic energy. He shot toward the orc, accelerating faster

and faster until he passed through the clouds shredded earlier like a descending meteor. As the Deathless got closer, Adam could hear him laughing. He could also hear something filling up in Shiv's lungs.

"Alright, you shit!" Shiv roared. "Give it your best shot!"

"Oh, I will!" the orc replied. "Don't you worry."

Adam scoffed and shook his head in disbelief. "I think... I think Shiv's letting the orc hit him."

Uva let out a groan. "Why?"

Adam winced. "Leveling, probably."

"Composer, that man... Ah. I suppose I should have expected this."

Chapter 139 (II) Leveling

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Shiv accelerated toward Bonk with feral glee in his heart and every intention of achieving a brutal death. The Heroic-Tier orc hit hard, at least as hard as the Recollector wearing Confriga's body. The orc had a staggeringly potent Physicality Skill, one that let him stack impact charges from all the hits he inflicted in a period of time before, somewhat akin to how Momentum Core functioned, but exponential in its buildup.

To put Bonk simply, every time he hit Shiv, the damage was amplified astronomically.

Last time, he shattered Shiv's armor. This time...

"See if you can finish me off this time," Shiv snarled as he tore through the screaming air. Shiv's heart was pounding. His organs were squirming and shriveling as his metabolic health collapsed entirely. Death was close. One way or another, Shiv wasn't going to be alive in a few moments. And to be honest, he preferred his death to come at the hand of the orc rather than his own mistake in Biomancy.

As he charged Bonk, he heard a deafening chorus of approval echoing from all directions. The gathered orcs were overjoyed. They pumped their fists high and called out to him, roaring his title as if he were some kind of celebrity. And once more, it was getting to Shiv, though he guarded his heart more than before. He spiked himself over 20 more times as he got within 200 meters of Bonk. The Court Leviathan responded to his approach by rapidly shapeshifting. He saw its outer shell harden as a layer of adamantine bone, harvested from one of his old bodies, swept across its exterior.

Shiv came at Bonk just under combustion speeds. He swung his cancer-forged club with perfect timing, and the Deathless didn't even bother blocking. He took the hit head-on, and this time, the strike blasted clean through his skull. His Adamantine Adaption tried to resist, but the impact was simply too much.

And once more, Bonk's skill surprised him. Rather than a cataclysmic explosion signaling Shiv's end, the force of the orc's blow resonated throughout the confines of his body, mashing it into paste with little more than a wet squelch. No shockwaves followed. No overflow of destruction devastated the world. It wasn't like Shiv's Inertial Overdrive at all.

More than meets the eye, indeed, Shiv thought as he died. Bonk seemed to care about keeping damage contained. Though he was larger than the other orcs, though he dressed far more savagely, his touch was paradoxically delicate. He also never missed. His club landed square at the exact same spot on Shiv's forehead every time, and Shiv felt the orc do something with the expanding shockwave; reduce it somehow, ground it within his own brutish body.

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Yeah, Shiv thought. This is pretty felling awesome. If I stick around with these orcs and let them kill me over and over, who knows how many skills I'll have at Master and Heroic-Tier in a few weeks or months?

As Shiv's body turned into dust, he watched as his bone armor snapped apart in two directions. He reached out using his Vitae and clenched the streams around the parting armor before they could fly off too far. He lost a bit of vitality, but he pulled it closer to him, and as he pressed the broken sides together, he looked on in delight as the regeneration kicked in. The two parts of the broken armor began to mend. Threads of biomass connected the gleaming adamantine tissue.

Seconds passed as the armor began to fuse back together around Shiv's Vitae-form, and Bonk let out a laugh.

"Not bad, eh?" Bonk said.

"Not bad," Shiv admitted. "Nasty skill. First time you hit me, I didn't think much of it at all. Second time, you cracked something inside of me. Third, I blacked out briefly. That was bad."

Bonk let out a laugh. "I don't think I've ever hit anyone more than five times." Bonk paused as he considered his statement. "Maybe that's not entirely accurate. I don't think I've hit most people more than five times. There are a few people that I never quite got to hit that much."

"Why, they run away from you?"

"No, they killed me immediately." Bonk let out a laugh. And the orc held no malice towards his killers, for in his eyes, it was all in good strife.

"Alright, you had your fun." Shiv placed a Vitae stream against Bonk and began draining the orc. "I think it's time to let the others join in."

Bonk frowned slightly. There was a bit of childishness to his pout. "Oh, but you spent hours with Helix. What's he got that I don't?"

"Well, Biomancy for one."

"Blegh, mages," Bonk said with a disgusted look and waved his hand. "You know, I can show you a thing or two about fighting. I can see that you have problems. Not big ones. But you telegraph a little. I can train you on the fun stuff."

"Oh, can you now?" Shiv asked. He sounded almost offended, but he suspected that there would be something useful to learn from Bonk too. "You know what? After the other orcs take their swings at me—"

"Shiv! Shiv, what in the bloody hells are you letting them do to you?" A blue sun rose into existence as Adam shot past the side of the Court Levithan. The Gate Lord had a Veilpiercer drawn. He looked on, his eyes darting between Bonk and Shiv, and his expression was one of confusion, but also wariness.

"Hey, Adam," Shiv said, waving a stream of Vitae at him. "Orcs are helping me do some training. I'm also getting to know the Masters and Heroes. They got Courtney to start working again, by the way. You want to come inside? They're doing some remodeling. It's way better than before. They even managed to get it to eat the cave biter earlier. Apparently, it really needs to sustain itself by assimilating biomass."

Adam didn't say anything for several seconds, and slowly he let out a long-suffering sigh as he dismissed his Veilpiercer. "So... they're... not betraying us yet?"

Bonk just laughed. "Not yet, Gate Lord. But if you're so worried..." Bonk placed his club on his shoulder, and just then Shiv responded. The moment he did, he opened his regenerating bone armor and wrapped a mana hydra around Bonk's body. A clash of crimson exploded out from the front side of the orc before he could do anything with Adam. Bonk took a step back and snorted.

"Yeah, Bonk?" Shiv said, a slight hint of genuine viciousness entering his voice. "You touch him, we're gonna have an actual problem."

That was almost certainly the wrong thing to say to Bonk. "Oh, will we now?"

"If you go for him, I'm not fighting you," Shiv replied. "I'm just gonna stop time and leave. I don't care what you do next. I'm either going to keep ignoring you, or, if you really force my hand, I'll try to cripple you."

"You think you can?" Bonk asked, wiggling his brows.

Shiv shrugged. "Maybe, but I can tell you this much. I don't think you're a Chronomancer. I don't think you could catch up to me if I wanted to leave. Or if I just wanted to break your special orc memory skill. Whatever the fuck that is."

Once more, Bonk pouted. "You're a real bastard, you know that, Insul?"

"Oh no, Adam," Shiv said sarcastically. "They're stealing your lines."

The Gate Lord offered Shiv a rude gesture. The orc did the same.

"Solidarity," Bonk said, holding out a massive fist for Adam to bump.

Adam frowned, but did so ever so slowly.

The orc grinned.

Shiv rolled his arm and tightened his armor around himself. The healing had pushed a few pieces out of place. That was going to be a bit annoying to deal with. With the basilisk biomass integrated, it wasn't

entirely bone either, so he couldn't just reassemble his armor like before. He needed to move bits of flesh and bone out of the way. Sculpt it with one of his mana hydras. "So, how are things going on the other side? You got something for us?"

"Yes," Adam said. "A briefing. Also, Can Hu wants to come over."

Shiv frowned. He looked Bonk up and down. The orc wiggled his arms to make the corpse pieces rustle. "Yeah, maybe not a good idea."

"That's what I said," Adam agreed. "But it's insisting. Anyway, that's for later. Right now, I need to do a briefing."

"Right," Shiv said. "Briefing first. Well, Bonk, I guess you got lucky. You got to smack me around for a few minutes. Everyone else is going to have to wait."

"Oh, that's fine," Bonk said. He didn't look so playful anymore. Instead, there was an expression of genuine curiosity on his face. "I want to hear what we're up against. You're fun, and so, don't get me wrong. But I'm here for more than just you. I heard that Vicar Sullain is one of your targets."

"He is," Adam said. He studied the orc. "Why? What is he to you?"

"What is he to me?" The orc laughed. "Nemesis-Beloved. He thinks he's going to get away from me, but he's wrong. This time... I have a good feeling this time."

Shiv was surprised, but then he put a few things together. "Hey, Bonk, was he one of the few people you couldn't manage a fifth swing on?"

"Indeed," Bonk said, sounding more enthusiastic than displeased. "But soon," he knocked his cancerous club against his forehead, "Challenger willing, soon, he's going to taste that fifth swing. And we're going to figure out just how durable a Legendary Pathbearer really is. Regardless, we should have this little meeting down on the bridge. Also, it'll be useful to connect the Gate Lord to the Court Leviathan. That way, whatever he's saying can be broadcast to everyone present."

"Courtney can do that?" Shiv asked.

Bonk grinned. "Oh, the Court Leviathan can do a great many things. But I'll let Helix show you."

"And that sums up my report!" Adam's voice made the world tremble, echoing out from a set of massive lips growing on the underside of the Court Leviathan. The lips were then connected to a huge pair of lungs, and the air billowing out from the maw washed over the basilisks below. The large serpents seemed to enjoy the breeze, and slowly they shook their immense bodies as they fed on a steady supply of corpses and lapped at massive pails of water.

"With this, you should know the general situation we face, our adversaries, their overall composition, and more. Now, I will continue the briefing with your most senior members aboard the Leviathan, but I look forward to standing beside you as we drive back the rogue Necrotech scourge and liberate Blackedge from this unjust siege."

As Adam finished, there came echoing responses from all across the Tutorial.

"Thanks, Adam Arrow."

"Good to meet you, Adam Arrow."

"Sleep with one eye open, Adam Arrow."

Practically all three million orcs taunted Adam at once. More than a few of them did it imitating his voice. And they were pretty good at it as well.

Adam squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his jaw.

"I told you that shit was going to happen," Shiv whispered, leaning over to Adam. "I told you, but you didn't listen."

The Gate Lord scowled at him, but he turned his focus back on his task immediately. A set of dangling organs hung in front of him. There was a sort of speaker organ he yelled into for his voice to be carried out from the Court Leviathan. Presently, he stood at the very center of the bridge. The orcs massed nearby were True Heroes and High Masters. They regarded him with something between curiosity and barely restrained malice.

Yet no one acted on their impulse, for the Insul declared his scorn and special retribution against any orc that dared transgress against the person of Gate Lord Arrow. Even so, the atmosphere was tense, and Adam's instincts called for him to flee or loose a shot. He had never spent so long surrounded by what were most assuredly enemies. Yet they did nothing, and he did nothing. Instead, he treated them like a normal army, giving them a briefing about what was to come.

"Alright," Adam said. "So, those are the critical details. Does anyone have any questions?"

Almost immediately, every last orc in the room raised a hand.

Shiv narrowed his eyes at them. "Do any of you have actual questions pertaining to our tasks, or are you just going to ask Adam something to try and scare him?"

Approximately 90% of the orcs lowered their arms, and some of them scowled at Shiv. "Spoilsport," one complained.

Psychology 28 > 29

The Deathless just shook his head. "These felling orcs, man," he said, looking at Adam. "You can't let them smell your anxiety. You're making it worse."

"How am I supposed to stop them from smelling my anxiety?" Adam asked through clenched teeth. "Have you seen...? Oh, what am I saying? You're practically one of them."

Shiv rolled his eyes. The orcs chuckled.

Whisper raised his hand higher. Adam shook his head but pointed at Whisper. "Yes, you. Stealth orc."

"Ah, you remembered my capabilities. I am honored." Whisper offered Adam a mouthful of pointed teeth.

"Please don't be," Adam muttered. It really wasn't a compliment.

"From what I understand, you said that you provoked this Inquisitor Sijik into action."

"Correct," Adam said. "I sent him a taunting letter and I insinuated we still had the Animancy Core. He's likely dispatching additional forces toward Gate Theborn. And I suspect there is even a good chance he himself might be arriving as well. If we can capture him, he will offer us valuable intelligence and a bargaining card against the rogue forces of the Republic."

"Quite good. Quite good." Whisper fell silent for a moment as he digested that information. "Give me a moment. I wish to think on this. You asked for recommendations earlier."

"Yes. You have some?"

"An idea," Whisper said.

Helix, meanwhile, narrowed his eyes at Adam. He smacked his lips finally, and he let out a breath. "Ah. Your mother is Rose Van Erren. That explains your hair."

Adam's heart skipped a beat as he looked at the orc Biomancer. "How did you—"

"Tell her that Helix sends his regards. Also, tell her that she will not be so fortunate next time."

"You—" But before Adam could lose control of his temper, Shiv seized him by the shoulder and silenced him with a shake of the head.

"Don't feed their cruelty,"

Shiv's telepathy hammered against Adam. The young Gate Lord's expression quivered between the verge of fury and resigned disgust for the orcs. All around him were smiles, gleeful expressions that relished in the power they held over him. "They enjoy domination, and that means all forms of domination, Adam. You give them your pinky, they will rip off your head. They know I care about you, so they're going to squeeze you as hard as they can. But they know if they go for you, I'm going to hurt them in ways they won't recover from, or I'm just going to pretend that they're not here. You, though? They're going to feed off your misery however they can. Don't give them anything."

"It's a waste of effort, Insul," Helix replied. He pulled his spectacles off and began wiping them using his silk coat. "He can't resist. He's not like you. He doesn't know what we are. He refuses to see it." Slowly, Helix cracked a grin. "I know this because I've never actually met Rose Van Erren. Love Thief has. Me personally, no. You're very easily provoked, Gate Lord." Adam blinked as his face contorted. "Yes, yes, that is the expression I'd like to see. But it will only remain amusing for so long."

Several other orcs laughed. Shiv just let out a long sigh. "See what I mean? Don't feed the assholes."

"How do you put up with them?" Adam asked through clenched teeth.

"I mean, I let them kill me and teach me stuff, so usually there's not that much of a problem for me."

"Shiv, sometimes the things you say, I can only imagine in my most demented fever dreams."

"And that is why he is Insul and you are not," Helix said. "We understand why you came over, Gate Lord. But understand this yourself: We do not follow you. You gave us this briefing, but we are the Insul's to guide into the fray. You are but an interesting victim to us right now. An interesting victim protected by the Insul. And unfortunately, he cares too much for you. And you reek of too much nervousness. You wish to gain our measure? To see if you can lead us?"

"We are not to be led by the likes of you," Bonk said with a laugh. "It won't work. The details were nice, though. Your oration is pretty good. Good Rhetoric Skill."

Adam just glared at the orcs.

Shiv sneered as well. "And this is them trying to drive a wedge between us or something because I'm the Insul, while you're the guy actually trying to organize this war."

"Ah," Adam said wearily. "I suspected, but—"

"It's usually the most psychotic thing you suspect with these guys." Shiv sighed. "When they're not being terrifyingly charming, that is."

"I have a suggestion, Gate Lord," Whisper finally said. The orcs turned to regard Whisper. More than a few let out grunts of annoyance and distaste.

"Great," Helix sneered. "Now the child stands to speak. Barely any reincarnations and he seeks to make himself a presence."

Whisper ignored the Biomancer's snide comment and continued. "I do not believe we need that great a concentration of force to resolve the Inquisitor's expeditionary assets. You've told me about them. Even with additional forces, they are probably moving apart from the bulk of their army, moving fast from what you described."

"Yes," Adam said slowly.

"Then, I would like to volunteer. A small group should suffice here to capture essential personnel. That should consist of you, I, a few more Stealth Heroes, and some Psychomancers. The rest of the force can be devastated with ease thereafter. And without much sacrifice on our part, either. We have the Masters and Heroes. They can be crushed easily."

"Crushed or turned against the Necrotechs," Bookworm mused. "We should take some of these Inquisitors alive. And use them as sacrificial soldiers. You said the Vicar already suspects them. Then let us exploit that. We have the Psychomancers for this act of deception. It will be a most interesting false flag to engineer."

At once, the orcs broke into discussions of their own about how to most optimally approach this without taking any losses whatsoever, and Adam's mouth opened slightly.

Shiv leaned closer to him. "I think the trick with them is letting them improvise a bit. They don't have discipline or inexperience issues. I think that's the only thing keeping some of them from fighting each other all the time. Because orcs got this cliché warfare thing going on."

"Uh-huh," Adam breathed. "Shiv."

"Yeah?"

"Can we trust them?"

"Hah! Fuck no. But we can use them. Just like they're definitely going to use us. They're already using me to make themselves System-favored and level faster anyway."

Adam did a double-take. "What? I—" He grimaced. "I should have seen that coming."

"Maybe. But still, we can use that too. How many orc Heroes do you think it'll take to kill a Legendary Mage?"

“A lot?” Adam ventured. “Maybe we have enough.”

“Yeah. But it’s more than that. They managed to get my Biomancy to Heroic over the past day and a half. They might be using me to level. But I’m using them as well. We just need to make sure they’re being set loose on the right people. And kept away from everyone else.”

“Like Blackedge.”

Shiv nodded. “Like Blackedge.”

Adam looked at the orcs and breathed out. “Well. Beggars cannot be choosers. Let us see how these orcs arrange themselves.”

“Don’t worry, Gate Lord,” Bonk said, leaning down to place a large hand on Adam’s back. “We’ll do just fine. We’ll make sure your Inquisitor friend is taken alive. But everyone else... I hope you’re not so attached to their fates. Because you can’t save them from us. You can’t save them from anything we do.”

Adam shuddered.

Shiv glared. “Bonk. Stop leveling your Intimidation on Adam.”

“But his fear is funny?”

“Yeah. I know. And he’s mine to scare. Not yours. Find your own asshole.”

Adam scowled at Shiv. “Thanks, bastard.”

“Bastard is right,” Bonk said, nodding with Adam. “Solidarity.”

“And don’t use him to level your Charm Skill either,” Shiv chided.

Chapter 140 (I) Predators [I]

[Mana Signature Recognized - Undoing Spell Seals]

Adept-Captain Harraman Sijik entered the Inquisition at age 40 during the year 10,993 Ur-Twilight Novembian 12. He distinguished himself at the Battle Line Cedar, holding his position against the Brighamites in the name of the Ascendants, even as other teams retreated and the general order to retreat was delivered.

It was also here that he finally reached Master-Tier for both Pyromancy and Physicality, unleashing an avalanche of ash that briefly stalled the Brighamites, protecting the battleline long enough to stabilize and guarding the retreat of the Republic’s forces.

However, this came at the cost of his entire team. Several of whom exhibited obsidian-based wounds and severe ash-burns inflicted upon their lungs and body. Further examinations conducted by Diviners and Investigators confirmed that his team tried to escape as well, only to be cut down by Sijik during a moment of zeal.

Before this bit of information could slip out to the public, it was contained by the Inquisition, and Sijik was transferred from the Republic's Unified Forces to the custody of the Inquisition after he recovered from his injuries. There, he was evaluated and examined—and was deemed suitable for the role of Acolyte. From there, due to his zeal and unfettered nature, he was deployed in high-risk and morally complex problem areas, serving under Inquisitors Sikoya, Michaels, Herald, Nebanbearer, and two more who have since been struck from the record.

Though his field service was exemplary, his personal conduct and personality were noted to be a pain point. Common after-action reviews of Inquisitor Sijik commended his faith, willingness toward sacrifice, and general fervor even in situations of extreme danger. However, they also noted his extreme paranoia, overuse of force, and excessive reliance on the most brutal and direct methods for information gathering.

Nonetheless, per the recommendation of Legend-Inquisitor Karennian, he was elevated to full Inquisitor and bestowed with the full authority of the Ascendants. However, the Legend-Inquisitor's recommendation came with that caveat that Sijik was to never operate alone, for in her words: "Sijik is a warhound and weapon. He will not turn away. But all flesh is tainted to his teeth, and his first reaction is to bite and taste blood. He cares not for apology if the blood is proven pure thereafter, only that the foul have been gnashed and butchered. A gentle hand is required for a hound. And a hound is required for gentle hands..."

-Profile: Master-Inquisitor Harraman Sijik

Orcs were creatures of cunning and initiative when it came to raids.

Adam told them the details of what was to come, what enemies they had to face, and what the objectives were. The orcs, in turn, immediately started organizing themselves into interest groups based on adversary and mission type.

Special interest needed to be placed upon the adversary. Helix, for once, cared nothing about the Necrotechs. But he did have a special kind of loathing directed toward the First Blood. He was willing to serve and support Shiv for the coming Blackedge liberation mission, but his personal preferences were stated clearly and simply.

“I wish to inflict a genocide upon the Bloodspawn for debasing my craft with their incompetence,” Helix declared. Several other orcs called out in accord, sharing a similar desire, while most remained indifferent.

Comparatively, Bonk had eyes mainly for Sullain and all but begged Shiv for first-hitter’s privilege if they happened to encounter the Legendary Pathbearer.

Then, in between were orcs like Whisper. He ran counter to most orcs in that he didn’t have a favored adversary. Rather, he desired to partake in certain operations. Operations that involved high precision, stealth, and complex environments. Mortar, despite disliking Whisper, also fell into this category—and to Shiv’s surprise, they immediately started sharing notes about these details.

This was where the orcs’ collective drive toward self-discipline made itself known. Shiv knew humans, goblins, and even elves generally leaned toward the path of least resistance. Not so with the orcs. They preferred resistance, and they would do anything to find the most interesting struggles and battles. So much so that they would even work against their natural inclination to be solitary predators and force themselves to collaborate with one another to see things come to fruition.

Adam, Shiv, and Uva watched on in rapt curiosity as the orcs composed themselves into symposiums after the briefing concluded. Most of them departed the Court Levaithan and descended to the camps. And these symposiums were not led by their Heroes or Masters either. In fact, the Skill Tiers mattered little in these matters. The ones who guided these symposiums were the orcs who had the highest cycle ratios: Years lived per reincarnation cycle.

It was a strange kind of pseudo-seniority that guided the orcs, but Shiv found it to be a strangely brilliant structure. It wasn't quite a gerontocracy, in which the eldest had the most say. It wasn't just a tyranny of brute force—as if the orcs were only brute force. It was a reign of the most efficient, guided by the best survivors and sorted among the interest areas.

And aside from formally declared duels or challenges, the orcs largely kept themselves clean from violence. Instead, they all began collective brainstorming about strategies and potential risks for the challenges ahead. They took things so seriously that practically all orcs had a notebook in their hands that they filled with details and questions. These were discussed, optimized, and then eventually collected by the orc Maestros: said orcs with the best cycle-ratios and the ones who most often served in leadership roles.

The Maestros then further convened among themselves until a core group remained at the end. Then, finally, a unified document was delivered to Adam approximately eight hours after his speech. The document was about a thousand pages thick, separated into two theaters.

The first was listed as the Surface Front, and it itself was split into campaigns against the Inquisition and the Necrotechs. The second was focused entirely on suppressing and crippling the First Blood. Adam speed-read through the pages, and with each flip of the page, his expression grew paler, and his eyes grew wider.

As he closed the orcs' strategic document, he looked at Shiv and let out a shuddering breath. "Broken Moon. They're bloody strategists too. The things in here... I don't have this experience. The maps they've drawn and the plans they have are complex to the extreme."

"Probably doing it deliberately just to shake you," Shiv said over their link with a grunt. But from what he managed to glean from the orcs' strategic proposals, he had to agree with Adam. The orcs were

smart and experienced monsters. Exactly what Blackedge and the gate might need. But that led to a new problem afterward: How the hells was Shiv going to contain them when this was done?

Shiv, Uva, and Adam had their personal meeting in the captain's quarters. The room had a desk put back in place, but aside from that, it was mostly a wide chamber of pale bone. And though the walls were supposedly soundproofed, and the door was fused shut, the team still conducted their conversation telepathically.

Because the Court Leviathan's crew was mostly orcs now. And Adam likely wasn't the only one with Heroic Awareness aboard.

"It's not just their strategies. They've listed probable outcomes. They've wargamed battles together—casualty estimates and what it might take to overcome each enemy force. Furthermore, they even have a section on spies. Namely, that orcs have no issue betraying each other, and our plans must remain dynamic because nonaffiliated orcs will betray our strategy to another faction if the fighting starts going too well, just to make the war last a while longer."

Uva's face twisted in an expression of quiet exhaustion at hearing that. "Perhaps it would have been better if I just asked the Dreamtaker to summon—"

"No," Adam interrupted her, his gaze wild with dread. "These orcs give me the shivers, but at least I know how to kill them. At least they can be killed normally. I don't ever want to see an Outsider again for the rest of my life, if I can help it. Bloody godsdamned nightmares." He let out a sigh while Shiv and Uva shared a look.

The Recollector had left scars on Adam. That much was obvious to Shiv. The damned thing left marks on Shiv too, in that he hated Outsiders and would try to kill them as soon as he laid eyes on them, but he felt the same way about most vampires.

He was increasingly feeling more than a little different about the orcs. And not just because of their Social Skills working on him.

"I don't think we should treat the orcs like an army," Shiv said. "It's not that useful, and they don't really do centralized commands or have a top-heavy society."

Adam regarded him and frowned. "Explain."

"So, in all the time I spent with the orcs, I've noticed a few things. The first is that they don't really order each other around. There's a lot of verbal jabbing. Some spontaneous murders. But I don't think they care about status as much as we do. Just experiences and struggles."

"Right," Adam said, nodding along.

"They also don't have human morale issues. They want to fight. They're going to fight. We gave them a direction, so that's what's going to happen. But aside from a general recommendation and some basic rules..." Shiv shrugged. "I don't think it's that useful. I... I'm thinking of them like an army of well-educated mes, actually."

That immediately made Adam's face twist in horror. "Oh, sweet gods."

“Not quite the same,” Uva said. “They’re more focused and less chaotic than you are.”

“Ouch,” Shiv replied.

“It’s not an explicit criticism,” Uva said, frowning. “I suspect this proposal they have offered is so detailed and overwhelming due to them trying to affect Adam emotionally. Make him feel doubt and inferior. I have observed their interactions with each other as well, and there is an undercurrent of volatility that is being held back.”

“What do you mean?” Adam asked.

“I mean, I suspect that a great deal of this is a bit of a show so they can get some collective amusement out of bullying you,” Uva said. “But they aren’t nearly as disciplined and well-structured as they portray. I would say forty percent of the orcs I’ve slipped my strings into already have plans to murder ten or so of their brethren soon if we don’t give them someone else to hurt.” Her expression turned curious. “They’re also starving and miserable underneath, and getting more so with every passing moment.”

“Truly?” Adam said. Shiv leaned in as well.

Uva continued relaying her findings. “They feed off harm and cruelty, and it builds each day. It’s like hunger for them. Or thirst. Something they will not be able to resist for overlong. It is only mental at first, but it will wither them physically, and soon. I think the orcs do have a general crippling weakness—starvation. They must in-fight or commit to brutality if they wish to stay sane and survive. And that might be our greatest defense against them as well. They’re predators. They need a constant stream of prey to be fed and to stay their hand from cruelty. But it will never last. However, if we can contain them, they will turn on each other. This I am almost certain of.”

“Right. But they gotta be contained for that to happen.” Shiv paused. “Or we can also keep them constantly fed.”

“How—Oh.” Adam realized what Shiv was talking about. “Well. Your willingness to let these monsters abuse you for Toughness levels has finally proven more useful than mad.”

“Probably also why the Challenger made me Insul,” Shiv added. “I’m renewable pain-food too.”

The Deathless grinned. Both Uva and Adam just stared at him like he was insane.

The latter let out a breath. “Right. Well. We need to deal with the expeditionary force first. I agree with Whisper from what I read of their proposal. We don’t need a large force to defeat the few thousand they are sending. We should ambush and capture their strongest Pathbearers with our Stealth-focused forces first, then crush the rest with an overwhelming display of power.” Adam’s lip curled. “The orcs also promised that they will try to leave some forces alive so that their Psychomancers can mentally break and repurpose the Inquisitors into attacking the Necrotech lines.”

Uva considered that for a moment. “They will do no such thing without my supervision. They cannot be trusted with that much subtle intelligence. I also have questions relating to its efficacy.”

“Not the morality?” Adam deadpanned.

“No,” Uva replied without getting the joke. “The orcs have potent Psychomancers among them. But perhaps only five of them are Heroic-Tier Psychomancers, and only two have a non-fused Skill Evolution.

Of the two, one seems to be focused on inducing mass psychosis. The other strikes me as a psionic wound-maker of some fashion.”

“But don’t they still have a few hundred Master-Tier Psychomancers?” Shiv asked.

“They do. But consider how many minds I can control at once. Can I mentally direct an army?”

Shiv thought about that. “Well. You can kind of nudge them in place.”

“Correct. My Skill Evolution allows me to possess and direct someone on a deep and near-total level—perhaps a few dozen if my Parallel Thinking is drastically improved and I level my Psychomancy more. But that is not an army. And we will be facing adversaries with strong Magical Resistance and additional defenses on top of that. They will not be so easy to reshape. The orcs are being over-optimistic at best. We will not be able to field a reliable army of mind-slaves without a Legendary Psychomancer, which we don’t have. Even if we did, I suspect it would take much more time than we have.”

“What about just deploying one or two of their best?” Shiv asked.

“No, that just doesn’t make sense. Even Heroes generally don’t attack an army alone.”

Shiv did a double-take. “They don’t? Then what the hells were we doing against the Vultegs two days ago?”

“Being desperate idiots instead of Heroes,” Adam replied flatly.

Shiv grinned. “Worked out for us.”

“Yes, you Deathless bastard. Because only one of us was in true danger,” Adam sneered.

“You’re cute when you’re frustrated,” Shiv taunted. He reached out to pinch Adam’s cheek, and the Gate Lord smacked his hand aside.

“Get your hand away from me, you oversized idiot.”

“You let Bonk squeeze your cheek,” Shiv complained. “Why don’t I get to? This is bullshit.”

“I didn’t let that bastard do anything. He just pinched me out of nowhere.”

“Yeah. I think he likes you, Adam. I think he wants to be your friend.”

“He needs to stay the fuck away from—”

“Boys,” Uva said, squinting at the two of them. “Focus. Please.”

Shiv nodded in agreement. And tried to pinch Adam with a stream of Vitae anyway. The Gate Lord dodged back and laughed. "I knew you were going to do that!"

"You won't be able to avoid me forever, Arrow." Shiv chuckled. "I will infantilize you like the orcs do someday soon."

"Uva," Adam said, pointing at Shiv. "Reach into his mind. The orcs are making him into an even bigger bastard than before. Shut him down and wake him up again. Maybe that'll fix him."

The Umbral's annoyed expression collapsed into one of exasperated amusement. "There is just something about leaving you two next to each other that turns you into children, isn't there?"

"Yeah," Shiv said. "I want my turn to bully Adam. The orcs had theirs."

Adam formed a Hydrokinetic limb with a middle finger extended. It pressed against Shiv's face, and the Deathless pretended it wasn't there at all.

Chapter 140 (II) Predators [I]

"But back to the matter at hand," Adam said. "The expeditionary force might be the simplest problem to solve, but we'll need to hit them soon, or they'll be in the vicinity of Gate Arrow."

“Gate what?” Shiv said.

“Yes,” Uva said, staring at Adam. “Gate what?”

“Gate Arrow,” Adam replied, squaring his shoulders.

“Since when, asshole?” Shiv asked sweetly. “Uva, did you agree that the gate should be called Gate Arrow?”

“No,” Uva replied, staring at Adam without ever blinking. “There has been no discussion pertaining to the name of the gate. Of this, I am sure.”

Adam shuffled awkwardly. “Well, I’m using it as a placeholder for now.”

“In place of what?” Shiv asked. “Because I just called it the gate. And that worked fine for me.”

“Well, if we take another gate, for instance—” Adam began.

“What other gate? Do you think I can just go out and take another gate? We want to save Blackedge, not go on a conquest. And why aren’t we calling this Gate Shiv?”

“Are you the Gate Lord?” Adam asked. “Did you kill the Recollector?”

“No, I just did most of the fighting, suffering, and struggling,” Shiv replied, his eyelid twitching. “It was what one would call a ‘group effort,’ Adam. But I see your point. You are the Gate Lord. Uva. We can call the gate Gate Arrow. So long as Adam calls me grandma.”

Adam's jaw dropped. “What?”

“I gave birth to your mom, dumbshit.”

Uva closed her eyes and pressed her lips together tightly.

Adam shoved a finger in Shiv's face. “I'm not calling you grandma. The very idea is... is... repulsive and wrong. And you didn't give birth to my mother! Stop claiming that. It's disgusting!”

“Well, I'm not calling it Gate Arrow. How about Gate Asshole?”

“How about we focus and deal with—” Uva frowned as Shiv and Adam continued arguing. A sigh escaped her. “Perhaps we are no better than the orcs. Maybe even worse.”

“What do you call the tower, then?” Shiv asked, shoving a finger at Adam in turn. “You got a name for it yet? Maybe Adam's Actual Penis?”

“Oh, I thought of that, Shiv, but I realized that I should reserve that title for a structure far grander and more imposing,” Adam sneered.

“It would also be inside you,” Uva commented. Both Shiv and Adam paused to look at her. “If he named the tower based on his genitals. Because it would be inside the gate named after himself, you see.”

Adam cringed in disgust. Shiv placed his hands on his knees and laughed. “Yeah. Yeah, let’s do that. I can accept that. Gate Arrow it is. So long as—”

“No,” Adam said aloud. “We can discuss the name of the gate later. Just let it go.”

“I’m never forgetting this shit,” Shiv sneered at Adam. There was almost lust in his breath from how much he relished the awkwardness of this moment. “Never.”

“You best forget it,” Adam shot back, jabbing at Shiv again. “Or I’ll name it Gate Shiv after all. And guess who Adam’s Actual Penis—”

Adam choked before he could finish the threat. Shiv considered it for a moment and frowned.

Uva, however, looked between them, and her face developed into a faint smile. “That’s not exactly the dynamic I’ve imagined, but I can accept that.”

“What?”

“What?”

Uva didn't elaborate. “Regardless. Now that we've had our moment of levity, we should figure out our most essential matters. First: how we are to move the orcs through the gate without them running into any of the people. Second, how they will be used.”

“I think the First Blood is simple,” Shiv said. “We just let as many orcs out of the Abyssal Gate as we want. Let them do whatever they want on First Blood territory. They can maraud and keep ruining the vampires' lives. Easy for us.”

“And can we be sure that the orcs will only raid the vampires?” Uva asked Shiv as she fixed him with a piercing stare. “Ur-Abathur is the city closest to the Abyssal Gateway, but what will be stopping them from just going somewhere else?”

The Deathless considered that for a beat. “Uh...”

“Because I can see the orcs ‘happening’ upon villages like those of your little vampire friend in the wilderness. I can see them overindulging. They will be destructive no matter what. But I want them channeled and focused. And I will not have any of my Sisters or Mothers go missing mysteriously while on patrol.”

“Right. So. Supervision.” Adam nodded. “We need someone to supervise and make sure they come back from specific missions in time and don't wander. Maybe do rotations?”

Uva frowned. “Maybe just someone to make sure they don't cross over into our territory. Or anywhere near Weave for that matter.”

“I can try to threaten them some more,” Shiv said.

“You can't punish millions of orcs, Shiv,” Uva replied. “Direct threats are not going to be so useful either. Tyranny just makes one hide their actions. We need to offer incentives to guide their behavior.”

“Yeah, but I don't think we're going to be better than them at that.” Shiv shook his head. “They read us more easily than we read them. I don't think that's a struggle that's good for us. It's why I've been trying to keep them focused on me.”

“We're likely going to need to think about the Abyssal Theater more,” Adam said. “But the surface should be more straightforward. We need the Necrotechs to be strained. Overwhelmed. I need their forces sapped and Sullain to be distracted as well. Getting through their fortifications will take more than a few orcs, and even the gray-skins expect it to take upward of a million casualties if they wish to open a path to Blackedge and hold Sullain's focus.”

“You're not worried about them spreading across the surface?” Uva asked.

“No,” Shiv answered. “There really isn't much nearby but the Necrotechs. I guess they can try running across the Republic to throw themselves at the Lords of random towns or cities, or pick a fight with the giant monsters that live in the Pacific, but Sullain's right there. And they want to be in my graces. They want to be favored.”

“So this should have minimal risk,” Adam said. “What I don’t want to do is this suggestion.” Adam flipped the pages of the orc’s battle proposals to a graph depicting a camp being built outside the Surface Gateway.

“Why not?” Shiv asked with narrowed eyes. “Looks good to me. It lets them move around easier up top—lets them guard our Surface Gateway on the outside too.”

“It also lets them conduct a potential pincer on the gate if anything happens.” Adam closed the document for emphasis. “They can squeeze us from two directions if they manage to amass enough forces. No. We will have the gateways manned by the Arachnae Order or even dimensionals. Never orcs.”

“Alright. But how are we going to move them from place to place?” Shiv asked. “I know we got a bunker built over the Tutorial Gateway. We can’t just have them moved in small groups. It’ll take days for them to get anywhere.”

“Teleportation anchors,” Adam answered. “We build massive teleportation anchors over all the gateways. It’s... not efficient. Not for movement or mana. But we will be able to teleport the orcs across the insides of the gate between these anchors. Maybe a few hundred at a time.”

Shiv remembered how hard Bonk hit him. “You know that’s not going to be enough to hold a good number of them if they don’t feel like it, right?”

“Right. So we need to supervise the Heroes personally.”

"I do," Shiv corrected. He tried to imagine leaving Uva and Adam alone with the orc Heroes. He didn't want to. "I'll be there when the orc Heroes need to move."

"Wise," Uva said.

"We will test this strategy out soon," Adam said. "We'll move you, Uva, the orc Stealth and interception forces over to the Surface Gate. Then, we move on Sijik and his elite Inquisitors while the orcs break the rest of the expeditionary force. After that..." Adam pressed his lips together. "After that, we go in two directions. I want skirmishers to go after the rest of the Inquisition—and Stormhalt. I want the City Lord alive for questioning. But the bulk of the orcs will be dedicated to pushing the Necrotechs back and keeping Sullain at bay. Between them and my father, we should get an opening to start relieving Blackedge."

"Alright. I'll go wrangle the orcs first," Shiv said. "See if I can add a few more incentives before we leave."

"Ah," Adam said, his eyes widening. "On that note, Can Hu says its functions seem to be improving after your treatment. It managed to gain a Toughness level from falling."

"Really?" Shiv grinned. "That's pretty good, no? Does that mean it's going to be fixed with some more levels?"

"Valor is uncertain," Adam continued. "Can Hu still retains severe soul damage, but it isn't nearly as broken as it was before. On that note, the two are currently in the upper levels of the gateway containment bunker."

“Yeah, about that, can we name the bunker something like Adam’s—”

“Don’t start with me again,” Adam cut him off. “Can Hu wants to start up a factory inside your cape. And it will be able to now since you have a Category One dimension there. I’m thinking that Valor, Uva, and some of the orcs can probably use that as a transportation point as well. The first project we should prioritize is building a teleportation anchor inside your cape as well.”

And that gave Shiv ideas. “Wait. Can you teleport outside of a gate?”

“You can. It just takes a great deal of mana, which... the core might be able to provide? I’m not sure. I haven’t had enough time to discover its limits.”

“So, if it can, why don’t I just go around dropping orcs off across combat zones?”

Adam’s mouth opened, but then he closed it shortly thereafter. “Huh. That... We’re dealing with multiple layers of Dimensionality, but it is possible. Theoretically. That might even be efficient. Though it could put the dimension at risk. We can discuss this with Can Hu and Valor soon. I’m sure they’ll have more insights. And maybe they’ll be done with my rapier soon too.”

Shiv remembered Adam still had equipment that needed reforging. “Hells. I forgot about that. Let’s take a look. I wanna see just what kind of weapon gets made from my kukri, your rapier, and Confriga’s sword.”

Equipment Obtained: [Rapier of the Myriad Selves]

Tier: Heroic

Condition: Perfect

Composition: Stellarite; Bone Adamantine; Arcanite

Enchantments > User-Duplication; Pyromancy 70; Self-Sharpening; Self-Mending; Self-Shaping; Master Speed Amplification; Master Temporal Warding; Spatial Warding; Conduit of Dawn; Chrono-Clone Anchoring; Master Magic Amplification

Adam held his new rapier high and grinned at his reflection. It was a length of adamantine, edged with prismatic arcanite that itself was finally edged with golden mana. Shiv could sense a dense infusion of Chronomancy within the blade, and he felt a slight twinge of envy at how good the weapon was.

Nearby, Can Hu looked better than ever before. The Penitent's joints still squeaked when it moved, but not nearly as loudly as before. The cracks on its chassis were fading as well.

"This reforging went smoother than anticipated," Can Hu said, gesturing at the blade. "Both broken weapons shared many similar enchantments, and the mana melded easily. The same case stands true for the material as well. Stellarite called to stellarite, with only the arcanite and bone adamantine hilt proving a challenge to shape."

“Remarkable,” Adam breathed. He swung his blade through the air, and it left a trail of Chronomancy in its wake. He flourished. The blade flashed. A dozen more Adams appeared around him, each sharing his expression. However, rather than just being like the old clones, Adam’s new clones were infused with a hint of Chronomancy. And it wasn’t just Shiv that noticed. Adam was eyeing his clones as well, and before they vanished, he waved his blade—and he blinked into a clone’s place, removing them entirely.

Shiv narrowed his eyes as he watched the Chronomancy mana within the clone shatter outright from the Chrono-Clone Anchoring transition. It was a bit like Shiv’s Chrono-Anchored Strike, but more fragile-feeling. Fainter.

“Huh,” Adam said, looking at himself. His blade’s golden glow grew brighter and brighter. “This seems—” He blinked back to where he was before. “—useful.” Adam looked around and frowned. “I... shifted back to where I was.”

“You did,” Shiv said. “Seems to be a bit different from my anchored strike. Temporary. There’s Chronomancy in all your clones, but you remove them by jumping to them, and the blade resets you back to your original position after a while anyway.”

Adam regarded the rapier again, but then nodded. “Not bad. Might even be better for me.”

“I am glad it pleases you,” Can Hu said. “Now. I have expended the remainder of the former Gate Lord’s arcanite toward the forging of the crystalline armor. Its merging has proven effective as well.”

The Penitent staggered over to a nearby stand and pulled off its cover. Underneath was a set of prismatic armor that resembled glass in terms of texture. Most importantly, Shiv had a slightly hard time focusing on the armor. As if it was pushing away his senses somehow.

Uva, meanwhile, had little issue walking right up and examining it.

Equipment Obtained: [Veil of the Silent Caster]

Tier: Heroic

Condition: Perfect

Composition: Arcanite; Focus Crystal

Enchantments > Heroic Magic Amplification; Temporal Warding; Spatial Warding; Invisibility; Awareness Warding; Lagged Spells; Illusory Mana Field; Spell Priming; Self-Repairing

“I suspect the original wearer of this armor might have been more Shadow than Mage,” Uva commented.

Shiv and Adam stared at the armor beside her. Sweat beaded on Adam’s brow as he forced himself to look at the armor. “Shit,” Shiv breathed. “I don’t know what half of these enchantments do, but it’s kind of hard to focus on the armor.”

“What the hells is Awareness Warding?” Adam groaned. “Trying to look at this thing makes me feel ill.”

“I am not certain,” Uva said. She pressed her hand against the armor and then slipped one of her mana strands into it thereafter. “But I intend to find out very soon.”

“Alright, then,” Shiv said. “I think it's time for us to get ready for a field test.”

“Pathbearer Shiv,” Can Hu said. “I have a request—”

“Get in the cape,” Shiv said, not wasting time. “You too, Valor. I wanna see how our new toys work in a high-stress situation.”

“Our?” Adam asked.

Shiv converted his own bone armor into a spellpattern rendering with a flash of crimson mana. Adam’s eyes widened as Shiv grinned at him. “Yeah. Our. I got some biomass to assimilate.” Then, he reached into his cape and pulled out a dead basilisk’s venom gland—a gland he fed to one of his mana hydras before fusing that with his armor’s spell pattern. “Maybe more than some.”