

## Path of the Deathless (Book 2 Completed)

### - 15 (I) Rematch

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*No, no, no, this is not acceptable. I have delivered what you asked, what I was contracted for. I have fulfilled the conditions of my Quest, while you kept none of your promises! You promised that there would be a secure extraction, that I would teleport there, and that you would take the Young Lord off of me and handle the rest. I would receive payment there—the other half of what was promised. Instead, I arrive to find everyone dead, and rogue Necrotechs waiting in Ambush!*

*I took grave wounds to escape with my life and preserve the Young Lord. So, I'm going to ask you again: Where... where... where is my payment? Where is my promised safe extraction point? We had an agreement. You are bound to the conditions of this Quest as well.*

*You understand the consequences of failing the Quest, of breaking an agreed-upon contract. Do you want to fail? Do you want to feel your Path break and sunder inside you, irrevocably damaging some of your skills? Is that what you want?*

*No? Then get me the fuck out of here!*

*I'm moving deeper into the Abyss. I don't want to do this, but I have to, because there is no way out. The upper levels are crawling with Vicar Sullain's heretics. They are throwing everything they have at Blackedge, but the battle lines are stabilizing. Roland Arrow, that... monster is matching the vicar blow for blow, hour after hour. I can hear them down here. The world is shaking, and I have to continue fleeing with his son in tow.*

*System help me if he defeats Sullain like he did the last time and gets a Diviner to track me. I am not fighting Roland felling Arrow for your vanity.*

*You get someone to come and find me. Get your Jump Mages and pull me out of this place. Pull me out of this place, before your precious Young Lord dies! And then... Ah, if Roland Arrow gets me, I'll tell him everything before he finishes me. I'll tell him who you are, and how you—*

*What was that? Come out. Show yourself. Show—*

-Communication between “Corvus” and an unknown party as overheard by a Weaveress Shadow Cell

15 (I)

Rematch

Shiv’s knuckles hammered into the relative softness of the raven-helmed stranger’s throat, and they gagged from the blow. He sensed the softness of their body—the parts that weren’t covered by armor, and he snarled in vicious triumph.

*Looks like you should have spent some more time improving your Toughness and not relied so much on that armor, Shiv sneered internally. My skin’s thicker than yours now.*

But where Shiv had a minor advantage with his Adept-Tier Diamond Shell, his Reflexes were still pathetic compared to the raven. In an instant, Shiv felt deep gashes open up along his wrists, waist, thigh, and near his groin. The Deathless rasped and fought back cries of pain as he drove his thumb into the raven’s Adam’s apple.

*Yup. Definitely male.*

The assassin gagged once again and stabbed at Shiv’s side. Each stab broke skin but chipped against the dense tissues below. The best thing about Diamond Shell was that it made *every bit* of Shiv’s body uniform in terms of hardness. That meant even nightglass needed to fight through every inch of flesh it pierced. Shiv was bleeding from practically everywhere, but the wounds weren’t deep enough to be fatal.

The raven-helmed stranger realized that as well. That’s why he changed his tactic.

With a surge of terrifying strength, he palmed Shiv off his body and sent the Deathless tumbling into the air. Shiv went flying—but drove his mana field against the raven in response. The raven let out another ragged cry—and Shiv felt something wrong with his Magical Resistance.

*It feels... pretty cracked already. Like it just barely healed from someone smashing it over and over...*

The raven was magically hurt bad enough that they couldn’t press the attack. As Shiv slammed back down the bridge, he cracked the stones beneath. He rose to his feet and took in his enemy properly for the first time.

Across from him, the assassin was bleeding too. But not from any of the wounds Shiv gave him. The raven’s left arm dangled like a deboned limb, and a deep cut ran along his left calf. His armor was dented, burned, and deformed. Each breath he took came with a deep wheeze.

*Yeah, this bastard's gone through hell. But who did this to him? And why is he here?* Such were the questions on Shiv's mind as he continued trying to break his enemy's remaining resistance with his Biomancy while advancing on them. His mana field tensed hard like the magical muscle as Shiv focused. A crimson spell pattern formed between both his hands as he pressed them together. With every bit of effort, more of the raven's compromised Magical Resistance cracked, and the assassin jerked and howled.

"E-enough!" Shiv didn't even see the raven hit him. Even after all the levels his Reflexes got, he wasn't fast enough. Shiv's focus broke, and his spell died. A heavy bruise lined his lower stomach as he found himself launched off the bridge, the raven-helmed stranger tumbling in tow.

Not even a second into the fall, the raven-helmed stranger transformed into a mess of black feathers. Shiv realized the assassin's plan of escape. However, Shiv could still feel his biology, still feel the enemy's presence with his mana field, and so he smashed his Biomancy into him again, striking wild and hard. The raven cried out. Even though Shiv couldn't crack through his Magical Resistance fully, it was enough to shake the raven's focus.

The stranger reformed just in time for Shiv to punch him in the face twice. Shiv could feel his Diamond-Shelled fists slamming and cracking parts of his enemy's helmet. He wasn't strong enough to deliver true harm this way—and Shiv knew it. It was just really hard to hit someone's throat while free-falling. Still, the impacts distracted the raven long enough for Shiv to do something else.

Shiv twisted his body, gripping the raven by the waist, and between their two combined might they slammed into the edge bridge below and then bounced off the side again. Once more, they were in free fall, and despite feeling like someone had dropped a wall on him, Shiv was still combat-capable. The raven-helmed stranger, however, was gasping and wheezing. Every impact made his wounds worse, made him suffer more.

*I can actually win this,* Shiv realized. *He's broken and hurt. And I don't care if I die. I can win this.*

**Grappling Proficiency > 26**

**Striking Proficiency > 15**

He secured an arm around the raven-helmed stranger's neck as they plunged further. He pressed his back hard against his foe and saw a wide-open walkway fast approaching. They crashed into it, and several Umbrals let out a unified cry of shock and fear. They backed away and a Weaveress ran up behind them, pulling them behind her, shielding them from harm.

Shiv squeezed his arms as hard as he could, trying to constrict the raven's breathing. However, his enemy simply stood up, bearing his weight with contemptuous ease. His Physicality was still far superior to Shiv's. So, he adapted. He stomped his foot into the bleeding wound on his right calf and heard the man cry out in misery. Shiv did it again, and the raven dropped. Shiv felt the blood leaking from the raven-helmed stranger seep through his own leg as he secured a rear-naked choke.

"You bastard!" the raven-helmed stranger choked. "Why can't you just... *die*?" With a staggering burst of strength, the raven buried his fingers into the ground and launched both of them off the walkway. Shiv tried to hold on, but suddenly the raven was a blur of motion. The stranger twisted. Two elbows cracked into Shiv's cheek and then his nose. Shiv's head snapped back, and he snarled in frustration more than pain. His nose was bleeding but not broken. However, the momentum of the fight had shifted in the raven's favor.

The air around him blurred as he felt his fall suddenly accelerate. The raven-helmed stranger clapped Shiv on the side of his head—his balance collapsed as sirens went off in his ears. The raven was on top of him now, stolen nightglass blade raised high to stab Shiv—but they crashed into another surface, sending them bouncing across what felt like a smooth, rolling texture. Shiv let out a grunt as his back cracked and dented against what felt like metal. He looked behind him and saw a group of Umbrals in what looked like carriage seats staring at him. There were even a few children. Beneath him, a beastly moan sounded. They were on one of those pancake things he saw flying through the air earlier, and it let out something that sounded like a cow's moo.

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Shiv didn't have time to appreciate that, though. Not when the raven-helmed stranger jabbed two thumbs in his eyes. Shiv tried to stop them—caught him by the wrists, but he was still not strong enough.

To the raven's mutual displeasure, he wasn't strong enough either. His fingers pressed hard against Shiv's eyes but didn't have the momentum to squash his Diamond Shelled-eyeballs, even if Shiv hissed in pain. "What? Why? You weren't this tough—" Shiv kicked him between the legs again, and this time, raven let out a loud hiss of pain. Shiv swept his legs and rolled over on him. He dropped a knee on the raven's wounded calf, and the man howled.

Again, Shiv was on top of him, and drove his thumb into an opening of their visor. Something wet dotted his thumb. The raven cursed and tossed Shiv off. As Shiv rolled back to a stand, he saw the raven rubbing his left eye. The Deathless looked at his hand and frowned. No blood. Just tears. "Yeah, doesn't feel good when it's the other way around, does it?" Shiv snarled. He eyed the scared Umbrals before driving his Biomancy into the raven again. The enemy flinched back, and Shiv wrapped his arms

around the raven's waist. Shiv eyed the Umbrals and offered them a grin. "Sorry, we're just dropping by. We'll be going now."

Then, he suplexed the raven off the giant creature.

## **Physicality > 46**

Once more, they were falling, and this time Shiv clapped the raven-helmed stranger on both ears. *Payback, asshole.*

This elicited a brief gasp from the raven, but he recovered faster than Shiv. He drove the back of his head into Shiv's nose—worsening the bleeding—before hooking his legs around Shiv's waist. Somehow, he managed to turn, and now Shiv was the one heading toward the ground first. He pulled at the raven's head, but they crashed atop another bridge before he could shift their positions.

Something inside Shiv briefly clicked, and a flare of pain followed, but he had taken enough injuries over his life to know what was just a sprain and what was actually a fracture. He recovered, rising up to drive one of his elbows into the raven-helmed stranger's injured arm. Unprepared, the raven toppled back with a loud curse, and his wounded leg gave out. He staggered back—but delivered a lightning-fast jab to Shiv's face before he could approach. This punch finally broke his nose, and Shiv groaned, blinking tears from his eyes and blowing blood out to clear his ruined airways.

The two stared at each other, gasping and snarling. They were like two wild dogs. Two wild dogs about to fight to the death in front of a group of spiders. Weavers—smaller than the Weaveresses from earlier—watched nearby, and they immediately clambered to the underside of the bridge for safety.

"What... in the Broken Moon is wrong with you?" the raven breathed. "Why won't you just... stop?"

Shiv glared at the raven-helmed stranger and sneered. "What's wrong with me is that some tainted asshole threw me off Blackedge."

The stranger shook his head. "What even are you?" THIS CHAPTER IS UPDATE BY Novel Fire

Shiv looked at his enemy stranger and spat on the ground next to him. "Goddamn vengeful, is what I am." And then he slammed his Biomancy field against the raven's crumbling Magical Resistance as he charged.

The raven-helmed stranger let out a gasp of pain, tried to dodge, but his wounded leg failed him. Shiv, though far slower, shot low and spun around the raven, *sinking* one of his fingers into the wound on the enemy's right calf. The raven-helmed stranger screamed. Hot blood welled over Shiv's hand as he used the stranger's wound like a

handlebar, and he began swinging—bringing the stranger up and down, bouncing them off the ground from side to side as hard as he could.

He wasn't stronger than them in direct competition, but the weight of a person was trifling to his current Physicality, and so long as he kept his enemy off balance, he could keep swinging. He dented nearby railings, bounced the stranger off walls, and hammered him against the pavement until the stones broke, sending bits of rock skipping everywhere. Nearby, his field touched scared Umbrals—people backing away in surprise and shock. There were a lot of people here, and briefly he realized how far down he'd fallen.

*Must have been a full kilometer*, Shiv thought as he spun around and bounced the raven-helmed stranger's face off a nearby light post. Nightglass shattered and scattered on the ground. Shiv, using his Reflexes, caught one shard and jammed it into the wound he was holding. The raven-helmed stranger screamed again as Shiv pulled the blade up, severing his tendon in that leg entirely.

## **Reflexes > 39**

But the same pieces of glass fell next to the raven-helmed stranger. At some point, the enemy lost his stolen blade—and now he had options again.

Within a half second, the raven vanished as he tore his leg out of Shiv's grasp. Before he could react, the Deathless felt several points of his body erupt in blood and pain. He tried to take in a breath and coughed instead as something was pressed into his throat. Even with his Diamond Shell, he wasn't immune to damage, and nightglass could pierce a high vampire. Most of the cuts the raven left didn't go that deep because of how weakened he was, but still, it didn't take much to embed a piece of nightglass in someone's throat.

Shiv growled as he found the raven-helmed stranger trying to pound the blade lodged in his throat deeper. Shiv let them, trusting his diamond skin to endure in his stead. While he did that, he went to work on the raven's body—stabbing underneath their armpit and slicing along the undersides of their wrists, just like he did last time. The stranger cried out, but Shiv betrayed no pain. Cuts and stabs were exchanged between them, and soon both were stained in each other's lifeblood.

"Die," the raven-helmed stranger wheezed, practically begging for Shiv to drop first. They hammered the shard, and Shiv felt it slide slightly deeper—every inch a struggle against his Diamond Shell. Shiv didn't care. It didn't matter if he died. It didn't matter at all. He would give his life a thousand times more if it meant killing this bastard right now.

Suddenly, he found himself picked off the ground and flung into the air. As Shiv lost track of the raven for a beat, a burst of black feathers suddenly materialized above him, and then he saw the enemy spinning through the air. The raven's left heel came down



on Shiv's neck. Before he could respond, he felt the shard of nightglass shoot all the way through him, severing the back of his spine.

**Physicality > 47**

**Reflexes > 40**

**Knife Proficiency > 22**

**Diamond Shell > 55**

**Grappling Proficiency > 31**

**Striking Proficiency > 18**

**Parry > 18**

**Biomancy > 19**

Shiv jolted, twitched, and perished in one instant as they fell off another bridge. His Revenant manifested and reached out to start draining from the raven-helmed stranger without missing a beat. The enemy cried out and tried to move, but Shiv rammed his Biomancy field into him again, stunning the man before he could escape in a burst of feathers. A drip of his mana seeped into the stranger, but when Shiv tried to pull him apart, a spike of pain washed through his own mind.

*My mana field's strained...* Shiv groaned, trying not to lose focus. He would need to give himself some time to recover.

They were once again in free fall, descending past the light of the higher city—past what appeared to be weaver laborers hammering and carving new murals in the obsidian of the great structures that composed Weave. As they descended closer into the dark, the raven-helmed stranger twisted in the air, striking wildly, trying to cut at Shiv's incorporeal form as shadows began to congeal.

"What are you? Let me go. Let me go. I'll give you anything. I'll give you mithril. You just need to let me go. We can come to an arrangement." The raven continued to beg, and Shiv's hate for his enemy intensified.

If the felling bastard thought this was a thing about money and bribery, he was mistaken. The raven came to his home to kill his people and killed him several times over. Shiv might not have liked Blackedge very much, aside from a few people, but still, most people there didn't have it coming. There was a difference between not liking someone and hoping they died. And Shiv remembered Feather, who gave him his armor after failing to save his sister. He remembered the automaton Pathbearer who

died protecting Georges, and all the Arrow Family Guards who gave their lives in defense of the town's people.

Whatever they felt toward Shiv, they were good warriors at the end of the day.

*And blood begets blood. Of which I'll spill plenty,* Shiv promised.

## **Vitality Drain > 6**

Vitality drained, and with his Magical Resistance breaking apart, the raven was unprepared for Shiv's resurrection. He wrapped his hands around the man's neck and began to squeeze. The stranger choked with discomfort and tried to stab Shiv, but the Deathless chopped the raven's throat again, just like he did at the start of the fight.

This time, he felt his hand drive deeper, and the raven's laboured breaths devolved into a coughing fit—leaving the fool ignorant of the fast-approaching ground.

Shiv landed a final elbow on the raven's helmet at the same time they impacted the bottom of Weave. Their combined weight struck the ground like an artillery spell. Rocks splintered everywhere and the people around them scattered in terror. The raven's broken arm made a terrible snapping noise, and the man started shrieking. This inspired Shiv to start slamming his wounded arm against the ground.

"L-let go! LET GO!" the raven wailed. He shoved Shiv off with a surge of adrenaline and launched the Deathless into the air. As Shiv went up, his original body tumbled down—apparently, it struck another of the flat, flying creatures along the way.

Shiv groaned as he saw his old corpse falling. He couldn't let the Umbrals or the Weaveresses discover what he could do—who he was. Straining his barely recovered mana field, he pasted his body with his Biomancy, but preserved two ribs. Those, he sharpened as much as he could. As Shiv landed next to a splash of red, he rolled right and picked up his makeshift "*rib shivs*."

It felt really weird looting bits of his dead body for weapons. Really weird. But also kind of awesome.

Shiv rose from the ground, covered in cuts, bruises, and stained with blood from his original body. A few meters away, the raven struggled to rise, stumbling out of the crater he lay in. His helmet was cracked from Shiv's descending elbow from earlier, and Shiv saw the face of his enemy for the first time. The raven was a gaunt, bald man with a narrow nose and sharp ears. An elf, but not an elf from the Abyss. No, an elf that Shiv would see back home, like Heather, the Jump Mage from Tran's team.

The Raven wasn't some assassin sent from the Abyss—or at least, he didn't seem to be. He was someone that Shiv might have encountered in Blackedge.



“What is wrong with you? Why are you like this? Why? *Why?* Why are you so committed to seeing me dead?” the raven whined. He was a bloody mess, and he looked ready to drop.

Shiv spat, holding his rib-daggers high. “Nothing business, just personal.”

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## 15 (II) Rematch

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#### Rematch

The raven gawked. “*What?*”

“You really shouldn’t have come after my home. And you really shouldn’t have thrown me off Blackedge. This was your fault to begin with, but I’m going to see this to its end.”

There was also the small matter of the bastard knowing about what Shiv could do. He didn’t need the raven telling the Composer or anyone else about that.

The raven just looked at him and let out a long sigh. “You don’t even care about mithril, do you? You’re not going to stop no matter how much I offer.”

“No,” Shiv said. “I just want one other kind of payment.” He took a stance, shifting his legs wide and bringing his rib-daggers high. “Come on, you’re not that injured. You must be a High Adept or a Low Master. Don’t just *let* me kill you. I was just Pathless a few days ago. Can you imagine dying with that kind of shame?”

The elf sneered and ripped away what remained of his broken helmet. He couldn’t put any weight on his right leg, but that didn’t stop his Reflexes from being so much faster than Shiv’s. The enemy rushed him, and Shiv accepted that he was going to be stabbed. That was the first rule of knife fighting: you were going to be bled.

The raven lashed out with precision, cutting Shiv in multiple places, making a mangled mess of his torso. But the same as before—when the raven’s nightglass sank through Shiv’s ribs, it didn’t go all the way. Every inch was a struggle, and the resistance meant that the blade was likely to get stuck.

Stuck long enough for Shiv to bring down both his ribs against the elf's broken arm. The man let out a gasp and tried to take a step back—but slipped in the blood leftover from Shiv's old body. Shiv followed the enemy down. He stabbed at every open wound he could find, tearing them wider. As the raven toppled back, sobbing from the agony, Shiv sprawled, letting the enemy's nightglass rip out from him. The raven let go of his knife as he fell. Mistake. Shouldn't give up in a fight. That only meant death.

Shiv fell on top of the raven. He jabbed a rib into one of the man's eyes. The raven howled. Then Shiv picked up the bloody piece of nightglass and drove it into the raven's throat—shaking hands taking a moment to find the raven's carotid artery.

“Nuh—please! Please!” the raven cried.

But Shiv couldn't risk it. The raven knew too much about him. And frankly, the raven was his rightful kill. He needed to finish this. He needed to see the enemy die for the defenders of Blackedge. Shiv whispered to the raven, “I don't care who you are or why you did what you did—I'll find out about that later. But you ought to know something before you head off to wherever the hell that comes next.” Shiv pulled his nightglass blade along the raven's throat and the enemy gurgled. Blood welled. The raven tried to throw him off, but the blood pooling beneath him made the assassin slip and flop around.

Shiv dragged the cut deeper and harder, his arm shaking with the strain against his enemy's Toughness and straining Physicality. “The moment you threw me off Blackedge, you sealed your own fate. I was coming for you. One year, ten years, a thousand—I was coming for you. It's better this way. It just puts an end to this farce sooner.”

And, with a final heavy shove, he drove his dagger all the way through his neck and began to pull in the other direction as well. The elf's eyes went wide as his mouth opened in a silent scream. “W-who—” the raven managed to wheeze before his cords were cut.

Shiv forced his enemy to look up at him, and he grinned—his face the expression of a victorious predator. “I am the one death will never get to keep,” Shiv whispered. And then he released his blade. The raven blinked a few more times and, after no more breaths reached his lungs, he kicked out with his legs and went still.

As Shiv held the corpse of his first great enemy in his hands, he couldn't help it—he started chuckling, sated by this victory, satisfied that he avenged the deaths of so many, and heartened by his progress in so little a time. He tried to rise off of the raven but found himself exhausted beyond measure. Then it hit him.

**Foreshadowing: The raven's death echoes across the world, causing a chain of destruction. Back on the surface, a certain City Lord screams in agony as one of**

**his Quest-bound Skills shatters. His schemes are unraveling due to the vicar's betrayal. Soon, he will have no option but to involve himself.**

**He has no choice. His loathing for Roland Arrow is just that severe.**

**Diamond Shell > 56**

**Physicality > 48**

**Reflexes > 41**

Shaking his head to clear his mind, Shiv tried to stand and slipped in the blood—his own and his enemy's. Looking down, he felt a sickness come over him. God, he was barely human—more like a slab of cut meat hanging in a slaughterhouse. Still, Shiv forced himself to rise. Every movement made his body scream in pain, and his Biomancy revealed how deep the wounds went. It was only thanks to his Diamond Shell that he wasn't bleeding out. The skill extended to his veins and arteries, making them as hard to cut as everything else in his body. But more than a few of his vitals were now exposed to open air.

"Broken... Moon," Shiv groaned.

"*Shiv! Shiv!*" He heard Valor's voice calling for him, and slowly he turned, feeling a pulse—an after-effect from a Jump Mage. He looked to see his group of Umbral escorts quickly approaching him. The Psychomancer was still at their helm, and when she saw Shiv, her mouth dropped wide as her eyes widened with horror.

"Oh, worse than it looks," Shiv joked as he staggered toward them. His head spun, and he looked at the raven-helmed stranger. "You should... you should see the other guy." And then, somehow, he managed another step before they had to catch him.

The Psychomancer swallowed, pressing her hands against his wounds. He looked up at her, and he smiled. "You know, you never really did tell me your name."

She looked at him incredulously. "Are you serious right now?"

"Hey, look." He shrugged. "Not exactly bleeding to death, just a lot of pain."

She sighed. "Uva."

"Hi, Sister Uva. I'm Shiv. Your security probably needs some work," Shiv joked. "You can't have your guests doing all the fighting here."

Her face went through several reactions before she settled on a disbelieving smile.

"You—are all surfacers like you?" she asked.

Shiv then looked at the raven once more. “No, some of the unlucky ones are more like him.”

A Weaveress Jump Mage teleported them back up to where the fight began. As Shiv rematerialized on the bridge, the pressure clenched at his wounds, and he felt himself bleed even faster.

“So that’s why Tran said that you needed to heal up before jumping,” Shiv groaned.

“Are you all right?” the Psychomancer asked, letting him lean against her. She didn’t seem to be that upset about him bleeding on her.

“Yep. Been worse. Been better.”

She looked at him as if she didn’t believe him.

“Trust me,” Shiv said. “I’ve been a lot worse.” And he had—many times in the past few days.

Looking around, he marveled at the destruction left in the wake of his struggle against the raven-helmed stranger. Several bridges below were dented, their edges missing chunks—imprints left by the battle. He also saw the massive floating, flat creatures—beings that resembled the mantas he saw in the Blackedge Aquarium.

*Manta meat tastes pretty good*, Shiv thought to himself, his mind feeling a little unfocused from all the blood loss. “Could go for a good cooking session right now.”

As he looked around, another group of Umbrals appeared from the opening guarded by the two Weaveresses.

“Did you see him?” a new Umbral called as she emerged from Passage’s exit. She led her own group behind her. “Did you find the surfacer—”

The narrative has been taken without authorization; if you see it on Amazon, report the incident.

“We found your assassin, *Mipha*,” Uva snarled. “You were supposed to keep him mind-chained and controlled. Look what happened.” She gestured at Shiv.

*System... she’s genuinely mad about this*, Shiv realized. He never had someone get mad over him getting hurt before.

“Sister Uva!” the Umbrel leader of the other team cried, and then found herself distracted by Shiv. “Is that a surfacer? What happened to him?”

"*Your assassin* is what happened to him," Uva replied through clenched teeth. "Your Weaveress will be hearing from me. This failure is unacceptable for a sister of the Arachnae Order. You prepare yourself for this."

The other Umbral swallowed and nodded. She didn't argue.

Shiv almost felt bad for her, but the thought didn't linger, because that's when he saw what the Umbrals in the other group were carrying. There, lying on a stretcher, beaten, bloodied, with some of his limbs still broken and bound in tight casts, and looking like he hadn't had a wink of sleep in a week, was Adam felling Arrow.

Slowly, the Young Lord craned his head. He looked at Shiv, and his eyes widened in surprise. Shiv stared right back.

"*T-Tanner*," Adam mouthed.

Shiv just kept staring.

"Do you know each other?" Uva asked Shiv, looking between them with suspicion.

Shiv's lips tightened as he looked at Adam Arrow. He considered how he could answer. Adam knew about his abilities too, but... considering how badly injured he was... Shiv couldn't help it. He had the chance to do something funny, and he took it.

No one could say Shiv wasn't a bit vengeful.

"I've never seen this man in my life," Shiv declared. He'd deal with that later. For now... for now he didn't want to talk to Adam Arrow. He didn't even want to think about the Young Lord.

Adam Arrow's face contorted into an expression of disbelief, and then delicious anger. "Bastard! Tainted bastard! Tanner! Don't—don't let them take me... Tanner..." Then he lapsed back into semi-consciousness.

"Tanner?" Uva asked. "Who's Tanner?"

"Beats me," Shiv said, shrugging. "My name's Shiv. It's the only name I'll ever have. The only real name, anyway. Now, let's see your Composer before I have to fight someone else."

"We can't present you like this," Uva said, looking him over with concern. "You're bleeding. You're a Biomancer, aren't you? Why haven't you mended yourself?"

Shiv looked at her. "Yeah, about that—I'm, uh, let's just say I'm untrained, but I've got a lot of *skill*."

She eyed him and slowly nodded. “Oh, oh dear.”

“Yeah, you, uh, you don’t want to deal with a cancerous mass, do you? Those don’t quip as well as I do.”

“That would not be preferable.” She pressed her lips together. “Another Biomancer should be here at any moment.”

“That would be great,” Shiv said.

The few remaining tatters of his chef’s outfit peeled off from his upper body as a strong breeze washed through him. He was now entirely shirtless, and then he caught Uva staring at him for a moment too long.

Shiv arched an eyebrow. “Maybe we can find some clothing for me to wear. I don’t think it’d be proper for me to be standing half-naked before your Composer.”

Uva shook her head, finally sobering as she stared back at him. “I, uh, yes.” She swallowed, then looked away.

Shiv snickered, and to his surprise, the younger Umbral who had tried to speak with him earlier also laughed. They exchanged a knowing look.

“So, how are your first impressions of Weave?” the young Umbral asked.

“Yeah, it’s pretty high. I think I can get used to it. Hopefully I don’t need to fight someone every time I want to go down a floor, though.”

She laughed.

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“I have no idea how you’re still standing,” a Weaveress Biomancer said, shaking her head as she sealed the last of his wounds with her many limbs.

Shiv took the opportunity to examine exactly what she was doing in detail, focusing intently to learn if he could replicate the same techniques. He caught some of what she did: she was culturing specific parts of his body architecture to heal in certain ways, while counteracting that in other areas and suppressing healing overall. It was hyper-focused repair rather than on a broad scale.

*Maybe that was my mistake before, he thought. I was trying to encourage the entire body to regenerate, or at least too much of an organ to regenerate, and that caused the cancer cascade. He still didn’t get everything she did, but he had enough of an understanding to start correcting his mistakes. Maybe with a few more deaths—or a hundred—I can get some headway into actually healing myself.*



“Yeah, uh, I’ve got a pretty high pain tolerance,” Shiv said as he watched the last of his wounds close. He felt his restored skin and nodded. “You did a good job. Not even a little scarring—the Biomancers back on Blackedge usually left at least a faint trace after their work finished.”

“It shouldn’t scar if you do it right,” the Biomancer said.

“I’d be interested in learning about that—doing it right.”

The Weaveress eyed him. “Are you now?”

“Is he well?” Uva interrupted before Shiv could answer.

The Biomancer nodded. “Yes. He’s... Well, frankly, it’s absurd how resilient he is. He has some kind of hyper-strong Toughness Skill Evolution that makes him durable all over, including his veins and cells. It took quite a bit of effort to heal that, but aside from his wounds... Well, you have Disease Resistance, don’t you?”

Shiv looked at her. “Yeah, something like that.”

“You’re not sick at all, which is remarkable. You’ve taken many wounds in your life, haven’t you?”

“What is this, interrogation before the proper interrogation begins?” Shiv asked.

“No, just curiosity,” the Biomancer said. “Surfacers—we don’t get many of you down here. If you’re interested and you are allowed by the Exalted Mother, you can come to the Cradle of Flesh. We’ll be interested in examining you. And, perhaps, they can make a trade—a little bit more in-depth examination into surfer biology for an education in Biomancy.”

“Sounds good to me,” Shiv said. “I’ll come looking for you, if they actually release me. I might have to look up a few books first, though.”

As he turned, Uva handed him a wet towel to wipe the dried blood off first, and then a silken doublet that was a deep crimson in color.

“Thanks,” he said. “How’d you know my size?”

“By looking at you? And analyzing,” she replied.

“What, you got some kind of Seamstress Skill?”

“What if I do?” Uva said, sounding slightly defensive.

“Then I’d say you’re a pretty interesting person—Sister Seamstress Psychomancer.”

She looked aside, and he couldn't quite read what her face meant.

*"Well, now that that's over, I think we should get along before another attack occurs,"* Valor said, sounding slightly annoyed.

"We once again most deeply apologize for this affair, oh great one—" The Weaveress began.

*"Just get us to the Composer. There is no excuse."* Valor sounded angrier than Shiv ever remembered. Angry over him. That was two people now. *"Shiv, you're all right?"*

"Yeah. I won. The other guy didn't. Good day."

*"It sounded like a particularly brutal fight."*

"Like almost every other fight I've been in," Shiv muttered. "I think I've got my fill of violence for the day. Let's get this meeting done so I can get put in prison or get set free to do some cooking."

At his urging, the group continued on—and Shiv watched as the Umbrals carrying Adam Arrow jumped away.

"I'm surprised you allow spatial magic inside the city," Shiv said.

"Only some have the privilege," the Weaveress explained. "For immediate emergencies, mostly. Like someone about to die from their injuries."

Shiv blinked. He had been too tired to examine Adam. Now he felt kind of bad.

As they got to the very end of the bridge, he found them standing around a platform with a massive crystal hovering in the air. It shone in a series of prismatic colors, and the pressure around it felt spatial somehow—but different.

"Oh, Denizen and Neighbor, we beseech you," the Weaveresses began, talking to the crystal. "We ask that you loan your aid and child to us so that we might soar the skies for a temporary time for a proper and measured price."

"What's happening?" Shiv asked Uva.

She shushed him and simply gestured for him to watch. A second later, the crystal came alight, and a fissure opened in the air. Shiv felt something—something akin to the pressure emitted by a gateway—as one of the strange flat mantas he'd fallen on earlier emerged. It let out a loud moo and slowly lowered itself before him, its flat underbelly hovering just a few inches off the ground.

Shiv blinked. "What is this?"

“It’s a demon. You’ve never seen one before?” Uva asked.

“A *demon*?” Shiv muttered, sounding terrified. “This is the thing that taints people?”

“Oh, no. That’s a specific variety of demon. Those are from the Dimension of Flies—Plagueforms meant for combat,” Uva explained. “This one’s perfectly docile.”

“Docile? A demon?” Shiv said.

Uva chuckled. “It seems that you might need to add another book to your repertoire.”

“Or maybe you can just explain more things to me.”

“I suppose I could. Now, would you please climb aboard, Adept Shiv?” And that was the first time she used his name. And his Pathbearer Tier.

Shiv acquiesced, since she was so polite. “Off to see the Composer, then,” he muttered.

“Yes, *off to see the Composer*,” Valor echoed.

The dagger sounded more than a little worried, though. “What’s wrong?”

*“For security to be breached like this? For them to fail in their duties so much? Something must have happened. The Sisterhood in my day would have never allowed this.”*

Shiv paused as he looked at Valor. If the others took any offense at the dagger’s words, they didn’t show it. “Yeah, well—good thing I was here, right?”

“Yes,” Valor said, sounding a little proud. “A *good thing you were. Good work, Shiv.*”

He grinned, and he looked up to gaze at the Heart of Weave—the Symposium, within which dwelled a goddess. *All in a day’s work*, Shiv thought.

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## 16 (I) Composer

*All demons carry the taint, and it is of this taint that more demons are born.*

*Once one is infected, it is not the body that succumbs, but the spirit.*

*The very being of a person turns against themselves and becomes something of an incubator for the demonic spawn.*

*To this regard, the researchers at the Prismatic Order have undergone many tests and experiments to discover whether the demons and vampires have close relations. Due to the nature and similarity of their breeding and bearing, it cannot be ruled out that vampires, too, count as a classification of demon, though there are major differences in biology and capability.*

*Should you encounter a demon, do your best to slay it, and if you cannot, ensure that your own demise is painless and pure. Your soul will be guarded by the Auroral Council, and you will be valorized for your bravery in the face of unfathomable sin.*

*Should you survive, however, it is essential that you inform your local authorities so that a member of the Prismatic Order may be dispatched.*

*You cannot risk infecting others with the taint. You must do your duty as a citizen of the Republic. Nation over self. Remember that, always.*

*-Demons: Dangers Posed and Proper Responses, essential Yellowstone Republic reading material for school children ages 12 and older*

16 (I)

Composer

It took Shiv longer than he would have liked to figure out how the belt buckles on the demon worked. Apparently, it was pretty simple. You just slid the pointy end into the slot. That, he wasn't used to. For most riders back on Blackedge—those who had aerial mounts or for the large dimensionals summoned for use in the Chevalier Corps—there was usually a more complicated process of hooking and chaining and binding oneself to the mount. There were even those who equipped their harness to their soul. Not so here.

The moment he and the Umbral all clicked their belts in, the beast took off, gliding through the air. Its flight was smooth, its ascent quick. Its wide body seemed very stable at the top, and as Shiv observed its form, he could see strange strands of hair-thin fibers flicking beneath it. That was curious.

He still didn't know how he felt about riding on a supposed demon. But so far, it hadn't attacked him or started turning other people into demons. *Is the Republic just openly ignorant, or are they actually hiding these things from us?* he wondered. He remembered the primer he read as a child—something about how all demons carried the taint, and how one needed to reach the Prismatic Order if they ever encountered such a creature. Failing that, the primer even encouraged suicide, which, even at the

time, felt like a heavy ask for a group of children. But the demon was practically the least severe inaccuracy he'd got from the Republic by now.

Shiv remembered the high vampire, what he learned about the Necrotechs, what he thought he knew about the Abyss...

Looking around, he studied the Umbrals, checked the Weaveress, and gazed upon the grand city passing by beneath him. There were people everywhere on the bridges and streets. Flashing illusions danced through the air—making a common day here seem as intense as the Festival of the Eclipse back on Blackedge. What's more was the magical infrastructure. There seemed to be translucent lanes in the air, and demons and dimensionals of all varieties floated about, sometimes carrying people within themselves. Shiv gaped when he saw a near-transparent spherical demon with two cute dot-like eyes and a series of wings that should have been too small to heft its load fluttering along one of the lines. Within its being were over fifty people, all seated on layered rows of protective cushions.

"You've never been to a great city, have you?" Uva asked.

"I—uh, no," Shiv said, trying to keep himself composed. "It's very large and impressive. Sorry about the architecture that I broke on the way down by the way."

She let out a hum. "Yes. We—we pride ourselves on maintaining our sanctuary. The Composer gives much to us, and we try to earn her affection any way we can. Regardless, what happened earlier was a lapse in our security. It won't happen again."

Shiv grunted. "If it does, and I'm around, you can count on me to help out again."

The Umbral Psychomancer shot him a brief look and smirked.

Another note danced through the air, shaking reality itself. Shiv turned and saw more threaded webs gliding alongside the demon. The webs did not move through those designated lanes; they simply went wherever they desired. Each web was aglow with a strange magical aura, and as they passed by, Shiv couldn't help but feel the immense power they held within.

*That's a lot of mana*, he thought to himself. He could feel his own Biomancy, but the thing about magic, as he was learning, was that you needed specific attunements for your mana field to sense others. Leveling different magic skills meant that, though one might have an extremely powerful field in Biomancy, they could possess only a paltry field in something like Psychomancy. He looked to Sister Uva and considered something: Valor did say that spending more time among Mind Mages could help you develop such a skill. He might need to test that if he got the chance in the future.

As they flew closer to the Symposium, Shiv studied the murals lining each of the great buildings. Many of them depicted Umbrals on their knees, weeping, while Weaveresses

reached down to help them up. That was a common story between most of the depictions. Some others depicted the Umbrals and Weaveresses in combat. It was always the Weaveresses in the role of protector and guide, while the Umbrals stood in rows ahead of them against the enemy hordes.

He wanted to ask for more details about the relationship between the Umbrals and spiders, but to his surprise, they were already drawing close to the Composer's home. The demon had provided the smoothest flight he'd ever been on—which wasn't saying much, since it was also the first flight he'd ever been on. "You're a pretty steady guy, aren't you?" he muttered to the demon.

It let out a loud, low moo, and Shiv blinked.

"She agrees," the Weaveress said.

"*She* can understand me?"

"Demons are creatures born of promises and contract," she explained. "They are dimensionals that understand the meaning we speak—no matter what language."

"So, does that mean it's telepathic too?" Shiv said, feeling a little worried. "If everyone has a mind magic skill, then—"

"No, no," the Weaveress placated him. "It... it is different. Intent is its own thing. Some dimensionals are so alien, or so simple in mind, that comprehension and mutual understanding are impossible. But what makes one a demon is specifically that they can understand meaning, and that they can be bound to us through ordained contracts. And the demon you talked about earlier..."

"The one from the Realm of Flies," Shiv answered.

"The Dimension of Flies and Plague," Uva corrected. "The one you speak of is a war form, something to be called upon only in times of severe conflict. If you summon it without blood to be shed and flesh to be contaminated, it will turn on you. It will be offended. The way they experience existence—the way their Path works—is different from ours. They are penalized and suffer from the poison that is peace."

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Shiv tried to imagine that—suffering for not killing someone, or not fighting and slaughtering. It was hard. He enjoyed fighting, but even if he didn't do it, it didn't come as a penalty to him. It seemed that the System had different rules for many people, but then again, wasn't that the nature of the Paths? Maybe just less severe than what it meant to be a demon.



They came to a stop on a platform leading into the Symposium. A similar prismatic crystal hovered atop that platform and created a crack in reality for the Demon's departure. As each of them dismounted, Shiv muttered his thanks to the demon, and it let out a loud "moo" again. The Weaveress released a melodic laugh.

"What? What did they say?" Shiv asked.

"She said you were very polite and that, hopefully, the next surfer is as polite as you," the Weaveress replied.

"She really said that?" Shiv asked, incredulous.

"Yes," she said. "Most Umbrals, they... uh, they are rather reserved."

Shiv looked at the other Umbrals, and they eyed him, all of them hiding smirks. Uva especially. "I can see that," Shiv managed.

As they ventured closer to the Composer, the song grew louder. He could almost hear someone singing in the distance—sweet and high notes pulling at his heartstrings. While they walked, the Umbrals and the Weaveresses took on solemn expressions and crossed their hands over one another. They walked with their heads bowed, and Shiv tried to mimic them. He wasn't sure if he got everything exactly right, but since no one complained, he assumed he was doing fine.

A wall of dense, fibrous webs opened before them, flashing alight as a doorway appeared. Beyond that, a glistening path led deeper still, and another group of Umbrals and their Weaveresses walked out. Some were crying, some seemed elated. As they passed by, a few of them eyed Shiv, their faces turning from rapture to curiosity, but he passed them without a word, wondering what he was about to face.

*The Composer—a god*, Shiv thought to himself—or what supposedly was a god. He'd never even thought about a specific god before this. He knew the Yellowstone Republic had its own divinities. Supposedly each of the Auroral Council's members was a living avatar of one of the Republic's gods—Champions, in a word—but after a life of ostracization and the general scorn he experienced at the hands of Clerics and War Priests alike, he did his best to spurn the churches and the faiths as much as they spurned him.

Among the things he did was literally never learn the names or scriptures of any of these gods. Didn't matter if he was going to offend the priests—they already hated him—so he simply didn't waste his time with religion at all.

The Composer felt like a different story altogether. She was here, present in the lives of her people, and so far she didn't seem all that malicious. And then his mind reeled as he saw something. Around him, the silken cocoon bore murals of its own—not even just murals, but weavings. Weavings of color. Weavings of a small spider maiden wandering

through the darkness of the Abyss. Weavings of her helping the first Umbral she came upon, composing a lyre, playing songs, weeping over the fallen. So far, it seemed like she was a goddess of mercy—a savior to the Umbrals more than anything else.

*Her song's not half bad either*, Shiv thought to himself. Then he focused on one specific mural. This one was different from all the others. It depicted the Composer at war. She stood upon a cliffside, her visage masked in a scowl of anger, facing dragons, vampires, and seemingly undead—er, *Risen*—alike. There was also another faction of strange creatures he couldn't fully describe—their bodies alien, like broken pieces forming the vague visage of a humanoid. She played her lyre at them, and it seemed that lightning and calamity fell as she did.

**Foreshadowing: The Composer rests her fingers on her great lyre. This instrument—the embodiment of her true feelings and her true soul—had been with her since the very start, since the first time she heard what she later learned to be music. By this point, her lyre had well over a thousand strings, each tuned to a specific note—some so subtle in vibration that the mortal ear cannot comprehend them.**

**But then there were strings that she simply never played during times of peace. Strings that compelled the world to react in certain ways. Strings so severe, so painful to hear, that they could make existence scream.**

**She stared at these strings as she sensed the approach of an old friend, an older enemy: Valor Thann was coming.**

**And so she prepared to make use of her entire lyre.**

As the vision of Foreshadowing passed, Shiv felt Uva pulling slightly on his new shirt. She stared at him. “Yes, I know. It's very pretty. Now, we need to go along before someone else takes our place in attendance. The Composer is very, very busy.”

He nodded and followed along. Foreshadowing had given him a lot of information he didn't expect. It increasingly felt like a Diviner's skill—and a very good Diviner's skill at that. But still, to get a glimpse into what a goddess was doing, and what she felt toward Valor Thann... and that's another thing Shiv thought to himself. *Valor—everyone seems to know Valor. Everyone seems to respect him, but is also completely terrified of him.*

Even a goddess had a plan to kill him, and he was sealed in a dagger. And then he recalled how Valor talked to him about Marikos. The dragon apparently had a grudge against Valor too. Shiv shot a look at the dagger, his eyes narrowing.

*Just what did I bring here?*

Well, he was going to get his answer soon. As another few doorways opened, Shiv found himself being led through a wide waiting lobby that seemed to circle the interior of

the Symposium. This space was filled with very well-dressed Umbrals and even larger Weaveresses. The Weaveresses themselves wore regalia of gold and gems. Their heads were adorned with those focus crystals Shiv had seen mages bear, but these were ornately carved with twisting horns.

Immediately, he felt several fields slam into his mana field—immense Biomancy fields. *Gods, they must be Master level at the least*, he thought. It was like he was a small pond being engulfed by numerous seas. And his presence didn't go unnoticed either; practically every head turned, sensing his entry. One would have guessed they all had some kind of high Awareness Skill. Shiv didn't even have a Common Awareness skill, no matter how much he tried. Sometimes, it was just hard to develop a skill.

He looked around, trying to keep his expression respectful and remain indifferent to all the tension he was getting. Back on Blackedge, when he had this much attention, it meant he needed to run—because more than a few things were going to be thrown his way. Here, however, they just studied him with absolute curiosity.

Then, to his surprise, another individual emerged from the group, different from all the others. Mechanical limbs whirled and whistled as its spider-like body skittered to a halt right before Shiv and his Umbral escort. The Deathless felt his breath catch a little. The Weaveress hadn't been lying about the automata being everywhere.

This one was practically a spitting image of the Composer, at least in general terms. Its lower body was all spider-like, with a tail that seemed like a wasp's. Its upper body had the dimensions of a woman, but its face was blank. "We greet you, O Sisters and Honored Mother." Its voice was soft and mechanical, like every automaton Shiv knew.

"We greet you, Speaker of the Exalted Mother," the Umbrals replied as one, bowing low. Shiv mimicked their bow. The automaton then swiveled its head between the dagger containing Valor and Shiv himself.

"We heard there was a disturbance near Passage," it said.

"There was," the Weaveress accompanying Shiv's group replied. "But we were fortunate." She gestured toward Shiv. "The surfer here, the outsider hero known as Shiv, was brave and decisive in protecting our sisters. More than that, he comes bearing auspicious things. The first is Valor Thann." She held up the dagger, and a series of gasps went up in the room. "And the second is grim tidings. It seems that Vicar Sullain has resurfaced."

At this, the silence consuming the lobby died, and voices broke out all around him:

"Sullain! Sullain, he's back!"

"Will it be war again?"

“Sullain? Light take the Necrotechs for not doing what was necessary.”

Shiv looked around as he tried to keep himself still. His heart was pounding. Anxiety was crawling up inside him. He was fine with combat and talking to people, but this much attention from this many eyes felt... felt wrong. He needed to get out of here. He needed to—

*“It’s okay. No one will hurt you here,”* a voice sounded in his mind.

It was Uva, using her mind magic. Slowly, Shiv controlled his shaking hand and nodded his thanks, rooting himself in place despite how much he wanted to run.

“Quick, then—we must not waste any more time. This is of utmost importance,” the automaton speaker said, gesturing and leading them through a narrow walkway. For more chapters visit

After a while, striding through darkness lit only by dim strips of nightglass, they came to a large, hexagonal platform carved from stone and nightglass alike, in the form of a strange web. It stuck out into a vast open space surrounded by flowing strings of silk, so large it once again made Shiv doubt if they were truly still underground. As they stepped on, Shiv directed his gaze to the horizon. There he saw the Composer—he saw how immense she was. The sculptures and representations failed to do her justice. She was even larger than Sir Marikos, much larger. Yet there was a greater magnificence to her, and a beauty that almost made him want to weep.

Her hair flowed in silken strands of moonlight-kissed colors. Her body was smooth like marble—human in dimension but lacking any of the detailed imperfections. It was as though she were a living statue. Her face was one of great beauty, resembling the Umbrals to some extent: large black eyes, pointed ears, sharp features. She played her harp close to her breast, and each string she plucked summoned ripples into existence. Ripples that created new strands of silk gliding through the world. The strands slithered past Shiv—past Shiv’s platform—and sank into the surrounding nest. Slowly, it began to make its way outside, with all the other threads he saw earlier, joining them in expanding the city.

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## 16 (II) Composer

16 (II)

## Composer

Shiv then noticed how many fingers the Composer had. There were so many—so many for so many strings. It was almost like they were overlapping, passing through each other like wisps of mist as played across her harp. It was uncanny. The lower his gaze shifted, the more the humanity in her aesthetics started to fade, replaced by the properties of a spider. Her lower body fused perfectly into the rear bulb of a spider's abdomen. Eight black legs as long as skyscrapers ended in more hands—more fingers—these a mix between a spider's palps and human digits. Just looking at them made Shiv feel uneasy. She gripped and stroked the webbing beneath, and her stinger—that wasp-like appendage—glistened. It was so much bigger and so much more wicked-looking than anything akin to a weapon Shiv had faced before—and he'd been stung by a weaver back when he passed through the feral nest's territory. Unlike its stingers, though, hers seemed carved and tipped with nightglass.

The Composer played on, humming a sweet, gentle note—and Shiv's worries melted away. There was nothing to be concerned about. No one would harm him here, not without angering the Composer.

He wasn't sure how long he stood with the Umbrals, waiting for the Composer to finish her tune. But as she played her final note, he felt his heart ache, hoping to hear more. He was almost disappointed, but then the music ended—and he realized he'd been staring at her intently, barely blinking the entire time.

Slowly, the Composer regarded them. A curtain of smooth, white hair draped over one of her wide black eyes. The Umbrals bowed. The Weaver bowed. Shiv mimicked them. The automaton speaker, noticing his tardiness, simply laughed silently.

Then, in a flash of movement, the Composer was before him. She was faster than the raven-helmed stranger at the height of the man's power—faster by far, and without any lingering destruction. The air did not break. No shockwaves came. She was simply there, still a few hundred meters away, but her size made it appear as if she now stood right in front of him. In a moment's notice, something inside Shiv quivered.

*Can I reach this power? Would I be able to achieve this level of Physicality? I have to. I simply have to! I would be able to run all around the world with that kind of speed.*

It was then he felt another presence—an extremely subtle but absolutely immense presence. A final mana field was engulfing his, surrounding him, wrapped around him in a gentle embrace so soft he couldn't notice it at first.

The Deathless blinked. She had Biomancy too, and hers extended—extended so far beyond his sight, so, so far. Did it encompass the city? Wait, if it did, then why didn't she just use that to crush the raven-helmed stranger? Why didn't she just...

“You have many, many questions. Your mind is like a maelstrom,” the Composer said with a melodious voice, speaking directly to him. Her words were soft, but there was an iron beneath the silk. And no—more than iron—it was something nearly unbreakable. Something not known to man, at least not yet.

Shiv centered himself. He was talking now. To a goddess. *First time for everything.*

“You can’t blame me now, can you?” he said, trying to sound casual and keep the apprehension out of his voice.

The Composer simply smiled. “I suppose not.” She leaned back, and for a brief moment she looked skyward as the harp in her hand untangled itself, becoming strings, merging into the weave of her nest.

Shiv felt speechless. *If she can do this... Was that conjuration? What kind of magic allows for this?*

The Composer spoke again, ignoring Shiv’s wide eyes and slightly open mouth. “Oh, daughter mine,” she said, speaking to the Weaveress that accompanied his group. “You bring something to me. You bring something that I must see, that I cannot ignore.”

“I do, Exalted Mother,” the Weaveress said. “I bring you...” She held up the dagger containing Valor. “...the Cage of Valor Thann, with the great hero still within.”

The Composer just stared at the dagger for a long moment, appearing lost in memories. “Valor,” she breathed. “Are you there? Why are you so silent?”

Valor spoke then. *“Well, it seemed impolite to intrude. And you know how much I like your music. When it’s not directed against me, that is.”* He finished the last part on a sour note.

The Composer laughed—and Shiv was surprised at how girlish it was. It was like the giggle of a small child; pure.

“In my defense, you were trying to assassinate me.”

Shiv turned. He couldn’t help himself; he stared at the dagger. “You were trying to assassinate a *god*?” he said, incredulity apparent. He couldn’t imagine how one managed to assassinate something larger than a mountain. The goddess part didn’t even come into it yet. The Umbrals eyed Shiv with a mixture of exasperation and near-offense, but the Composer simply laughed again.

“Oh, He Who Stills Eternity would have found a way, I’m sure—as long as I didn’t stop him.” The Composer leaned closer. “And I did. I did stop you that time, didn’t I?”

Valor took a long time to answer. “Yes, you did. But—” He paused. “But—”



“Yes, I know—you have your pride. You would have achieved it eventually and all that boasting. But still, I’m glad you have come to me after all this time. I’m glad that you have agreed to my terms. To serve under my nation as a true agent of salvation and justice.”

Valor let out a long, suffering sigh. “Yes, well, you must forgive me, Composer, but I’ve heard this many, many times from practically everyone among the Five Great Faiths. I don’t mean to offend.” Before the Composer could interrupt, he continued. It was like he knew she was about to speak. “I know you’re not like them. I’ve known you for a long time, but politics... they have a habit of making us compromise who we are.”

The Composer blinked, drawing in a deep breath before releasing it as a soft sigh. “They have a habit of doing that, don’t they? Well, it’s good that you’re here. We can discuss the terms of your release and what’s still required.”

*“What do you mean, what’s still required?”* Valor asked, sounding surprised. “You said you could get me out of this cage. You said you could break the seal!”

“I said I *could*,” the Composer replied. “I didn’t say I could do it immediately.”

*“And once again I have been poisoned by the language of politics,”* Valor growled. *“What exactly is ‘not immediately’? How long?”*

“There are several things that still need to be acquired, and a certain Gate that needs to be closed.”

The great hero known as Valor Thann simply let out a long hiss. *“I’m going to be quiet for a bit, because I don’t want to say anything that offends everyone.”*

“It’s probably for the best,” the Composer said. “Still, it’s good to see you again, Valor. Even this sealed sliver of you.”

Valor let out a huff, but there wasn’t any rancor in it.

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“And you, child of the surface,” the Composer continued.

“Me?” Shiv said, surprised.

“Of course—who else? Aside from the other boy, the one you seem to know and who is currently being mended by my Biomancers.”

Shiv thought about Adam and winced. “Yeah, I don’t really—”

“Come now,” the Composer said, her voice low with warning. “Come, please. Not here. Don’t lie to me here. *Never* lie to me here.” With each word she spoke, her eyes narrowed further, and her tone grew colder, and Shiv clenched his shaking fists.

“I, uh...”

“But we don’t need to talk about that first,” the Composer said with a smile, throwing him off with her change in tone. “Let’s talk about you. You, who hails from the surface. Tell me of your tale. I’m sure it is a wonderful, exquisite story of how you ended up in the deep umbra. It is a long way to fall, after all.”

“Yeah,” he replied, “a long way to fall indeed. But since you can see so much, I’m sure you saw the little fight between me and the assassin—the one who wore the false face of a raven.”

“Yes. You slew him.” She nodded thoughtfully. “You took many ugly wounds.”

“And he died. That’s a good deal for me.”

“You’re very determined.”

“No. It’s just simple arithmetic.”

“Perhaps for you.”

And now, Shiv felt an undercurrent of subtext. There was something she wasn’t saying, at least in front of the Umbrals and the Weaveresses. *She could see so much...* His stomach dropped. *Did she see my death too?*

He met her gaze, and to his surprise, she winked at him. But she said nothing regarding the matter of his Unique skill. Instead, she pressed him to elaborate on his story—to tell them how he ended up down here. And so he did. He went into as much detail as he could, starting from the moment the raven threw him off Blackedge to where he fell when he encountered the Umbral group led by Sister Nomos—their fate, and his long trek to reach Weave. He also briefly touched on Sir Marikos, but the mention of the dragon simply made the Composer groan.

It was such a human-like reaction, again, that Shiv took pause. The other Umbrals looked at each other worriedly.

“I swear, every time that fool does something stupid and horrible, he comes here, screaming for me to kill him,” the Composer muttered. “I should have never given him that Blessing. I should have never told him that he was a good man. Why would I ever do that? Was I a fool? Was I, Speaker?”

The mechanical Speaker simply shook her head. “No, Exalted Mother, you were simply too kind.”

“That’s called being a fool, Speaker!” the Composer said, her hands shaking as she spoke. She looked between her Umbrals, and all of them flinched under her gaze. Only Shiv continued staring, transfixed by the scene.

“You, boy—do you think I’m a fool?” she asked.

“I, uh...” Shiv muttered, trying to give an honest answer. “I don’t know. I kind of like you, and people have called me a fool, so... it takes one to know one, I guess?”

He was trying to be funny, but he caught Uva’s jaw drop in pure horror.

But the Composer giggled, and then she started laughing—laughing and laughing until she was holding her stomach and her head was thrown back in guffaws, her dancing in the air like the cresting of great waves.

“Takes one to know one,” she said between laughs. “Oh, you’re bold—or just foolish.”

“Probably the latter,” Shiv replied.

That made her laugh even more.

*Well, that was a gamble that worked out, Shiv thought as his heart rate accelerated. It could have gone very bad, but then again—she’s a goddess. What would happen if she killed me? What could she do to my spirit? Broken Moon, I don’t want to find out.*

As the Composer’s mirth finally subsided, she wiped what seemed to be glistening, crystalline tears from her face and placed them somewhere below.

“Ah,” she sighed. “I haven’t laughed like that in a bit. Thank you, Shiv.”

“Uh... you’re welcome,” Shiv replied, painting a smirk on his face—a smirk he didn’t feel, considering how fast his heart was pulsing.

“Still, Sister Nomos and her team...” The Composer’s expression went from joyful to solemn in an instant. “It is a great shame about their loss, but it is a greater shame still that they did not heed the words of their Weaveresses. This was not a task for them. They were to deliver the dagger to a Legendary Weaveress, not carry it themselves through the wilderness. Ah. I suppose circumstances forced this.”

She looked to her Speaker. “How many did we lose?”

The Speaker was silent for a moment, and Shiv heard the buzzing within its skull as the automaton did its thinking.

“Still not conclusive,” the Speaker managed, “but we’re estimating somewhere around two million.”

“Two million?” Shiv gasped. “Two million? Two million *what?* People?”

The Speaker turned and simply nodded. “Yes. It was a heavy raid.”

“Heavy raid?” Shiv whimpered. “Two *million?* That was dozens of times the entire population of Blackedge...

The Composer looked at him with confusion. “Yes, it was a substantial operation, but why are you surprised? Is that not the number you’re used to?”

“No,” Shiv replied, his mouth slightly dry. “My home—uh...” He hesitated, unsure if revealing military information to the Composer might put Blackedge in even more danger. But considering they were being hammered by the vicar and what seemed to be a Necrotech splinter group, he continued. “Blackedge has just fifty thousand people.”

“Fifty thousand?” Uva said, her eyes widening. Now it was her turn to be surprised. “You... you hold the mouth of the chasm with so few. Is the Curse of Light truly that severe?”

“Curse of Light?” Shiv repeated. He blinked and thought back to the vicar. He remembered the beasts clinging to the great serpent’s ribs, and how steam hissed from them when the Light struck their forms.

“Yes. When the Light strikes our bodies, it sears us, it burns us. You don’t know this?” Uva asked.

“No, no. I did see it. But... I just don’t seem to know much about anything. Not even about my own home.”

The Composer’s expression grew slightly mournful. “Well, regardless, it honors me and the rest of Weave that you made Sister Nomos’s sacrifice worthwhile—even if she did disobey direct orders. She was always a proud child.”

Shiv looked at the Composer. “Did you know her personally?”

“I know all my children personally,” the Composer said with absolute sincerity.

He couldn’t even imagine that. He could maybe remember the names of fifty people, and after that... things got a little hard.

“And you said you left them encased in ice, using Nomos’s spear back in the Penumbra?”

“Yeah,” Shiv said. “I wanted to bring it back to you, but it was destroyed when Marikos blew the mountain apart. I didn’t know someone could channel that much fire.”

“Well, yes,” the Composer said with a slight sneer. “He’s quite destructive when he gets into one of his tantrums.” She hummed as she looked over the others. “Children, you may go. You have done me a great service in bringing the surfer here safely and ensuring the delivery of the honored Valor Thann. However, I ask that you leave the dagger in the hands of our newest guest, the honored Shiv, who fought so hard to defend Weave from a most unexpected enemy today. Shiv, would you mind staying a while longer? I have something to talk to you about.”

Shiv froze. He wasn’t expecting this. He looked at Uva, trying to gauge how the Umbral would react, but a look of naked surprise and uncertainty washed over her as well.

“Well, since you asked so nicely,” he said, trying to keep his tone casual.

This time, Uva didn’t send him a telepathic message. She simply jabbed him with her elbow and frowned.

The Composer laughed again, then flicked her hands. “Now, off with you. I want to have a private conversation—one that, uh, concerns very personal matters that might have to do with the safety of the Weave, and, from what I can tell, a war... to stop a war with the surface.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, the Weaveresses and the Umbrals saluted their Exalted Mother, and all of them retreated. Before they left, however, Uva cast Shiv a final glance.

*“Be careful. Mind how you speak. Don’t lie. Never lie to her.”*

And then she moved on. Shiv blinked, watching as a layer of animated webs sealed the path behind the departing group.

“Finally, we are alone,” the Composer said, letting out a breath. “It’s very hard sometimes, always bearing a regal demeanor in front of one’s own children, Valor. But they need something to believe in—something greater than themselves. And, well, I suppose one has to be greater when the burdens of divinity are one’s inheritance.”

Valor stayed quiet, but Shiv himself considered the statement. “I can’t quite say. I’m not divine. I have no experience in divine matters.”

The Composer considered him. “But you were Omenborn, weren’t you? You know something of legacy more than most.” A sudden alarm washed through Shiv. He didn’t know how to react.

"I'm not accusing you," the Composer continued, leaning in very, very close—her vast face taking up his entire field of view. He could make out his body's reflection in her glistening eyes. "... can feel the traces of a broken Curse in you. And your Path has such an interesting title... I have to ask: How do you do it? How do you come back from the dead?"

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

## 17 (I) Quest

*Quests are something that all Pathbearers desire, but few will ever encounter. It takes a divine entity, or in extreme cases, the System itself, to issue forth Quests. They are events of massive importance, often determining the fates of entire towns, cities, or even kingdoms, such as:*

### **Stop the First Great Incursion**

*Perhaps the most well-known Quest came during the early days of the System's integration.*

*The Incursions, as they were called, saw the invasion of new species from other dimensions, trying to conquer our world. This resulted in the creation of the first great nations across Integrated Earth, for we needed to band together—not only as rogue, wandering hedge Pathbearers, but as true organized armies in our own right—to withstand the onslaught of the enemy, and to venture forth into the gates to halt the invasion for good.*

*According to historical records, it was only after this Quest was completed that all the ambient mana from these external dimensions flooding our world was naturalized as a reward, allowing a Pathbearer to go beyond the limit of Master Tier.*

*A Quest is a goal, or many goals, that need to be fulfilled for great rewards—sometimes allowing someone to obtain the skill of their choosing, a powerful weapon, or an item that is desired by many.*

*But beware, there are consequences should one fail a Quest.*

*As we have discussed in the chapter on contracts, two souls are usually bound after the creation of a contract, with skills put up as collateral. A sundering takes place if either side breaks their bargain, and the Quest will deliver its own penalty. Or worse, a failed Quest could bestow curses or even unleash calamities upon the world, such as the*



*unleashing of Lie Tian Hu, the savage Storm Titan who still reigns over the Vast Atlantic and launches invasions onto our shores.*

*Should you be fortunate enough to obtain a Quest, understand that you bear a great burden as well as a great boon. Succeed, and you rise beyond what you could have dreamed of.*

*Fail, and be broken—potentially breaking the world alongside you as well...*

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

17 (I)

Quest

“Before we continue, please don’t lie to me,” the Composer said. Her face was stern, hard as a statue. “I loathe lying. There’s nothing I hate more than a liar, so please don’t make me hate you, Shiv. I don’t want to hate what seems like a good man.”

Shiv looked at her, swallowing. After all of that—after killing the raven to hide his secret—she knew. All along, she knew. She—

Before he could answer her, another question came up. “Wait, if you were aware of what I was the entire time, why didn’t you just kill the raven?” he asked.

“I wanted to see what you were capable of, and if they actually knew you. You must understand that not even my home is entirely safe. The agents of New Albion are everywhere. And though my web stretches far across the abyss, I know little of the surface. Frankly, you are, in ways, more of an enigma to me than I am to you.”

“I very much doubt that,” Shiv muttered. “I keep hearing about this New Albion. Valor warned me about them.” He held up the dagger. “But I barely know about New Albion. From what the Republic says, they’re like a small backwater nation that’s barely worth mentioning—that they’re lucky to exist with our protection.”

The Composer’s face contorted in an expression of barely suppressed mirth. “The Yellowstone Republic said that about New Albion... Well, the Auroral Council’s arrogance...” Her expression turned serious again. “No, New Albion’s power makes them among the greatest nations on post-Integration Earth. Few have the resources and influence of the Stolen Throne, and all are wary of its spies.”

Shiv frowned. “Except for me, apparently. I don’t really know anything. But I’m not a spy. I’m not from New Albion.”

**Foreshadowing: From afar, a man with a Mythical set of artificial eyes watches the Composer's nest. He flickers into Weave only briefly, stealing a glance before vanishing. He does this several times—never staying in one place. He wonders why he agreed to this assignment just days before his retirement. And why the Throne is so interested in the least hostile of all the Abyssal Nations...**

### **Foreshadowing > 3**

The Composer observed him for a long moment. "I believe you, mainly because of your Path. They wouldn't risk someone like you on mere tradecraft alone. And that's what I want to talk about: Why can't you die?"

Shiv licked his lips, unsure how to proceed.

*"Shiv. What is she talking about?"* Valor said.

Great. Now he had to explain to Valor why he was lying the entire time. Shiv closed his eyes. "I don't know. I don't know how it works. It just happened. I gained the Path the first time I died. When the raven killed me."

"Oh, so that was a thing of revenge. I was wondering why you were so vicious with him," the Composer said, seemingly entranced by his story. "Oh, continue, please."

"Yeah. So, where do I begin?" Shiv went into some detail about his past. He went through as much as he could. His upbringing. The ritual his parents did. Him being an Omenborn, and how Roland Arrow dealt with him. After that, he managed to skip most of his miserable years as a street rat before his acceptance into Georges's kitchen and his determination to gain a Path before he finally got to the point of the present.

To his surprise, though, the Composer knew who the Town Lord was.

"The Dread Horizon," she whispered.

"The Dread what now?" Shiv said.

"That is what we call him. During his invasion into our depths, he slew many, destroyed cities with the other surfacers, and displaced countless people."

Shiv just stared. "What invasion?"

"They didn't tell you this? The surface nations... They pushed into the Abyss after their victory during the Eclipse. At first, they were pursuing the Necrotech Legions, and we allowed it to be, for it was the Necrotechs who brought misfortune upon themselves. But the surfaces, and the Yellowstone Republic especially—they continued pressing on, pushing further. It took the Five Faiths uniting to halt the surfer advance. It was an

unprecedented, fragile union, considering only just a few years before we were all at war with each other: the Second War of Faiths... War of the Five."

The Composer fell silent for a few moments. "That was likely also the reason why we couldn't protect ourselves. So often, we strike at each other—mauling and bleeding and committing atrocities in the name of my fallen progenitor." Her voice took on a mournful quality. "We cannot unite. We are too different. And so, we hurt ourselves worse than any surfer could. It might be our undoing in the long run."

Shiv blinked as he tried to process the information. The history books distinctly ended with the Yellowstone Republic victoriously defeating the Abyssal legions of the Necrotechs and pushing them back into the Abyss. But they did not speak of a counter-invasion. Frankly, none of the soldiers he knew talked about it, not even those veterans from the campaign. Something was very wrong here. Shiv shook his head.

"All right, well, I didn't know anything about that. But Roland Arrow is Blackedge's Town Lord. And the rest—the rest is the absolute truth of what I know."

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"You said your parents performed a foul ritual behind your birth. You suspect that to be why you have your Path?"

"Yeah," Shiv said uneasily. "My Curse went away. It had the condition that something terrible would bear fruit after meeting a certain requirement. I suspect that requirement was my death." He chuckled. "It wasn't as bad as I thought it might be. And probably not nearly what Roland Arrow feared." Come to think of it, this might have been his parents' plan all along. "If Roland Arrow had the strength to kill me, I might have gotten a Path a long time ago..."

*"This is impossible,"* Valor said, processing everything. *"It just is. There is... This goes against everything I know about Necromancy and Animancy."*

"Animancy?" Shiv asked.

"Animancy," the Composer explained, "is the study of souls. It is the direct modification of a Path, of every component that makes up a person's being. It is a new skill—one very few have."

*"We know enough about the soul, however,"* Valor pressed, entering the conversation. *"We know enough that vitality, the mind, and the soul itself are three separate components. They work in harmony, but they are not a single construct. If what Shiv says is true, that means his mind is bound to his vitality and soul like a single unit. That's the only way he should retain vitality after the destruction of his body. This makes him fundamentally different in composition compared to every other soul in*

*existence. At least, every other soul we've seen. Even dimensionals fall under these rules, alien though their mana might be."*

Shiv was reeling.

Valor continued. *"The Eclipsebreakers and the raiders from the surface gained access to many of our secrets when they captured and razed the fortress city of Submission. But there wasn't enough time for this. How—how could they understand? How could they know what we spent centuries—no, longer—mastering ourselves? I'm telling you, it is not possible. Not... not without... not without..."* Valor trailed off. His tone became ice-cold. *"Not without substantial help. Not without someone who knows more about Animancy than even I do."*

The Composer looked troubled, and Valor was silent.

"So, what does this all mean? Is there something wrong with me?" Shiv looked between the dagger and the goddess.

"On the contrary," the Composer said, looking at him with renewed interest. "You might be special. That is why one of your skills is Unique—because no one else has it. In a sense, you have a composite body: something that has your mind, your soul, and your vitality bound together, hence allowing you to exist in a state of disembodied, incorporeal life."

*"...and not the kind where one escapes death through the Ritual of the Dichotomous Soul,"* Valor elaborated. *"You simply can maintain yourself by draining another. Or so it sounds."*

"For a time," the Composer said, "your vitality field is—it's very, very chaotic. Your body gives it a stable shape, but the moment you lose your material form..."

"I start getting colder." Shiv added, "I start dissipating."

"Yes, I suspect you will cease to be... without draining a surplus of vitality from someone else," the goddess finished. Both the Composer and Valor were now quiet, each lost in thought.

"So," Shiv said, "am I going to be put in a cage? Are you going to experiment on me? If you reach into my mind, I..." He clenched his teeth. "I will kill myself, you understand. I will do my best to escape from you. I will destroy myself for good before I let you take me as a slave. This is my honesty."

The Composer almost looked offended. Her many fingers clasped together, and she shook her head. "You have not had the best experiences with authority, have you?"

“Yeah, well, you can say that again,” Shiv said, thinking of his upbringing, of his last conversation with Roland Arrow. “But my Path is also Unique. I have a Unique Skill—a Legendary Skill. This must be interesting to some people, right?”

“Yes, but—well, we don’t need to make a slave of you to learn about this. In fact, it is pointlessly brutal to do something in that way. It’s honestly quite hurtful that you would think that of me,” the Composer finished, and she pouted. Again, the shift between girl and goddess was quick and sudden.

Shiv started to feel bad. He wasn’t expecting this. After years of Republic propaganda, he expected monsters, horrors, and nightmares lurking around every corner. Instead, he found—well, he was finding that he liked this place more than he liked it back home on Blackedge.

“I’m sorry,” Shiv said. “The things I grew up learning in the Republic, the things I thought about the Abyss—it’s just none of it is true. None of it.”

The Composer looked upon him with pity. “You’ve had a hard life, Shiv. I’m surprised you are the way you are. Many would break under these circumstances. Sorrow would seep into their souls, I’ve heard it—the songs, low and mournful.”

Shiv looked at her and shook his head. “I thought about that a few times, and I wouldn’t give the world the pleasure. World won’t stand for me? Fine, I do. I’ll be my own champion since the gods apparently hate me, and since everyone hates me. It’s the way it is, it’s the way it will be, it’s the way I will always be.” He was resolute. Even before he had his Path, that was the truest thing Shiv knew about himself. He wasn’t going to betray his own heart, not for a second.

A moment passed as the Composer studied him, and slowly, she smiled. It was a genuine, appreciative smile. “You’re a very precious boy, you know that?”

“I—what?”

“Very precious,” she said again. “Well, after hearing all this, I will need to convene with a web of my eldest daughters.”

*“Will I need to be in attendance as well?”* Valor asked. *“You do know I hate these things.”*

“I think I will spare you this time,” the Composer said. “Besides, I think it’s best that you stay with Shiv for now, until I figure out the rest of your situation.”

“My situation? I have a situation?”

*“Yes, let’s talk about that, now that we’ve finished with his problems,”* Valor said. *“And Shiv, we will be talking about this afterward.”*

Shiv swallowed. "Yeah, sorry about hiding all that from you."

Valor didn't acknowledge that, and Shiv felt worse. "*Now, let's talk about my problem,*" Valor said. "*Did you find the remnants of my soul or not?*"

"I know where they are," the Composer said with a slightly apologetic smile.

"*Composer,*" Valor said. "*You have no idea how mad I am right now. If I weren't trapped in this dagger...*"

"You would probably be strangling me," the Composer guessed quickly.

"Yes," Valor said.

Shiv tried to imagine that. "How big are your hands, Valor? How big are you, actually?"

Valor let out a surprised sputter. "*How big am... I won't... I'd use magic for that, Shiv. And I was being figurative!*"

But Shiv's question broke the tension in the air, and the Composer started laughing again. "Oh, he is precious. He is truly, truly precious," she said. "But, Valor, we really know where the pieces of your soul are. We just don't have all of them yet. A few are held within my vaults. I will return them as soon as I can, provided that you agree to the Quest I have for you. But as for the four others... One of them is still with the Necrotechs in the Moonlit Library. Two are held by the Descenders. And the last one—the last one might be the most difficult."

"*And why is that?*" Valor said, dreading.

"Because the last one was brought into a gate during a crusade into another world. A crusade led by Compact." A moment passed, and Valor did something that Shiv never expected him to do.

Valor started cursing. Very loudly, very angrily. He cursed Compact in every way, begging for their children to be born wrong, to be born *simple* of mind and *crippled* of flesh. He prayed to the Great One, asking every member of Compact to have their greatest skills shattered and for them to gain the Path of Slave. And he finally cursed someone called the Suzerain in especially vivid detail.

With every word that Valor spoke, Shiv's eyes widened further, and the Composer shared his expression. He looked up at her. "Is he... alright?" he muttered.

"No," the Composer said. "He is very upset right now. In fact, I don't think I've seen him this upset since the last time we fought."

*“Well, this is just—this is grand!”* Valor ground out. *“How am I supposed to return now with that piece missing? Ah, of course! We just need to find the dimension that it got lost in and then retrieve it. Which means an invasion. It means that we need to perform an incursion on another world, Composer.”* His voice rose, each word building in rage. *“Have you considered that? Do you have an army ready to invade another world?”*

“Invading another world?” Shiv said. “Like what happened to ours all the way back in the Apocalyptic Era?”

“Yes,” Valor replied. *“Invasions will always trigger a Quest for all locals of that world to bring their collective power to bear against the invaders. A war like no other.”*

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“I’ll come up with a plan,” the Composer said quickly. “Don’t worry—just be patient for a little while longer.”

*“I’ve been patient for the past forty years!”* Valor almost screamed. *“Forty years in the darkness! Forty years of no sight, no feeling, no impression of anything. Forty years and no one to talk to. No one! Forty years imprisoned by my own son for doing the right thing!”*

Both Shiv and the Composer were dead-silent now.

*“Forty years...”* Valor finished. By the end, the great hero sounded like he was weeping.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

## 17 (II) Quest

17 (II)

Quest

Shiv, not sure what else to do, awkwardly patted the dagger. “I’m sorry,” he muttered.

After a moment, Valor let out a sigh. *“It’s... Thank you, Shiv. It’s alright.”*

Shiv didn’t think so. Forty years in the dark sounded... Well, it didn’t sound great. He tried to imagine how he would handle that. *I’d probably go insane*, Shiv thought. *Actually, it might be in my best interest to go insane. Forty years... Broken Moon, I don’t even want to think about one year in the darkness.*



“There, there,” the Composer said. “I will make sure you are whole again. I swear to you, on the Quest I will bestow, and for all the things you’ve done for me, for all the wrongs you have righted. Do you believe me? Will you believe me like you used to?”

There was a pause in the air, and it dragged until even the Composer looked uneasy. Finally, Valor gave his answer. “Yes. Yes, *I do*.”

“Good,” the Composer said, her face relaxing into relief. “Nonetheless, you’ve both undergone a significant ordeal, and I cannot express how grateful I am to you, Shiv, for seeing Valor delivered here. The city will know what you have done, and you will be rewarded for your efforts. But I have something more to ask of you.”

Shiv looked at her. “What kind of something more?” he said, worry creeping into his voice.

“Everyone in the Abyss bears the Light Curse,” the Composer explained, “from the youngest Umbral to even I, a divinity. *Those who are born in the dark—born of the Great One’s descent—shall not know the light without suffering a brand upon their soul.*” She recited the words as though reading from memory.

It took Shiv a moment to realize she was reading the description of her Curse. “It says that?” Shiv muttered. “Why?”

“I do not know,” the Composer replied. “I suspect it was a Curse born by the Great One as well, when they finally escaped their shell.”

“Their shell?” Shiv asked.

“*The moon*,” Valor provided, and everything clicked for Shiv.

“Broken Moon... *That’s* why people use it as a curse?” he sputtered.

“I suspect so,” the Composer said in a sing-song voice. “Anyhow, I might need you to do something to our mutual benefit. In the near future, I believe the Five Faiths will be calling a conclave—the first one in many years.”

“I... You want me to stand testimony there?” Shiv said.

“Absolutely not,” she interjected, gazing upon him with a stern expression. “There are those who will kill you for merely being here. The Necrotechs—they have not forgiven the surfacers for the destruction of Submission. They might never forgive the surfacers for that. Your very presence will be taken as a breach of the truce—the truce between the Auroral Council and the Abyssal Nations. Something that Vicar Sullain is doing right now, in his mad quest to redeem himself for his failure.”

Shiv stared at her. “So, what do you want me to do?”

"I want you to end the war before it properly begins," she said. "You are the only one who can move freely between the surface and the Abyss without suffering from the Curse. And, frankly, you're an outsider—one who has vested interests but no true ties. You are, in a word, perfect for this task."

*"Of course you're doing this right now,"* Valor said. *"Of course you're recruiting a new 'sister' for the cause."*

"Sister?" Shiv looked at the dagger. "But I'm not a... I'm not... I'm not sister material."

"You can be," the Composer said, showing a toothy smile. Shiv suddenly felt terrified.

*"She's being metaphorical,"* Valor explained.

"It can also be quite literal," the Composer interjected. Shiv felt her Biomancy field flickering around him, and his eyes widened in alarm.

"I... uh, I like being a brother," he said.

"Oh, you like being a brother?" she replied, barely able to restrain her laughter.

"Yeah, I do. There are lots of things I like about being a brother. Lots of parts. One part in particular."

"Ah, I tease, I tease. But I am serious about what I said. I need you. The Abyss needs you, and the surface likely needs you as well—though the ones from your home might have mistreated you, so..."

Shiv nodded. "Yeah, they're kind of bastards," he agreed, "but there are people I don't want to see die, and there are people that probably don't deserve to die, even if they're bastards."

"That is a very mature attitude to have," she said, "and, frankly, you'll be saving many lives. I have means of returning you to the surface." Shiv felt a weight lift off his shoulders. "That does not mean it will be an easy path back to the Surface," the Composer continued, and some of the weight returned to Shiv. "But there is a gateway we can potentially use, and I can help you pass through. On top of that, I would like to open Weave to you and name you an honored guest. We will treat you as one of ours—so long as you follow our laws and customs."

"And obey your every word," Shiv joked.

"Impossible," the Composer said, waving her hand dismissively. "Not even my own daughters do that."

Shiv grinned. *Yeah, it's nice meeting a goddess with a sense of humor.*

"I understand that there are forms of education you're interested in pursuing. I shall make sure that my halls of learning are open to you as well."

"Thanks," Shiv said.

"It's also prudent," the Composer added. "It wouldn't do to have you return unready for conflict and as strong as you can be. Which brings me to my next point: the other person—the boy under the care of my Biomancers—do you truly not know him, or—"

"No, I was lying about that," Shiv said, wincing. "Sorry, I... uh... He's... Adam Arrow."

**"Adam Arrow!"** the Composer screamed. Shiv felt his Diamond Shell come in handy again, as he was blown off his feet and flung against a webbing. He bounced off and awkwardly walked back to the edge of the platform.

"All the shouting Marikos did got me well-conditioned," Shiv muttered quietly.

"Oh, I apologize," the Composer said, covering her mouth. "I didn't mean to—"

"It's okay. You weren't as bad as the dragon."

"I hope not," she muttered, narrowing her eyes. "But anyway, Adam Arrow! The... the Dread Horizon's offspring!"

"Yeah," Shiv said. "He's also kind of an asshole."

She looked at him. "Is that a euphemism?"

"Yes. It's what we call people we don't like."

"Oh. Well, he is mistreating some of my Biomancers and making demands to be set free. They have applied restraints."

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That made Shiv smile. "Yeah, you know, maybe add a few more. He's pretty dangerous."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, as many as you can. And gag him, too. He has some kind of mouth skill."

"Mouth skill," she said, like she didn't believe him. "Shiv, are you lying to me?"

"Maybe a bit," he admitted.

She glared.

"I'm sorry," Shiv whispered.

"It's fine. Just don't do it again."

"I should probably go speak to him afterward," Shiv said. "Explain things to him."

"I thought you said he was an *asshole*."

"Yeah, but asshole doesn't mean enemy," Shiv explained. "It's just someone you don't like, you know—his personality. It's like, you know, he treated me like Sister Nomos did." Follow current novels

The Composer looked at him for a long while. "Oh, I see, I see. He's an unpleasant person."

"Yes, not an enemy," Shiv replied. "Just kind of a prick."

"Well, that clarifies things. And he will help you?"

"Absolutely," Shiv said without hesitation. "He might be an asshole, but he's a brave asshole, and his home is at stake. He cares about Blackedge more than I ever will, and he definitely cares about his father. Then, well, he's got a fiancée up there, so he probably wants to get back to her as well. What I'm saying is, he has a lot of skin in this game."

"So you think we can enlist his aid?" she said.

"I think I can probably enlist his aid, maybe," Shiv muttered. He thought about it, and he increasingly found himself unsure. Adam really didn't like Shiv—he knew that. But being surrounded by Umbrals and beings from the Abyssal Depths, and considering what kind of propaganda he'd been fed at the capital...

*Yeah, best I still talk to him when I have time. Maybe later.*

"Very well," the Composer said. "But if he proves a danger—"

"If he proves a danger, just pop him." Shiv nodded. "I'm not asking you to put your people and your city at risk. Just, you know, give me some time to work with him. We'll see what I can do."

"Very well, Shiv. I appreciate this. You have already helped quite a bit. Finally, before I let you go and seek a place of rest and recovery, I have something for you."

"For me?"

“Yes. I have this.” To his surprise, the Composer placed both her hands together as a flow of golden patterns came into shape. Gold turned to blue to the purest white, and he felt all spectrums of mana merge together until it was something pristine, something beyond his description. Slowly, she held it forward to him. It resembled a gleaming shape of some kind, its geometry hard for him to comprehend.

As she held her hands before him, Shiv looked into the light and breathed in slowly. “What is this?”

“It is a Quest, if you will accept it. Reach out with your hand and the conditions will reveal themselves to you—and only you.”

Shiv hesitated for a moment, then extended a finger, dipping it into the radiance.

**Quest Gained: Break Vicar Sullain’s siege of Blackedge and stop another war between the surface and the Abyss before it can begin.**

**Success: Evolve an [Existing Skill] to Legendary Tier.**

**Failure: The Abyss rises, consuming all surface territory of Lost Angeles.**

Shiv studied the conditions of his Quest for a long while. The reward was nice, but the failure condition... “Why is the penalty so severe?” he asked.

“Often I ask myself that question as well,” she replied.

Shiv looked at her. “Wait—you didn’t decide this?”

“No.” She shook her head. “I am merely a divine entity—a god. I bestow the quest, and I can weave some of its requirements, but the reward and the penalty are decided by the System. I am,” she paused, “like a conduit for the System, as all gods are.”

“As all gods are...” Shiv repeated, not fully comprehending.

“You asked me earlier why I didn’t simply strike down your adversary. Well, there is a very simple reason why: gods are not meant to directly interfere in most mortal matters. There are restrictions and penalties placed upon me as well. Due to the unique situation behind my birth, however, I have a bit more flexibility than most gods, but not that much more. I can empower and aid my children, but *rarely* more. And only in very specific and very extreme circumstances can a true god truly reach into the mortal realm.”

Shiv took note of what she said at the end—“true god.” She probably wasn’t a true god, he realized. Maybe something half-immortal? Half-divine? Something that would allow her to remain in the material dimension. He didn’t voice that, but she nodded, and he understood.

After a moment's consideration, Shiv accepted the Quest. He didn't intend to fail. To his surprise, a new section was added to his personal status. He could now view the Quest at any time.

"Perfect," the Composer said, clapping her hands together. The loud sound made Shiv jump a little, but he composed himself.

He looked around. "So what now?"

"Now? Now you should go rest," she said. "After a long ordeal like that... I will go over more things with you in the meantime. Including how you might traverse between the Abyss and the surface. We can talk when you're less exhausted."

"I'm not that tired but..." Shiv yawned. "Okay, but I'm probably more mentally tired than physically." He rolled his shoulders. "Say, is there somewhere I can get some cooking done?"

"Cooking?" she echoed.

"Yeah—cooking. I, uh, just finished killing a guy. I think I need to work off some of that stress."

She looked at him thoughtfully. "I see. I will make the arrangements." She grinned. "Oh, I'll make the arrangements indeed." Her eyes narrowed.

Shiv wasn't sure how he felt about that.

"And do take Valor with you. I think you two are good together. It will keep him company."

*"Do I get a say in this?"* Valor asked, his voice rife with sarcasm.

"I could give you to one of my Honored Daughters. They'll be sure to ask you about all your escapades so many times."

*"Please, please, let me stay with Shiv,"* Valor begged, and that was exactly what the Composer expected.

She looked especially smug. "Now, off with you. Go get some rest. Enjoy my city."

As Shiv awkwardly offered her a salute, she covered her mouth and laughed, and he slowly retreated from the room, feeling more dazed and overwhelmed than ever before.

"This is a lot to take in," he muttered to himself.

*“For both of us,”* Valor said. *“Now, we still need to talk about your special circumstances.”*

“Uh, yeah,” Shiv muttered. “Sorry about that.”

*“No, no—again, it’s understandable, it’s just...”* Valor hesitated. *“Is that how you managed to make it here? And all the times I lost contact with you... You were dying?”*

Shiv looked at Valor. “I mean, I wasn’t lying about just becoming a Pathbearer a few days ago. “

*“And that’s why your Toughness is so high—because you’ve been killed over and over again?”*

Shiv nodded, then realized this dagger couldn’t see him. “Yeah.”

*“My... my boy, how are you... How are you not insane?”* Valor asked.

Shiv stared at the dagger. “What do you mean?”

*“Dying is traumatic, is it not?”*

Shiv considered it. “I mean, it hurt, and some of my deaths were ugly, but you know, I got skills out of it.” He shrugged. “So, it’s not that bad. It’s pretty good, actually. Educational.”

*“I... I don’t... I don’t know what to say to that,”* Valor said. *“You have an exceptional mind to accept this state of affairs.”*

Somehow, Shiv didn’t know if that was a compliment or not.

As he departed the tunnel from which he came, he was surprised to find someone familiar standing at the end, waiting for him. There was Sister Uva, with both arms folded behind her back and a slightly awkward look on her face.

“Honored guest,” she greeted.

“Sister Uva,” Shiv said. “What are you still doing here?”

A part of him was actually pleased to see her. It would be nice to have someone to guide him. “I am assigned to be your guide,” she said, “to familiarize you with Weave.” She swallowed slightly. “And I understand you will be carrying the great Valor Thann with you?”

“Yeah, seems to be the case,” Shiv said. “So, uh, did you get a Quest from the Composer too?”



“You got a Quest?” she asked, her breath coming fast and excited. She quickly looked around and leaned in. “Don’t just tell everyone you have a quest! Have you no sense?”

Shiv shook his head. “Not really.”

“You...” She let out an exasperated sigh. “Just don’t. Come with me. I’ll get you out of here before anyone else hears you.”

He followed her and found himself appreciating her reactions.

“So—you don’t have one?”

“No, I don’t,” she said, a little too quickly, a little too annoyed.

“What do you have? Did she communicate with you telepathically?”

Uva didn’t respond.

“So that’s a yes,” Shiv said. He could see something in her body language changing. He had to keep needling her—he couldn’t help it. “Do you know where we’re going?”

She paused and turned. “I understand that you wish to cook?”

“Yeah,” he said. “You want to have a taste?”

She blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Of my food. I just finished killing a guy after an ugly, brutal fight. Now I cook to balance that out. So, would you like to have a taste of some food?”

Her mouth fell open, but no words came out at first. “Yes?”

Shiv smirked. “Alright. Well, let’s see how this goes.

“Am I going to regret this?” Uva said.

Shiv grinned. “Nah. I’m a pretty good chef.”

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

## 18 (I) “Relax”

*Rest is essential. Rest is non-negotiable. Rest is something many Pathbearers neglect during their journey to obtain more power and advance their standing in the world. You cannot overcome an injury through determination. You cannot overcome a lack of proficiency in a single day—or avenge a defeat in a single instant.*

*You simply cannot.*

*Face this. It is as much a fundamental truth as the sun rising in the morning, as mana pervading this world, as the Auroral Council watching over us eternal.*

*You need rest to recover from what you have done, what you have experienced, to internalize your trials and tribulations into something useful. Yet, to rest does not mean to languish. “Rest” does not mean “do nothing.” Rest also comes with its own work, its own preparations. It does not mean to go idle and drown yourself in meaningless pleasures. It means to calm your mind, recover, so that you can come back stronger next time.*

*And recovery can also bleed into other skills.*

*Hence, this is why we recommend all martial classes pick up something related to craftsmanship, a hobby, something that can nurture your spirit and regain your focus. When you are tired of one skill, you can seek and improve another. Those who dedicate themselves to the front line might wish to look into blacksmithing, or perhaps chess—some form of strategy. Majors should think about taking courses on engineering or physics, on top of their already required curriculum. But only things you enjoy.*

*This is essential. Do not simply take a class for synergy. That is not rest. That is building more strain. And if you are strained further, your skills will slow. We repeat this: your skills will slow. Even cooking—though it might not have a direct bearing on combat—is a good separate skill to have. After all, it is important to feed oneself and another. Besides, you will likely not always be at war, and there are more battlefields than the obvious one. Sometimes, the best skill to have is not the one that kills, but the one that nourishes, the one that feeds, and the one that makes you new friends.*

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

18 (I)

“Relax”

After finishing with the Composer, Uva guided him back to another platform, where they summoned a new demon, and she took him straight to his temporary residence. Shiv was surprised that he was going to get a temporary residence, but the Composer did say she would reward him.

*I suppose this comes with doing a great deed*, Shiv thought as his heart beat faster. He remembered the hovel he lived in back on Blackedge. For years, after he was processed by the orphanage, he was left to fend for himself. Frankly, he started fending for himself even earlier, considering how the other children and matrons treated him.

After a few years of alley diving—knife fighting drunks who tried to rob or assault him in the middle of the night—he finally found a place to live when he was pilfering from the dumpster behind the Swan-Eating Toad. It was Georges who happened upon him while trying to have a smoke. That was also the same day he started as a chef, for the man saw him holding a knife, trying to peel a potato.

That was the first time Georges yelled at Shiv, chewing him out for improperly peeling the potato, leaving chunks of edible bits lost to the trash. *Good times*, Shiv thought to himself.

The demonic manta-thing touched down between four large buildings, each of them holding a separate mural of a different Weaveress. The first held a scepter, the second a large halberd, the third a tome of some kind, and the fourth the hand of a small Umbral child.

*There's very much a running theme here*, Shiv observed. *The Weaveresses are in control of everything. The Umbrals are always in service or being saved. Interesting culture. Kind of a fixed hierarchy, though.* Back in the Republic, anyone could technically be anything regardless of their race, but most high-ranking administrative roles were filled by automata, and most combat-heavy roles were human centric. Demographics had a way of skewing things...

Sister Uva led him along a bridge into one of these residential blocks, where he was surprised to find that every single building had an elevator that could go up and down. He was also proving to be quite the public attraction, considering how many Weaveresses, weavers, and Umbrals took notice of him.

"You are a surfacers, so your presence here will not be..." Sister Uva tried to find the words.

"You mean I'll be seen like an exotic animal wandering around," Shiv said.

She winced. "I wouldn't put it that way."

Shiv grimaced but didn't complain. "Yeah, I don't like being looked at that much by this many people either, but I'll handle it. I always handle it."

Uva eyed him for a moment. They entered an elevator, and a small umbral child with her mother briefly glanced at both Uva and Shiv before they quickly stepped off the elevator.

"Is that... is that one of the light-cursed, Mommy?" the small Umbral said, pointing at Shiv.

Her mother pulled the child along, telling her to hurry and not to draw his attention.

"Well, that hasn't changed," Shiv muttered.

"Don't mind them," Uva said. "They don't know you. They'll take some time to warm up. When the Composer has her Weaveresses announce your great deed, you can expect the reception to change. The news will latch on as well. You'll be surprised at how one's reputation can shift in an instant."

Shiv shrugged. "I don't really care that much, either. I'm used to it."

"Used to..." Uva asked, "people not liking you? Why?"

"Well," Shiv sighed, "it's a long story."

"As your guide, I have time now. It is my official capacity to listen to your long stories." He saw the faint flicker of a smile on her face, and slowly, Shiv felt his apprehension dissolve a bit.

"Do you want to be here, Uva?" Shiv asked. His question took her by surprise. She hit a button, and their elevator started going up.

"I've been told to, by the Composer herself. It's a great honor."

"But do you want to be?" Shiv pressed. "Because if you don't, I wouldn't mind if—"

"No, no," Uva said. "I..." Slowly, she reached out with her arm and wrapped her hand around his bicep. Shiv blinked, and he went very still. She pressed her thumb against his arm, and he realized she was feeling for the wound he took for her earlier. "Well, healed, no scarring..."

If you stumble upon this narrative on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen from NovelFire. Please report it.

"What are you doing, Uva?" Shiv said, his heartbeat quickening slightly.

"Just... I never thanked you earlier," she said. "The strike—I saw it coming too. I just wasn't fast enough. It would have pierced me. It might have killed me."

Sister Uva blinked and looked aside, as if realizing the weight of her own mortality.

Shiv shrugged. "Yeah, well, I couldn't let him do that. Not after everyone else he hurt and killed."

Her hand lingered on his arm for a brief while. "Thank you. It was brave and..." She paused, searching for the words. "I apologize for how I acted when we first met."

Shiv waved her off. "You had a job to do. I just... It still stands. Outside in the wilderness, I ran into a mind weaver, and, well, that much you know. When they reached into my mind..."

"You felt like your sense of self was being destroyed. You were afraid that you would be enslaved."

"Yeah," Shiv said. The admission left a bitter taste in his mouth. "It's one of the few things I think I do fear now. One of the only things."

"I understand," Uva said. "It is something that all Psychomancers fear as well. We have a better understanding of our vulnerability than most others."

"You do?" Shiv said.

"Yes, because the first mind you learn to control as a Psychomancer is your own. If you cannot master your own emotions or guide them, then someone else will. And if someone else can, then they control you."

He took this opportunity, pressing his advantage. "I have a request."

"I hope I can deliver," she said, sounding a little apprehensive.

"Can you train me, or teach me Psychomancy?"

She blinked, as if this wasn't what she was expecting. "I... it will take time for you to attune yourself to the mana. And since you are afraid of someone reaching into your mind, it's going to be difficult for you to be exposed to this kind of mana."

Shiv hesitated for a moment, then let out a long breath. "What if... what if I agree to let you touch parts of my mind for a certain period of time, when you have time? Would that help?"

She stared at him for a while. "We could start with telepathy, perhaps," she said, taking on a thoughtful expression. "You are mainly doing this for defensive purposes, yes?"

"Yeah," he said. "And according to Valor here, I don't hate magic nearly enough to get an easy Magical Resistance skill."

*"Well, considering your unique circumstances, you could find a group of mages who really, really don't like you and let them bludgeon you to death over and over again,"* Valor mused.

“What?” Uva said.

“Uh, he’s mostly joking,” Shiv added. He glared at the dagger briefly, but realized that was useless. Valor Thann could only hear him—the dagger offered no sight.

As the door opened, she led him down another set of halls, all richly decorated, with nice soft plush carpets beneath his feet. An implement by the door had ensured their shoes were clean when they entered. Shiv looked around and took in everything, feasting his eyes.

“Is this, uh, for high-class people?” he asked.

“It is a well-to-do neighborhood,” she said, “but no, it is not for especially rich people. A mixed assortment live here—mostly craftsmen and merchants and the like.”

“Huh,” Shiv muttered. “A kind of house like this would be pretty impressive back where I came from.”

“Blackedge, was it?” she asked.

“Yeah, Blackedge.”

Before they could dwell on the discussion, they finally arrived in front of a wooden door. “Here we are.”

Shiv looked at the door and found that he couldn’t quite read the letters.

“8308,” Uva told him.

“I’ll try to remember that,” Shiv said. “Also the way here.”

She eyed him briefly. “I will make sure that you are prepared to get around the city. Don’t worry.” Then, she pulled out a key and opened the door. When she was done, she handed him a key as well.

“Do you...” She looked at him and paused, closing her eyes in embarrassment.

“What? Is there something wrong?”

“I was going to ask if you have any luggage. But...”

“But the only reason I still have a shirt is because you loaned me one?” Shiv said, smirking.

Uva’s lips pressed together. “Something like that.”

She led him inside. Shiv looked around, and his mind went blank.

“So, as you can see here, you’ll have a bathroom, a living room, a master bedroom connected to the living room—like so.” She found him standing right at the doorway, staring into the bathroom.

“Is there something wrong? Is this unit not to your liking?” she asked. She paused. “You will be offered a more luxurious and permanent residence in the future, this I am sure of. After all you did—

“No, no, it’s not that,” Shiv interrupted. He just kept staring into the bathroom.

It was wide and white and pristine. There looked to be some kind of sink. There were knobs. Fresh towels. An honest-to-god bathtub with some kind of nozzle on top—plus this round-head thing—he didn’t even know what that was. And then, there was a magical toilet. He only saw that in other people’s homes. *I made do with a bucket at home. That’s why I liked to shit in the library*, Shiv thought to himself.

All this felt a bit overwhelming for him. He took a step into the bathroom and looked around. Uva followed him, her head peeking in behind the door.

“Do you find it dirty?” she asked.

“I think it’s one of the cleanest places I’ve ever been in,” he whispered. “It’s also larger than my previous home.”

“What, this unit?” Uva asked.

“No, the bathroom.” He turned and looked at her.

She blinked at him, her mouth opening and closing several times. “Is this another one of your jokes? A surferer jest?”

He shook his head. “Nope. My home was...” He gestured and came to a slight halt before the shower. “This large.”

“That’s not a home, Shiv,” she said. “It’s more like a prison. I don’t even think we leave our prisoners in cells so small.”

Shiv shrugged. “It was the only thing I could get. I rented it off the books at a little bit of a higher price.” He thought back to how Georges screamed and shouted at the renter until the man finally gave up. That was the only reason Shiv had a place to stay. Georges was particularly livid when he found out Shiv was just sleeping in the back of the restaurant.



Shiv finally broke from his trance and looked back to Uva. "Sorry, you can show me the rest of the apartment now."

And she did just that. He saw his living room, and it was nice. There was some kind of magic crystal in the center that could apparently let him glimpse other places and what she called "programs" and "live theater moments." Shiv didn't fully understand that, but he heard the richer nobility on Blackedge had something similar: entertainment channels, modeled after what the ancients supposedly enjoyed before the System's arrival.

His bedroom had a bed—a real, honest-to-System bed. It was wider than Shiv could have possibly imagined. The sheets were delightful. There were no roaches. The wind didn't come through. The roof didn't leak. There was even a cute little night lamp on the side. And cabinets—places to store clothes. Clothes he didn't have.

Shiv looked at all of this and found himself overwhelmed. This place was huge—much bigger than he anticipated. He also saw that little spot, that little section of white with pleasant countertops and cooking utensils: a small kitchen, all for his own use. He stared at that as if it was the most precious thing he'd ever seen.

"Oh yes," Uva said. "You said you were a chef. You weren't joking about that, were you?"

"No," he said. "The offer still stands. You want to try something? Is this place's pantry stocked?"

She nodded and opened the cabinet. As Shiv looked inside, he grinned.

"You got shrimp?"

"We do have seafood," she replied, "though it might not be the kind you're used to."

"I'll make do. You have cave-biter meat?"

She stared at him briefly. "There's a small amount stocked. But that's an exotic delicacy. We might have to get more after expending the ones here."

"And do you have, uh, Mendules? Little blue mushrooms?"

"Oh, yes. But what are you making?"

"I'm going to make something I made for myself on the way," Shiv said. "Something I had in a little mountain alcove while walking through the wilderness."

She blinked at him. "Is this going to be poisonous?"

“Well, it didn’t kill me.”

“Shiv, I’m beginning to suspect that nothing can kill you.”

Shiv barely suppressed his grin at Sister Uva. She didn’t know how right and wrong she was at the same time. “Have a little faith, Sister,” Shiv said. He took on a challenging, provoking expression.

She leaned back and folded her arms. “Earn it, surfer.”

Oh, it was on.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

## 18 (II) “Relax”

18 (II)

“Relax”

“By the Composer,” Uva moaned. She blinked rapidly as she put her hand over her mouth. “By the Composer,” she said again.

Shiv’s gut tightened. “What, is it bad? Do you not like it?”

She shook her head, and his heart fell briefly before she continued. “It’s great! Why are you so good at this?” She finally swallowed her food, and as it went down, so did the anxiety bunched up inside Shiv.

He let out a breath. “This is actually what I spent most of my life doing. Well, most of my life after I got a job.”

### Cooking > 21

“You said you worked as a chef. I still wasn’t sure if you were joking,” Sister Uva said, leaning back in her chair. She shook her head. “You are a man of many surprises, Shiv.”

He couldn’t help but smile. He was proud of himself. After a long day of fighting people, surviving perils, and getting killed, now he got to do his other favorite thing—and with someone else, no less: cooking.

“How did you discover how to make this?” she asked with a smile. “This is quite creative and surprising.”

“You don’t expect me to be creative and surprising?”

“Well, considering how you fought, I expected you to be blunt and brutal. No offense.”

Shiv shook his head, “None taken. I’m, uh, mostly self-trained.”

“I could see that,” Uva said.

“Did you mean offense when you said that?”

“A little bit.” She had a small smile, and he thought he quite enjoyed that small smile on her face. It made her look *rather* pretty.

She took another bite of his unique recipe, and he felt his cooking advance. *Well, that’s another good reward for the day*, Shiv thought to himself.

“So, tell me about your past. Tell me about why people don’t like you,” Uva said as she leaned back in her chair. She eyed Shiv—confused and strangely sympathetic. “So far you seem... pleasant.”

“Just pleasant?” Shiv asked.

Uva rolled her eyes. “Don’t push your luck, surfacer.”

Shiv laughed. Then the laugh faded, and Shiv started thinking about his past—his past... Why would someone want to know about that?

Shiv opened his hands and closed them again. “Well, how much do you want to know?”

“As much as you want to tell,” she said. “You can choose to not say anything. You know that, right?”

“Yeah,” Shiv said. “It’s just... All right, where do we start? Let’s begin with when everything went wrong.”

“When everything went wrong?” she echoed.

“Yeah—the day I was born.” Shiv said

Uva huffed. “Do you ever stop jesting, Shiv?”

“No, I’m not joking this time,” Shiv said. “You’re probably not going to like what I tell you.”

She blinked, and he went into detail about what his parents did, about the ritual, about the Omenborn curse. And as he did, he saw that look on her face: the brief flashes of horror, the widening of her eyes. She stopped eating, which disappointed him the most. Then he moved through the early parts of his life: the orphanage, the streets, running into Georges, the Swan-Eating Toad. And then he accelerated, talking about wanting to get a Path—and everything Georges did for him leading up to this moment. He was vague about how he eventually attained his Path, but he did say he earned it just before he got thrown off the edge by the raven-helmed stranger.

“And that’s generally everything,” he said, finishing with a huff.

A few hours had passed. He hadn’t seen much of Weave, but he didn’t feel like going out. Not today. Today was for rest and, apparently, conversation. Uva, however, seemed to have dropped out of the conversation part. She was just staring at him, saying nothing.

Finally, she picked up her fork again, skewered the last bit of cave-biter meat—drenched blue and gold by the sauce—and finished her meal. Slowly, she reached over and patted his arm. Shiv looked at her fingers: how pale they were, how thin and well-maintained her nails were.

“I’m sorry that you grew up around a bunch of dung-eaters,” Uva said simply.

That caught him by surprise. Shiv nearly folded over. “Dung-eaters? Is that what you call people you don’t like down here?”

“Yes, but they’re also a certain kind of bug—a very mean form of cockroach, the size of a small boulder.”

Shiv blinked at her. “Are you serious?”

She nodded. “If you run into one, you need to flip them over. They don’t break easily from the topside, and if you don’t have any magic... Well, Shiv, your Biomancy can probably help you here. You’ll just burst them from the inside. Do be mindful of their larger queen variants, though. Sometimes those have Magical Resistance.”

Shiv thought about that. “Yeah, thanks. I’ll keep that in mind. Do they taste good?”

She stared at him. “Are you serious?”

“I’m genuinely curious.”

“People don’t usually eat roaches, Shiv.”

“Why not?” She stared at him. “Listen, I grew up on the streets, okay?”

“Yes, but most of us don’t,” Uva replied.

Shiv sighed. “Yeah, I guess, but you can’t fault me for being curious. I’m a chef, after all.”

“Yes, but... you know, you can be selectively curious.”

“No,” Shiv said.

“No?” she replied incredulously.

“No. I’ll try everything.”

Her mouth opened, closed, and opened again before she sighed. “You are a very interesting man. A very interesting surfer.”

Shiv smirked at her. “Is that what you say to all of us?”

“Only the interesting ones,” she said. “And so far, you are one for one—which makes you the best and the worst at the same time. If we discount your badly wounded companion. Who you claim to not know.”

Shiv chuckled. He couldn’t remember enjoying a conversation this much other than with—

“*Shiv*,” Valor said.

Shiv nearly jumped. He’d forgotten about Valor’s existence. The dagger was left on a counter nearby, and Shiv went over.

“Oh, hey, Valor. Sorry, I was, uh...”

*“Yes, you were busy having conversations with other people. This is understandable. However, could you place me somewhere else? In another room, preferably? Because I’m beginning to feel like a third party in something that should only have two.”* Valor coughed.

Uva’s face reddened into a blush—and that’s when Shiv realized Umbrals could blush. He, meanwhile, kept his own redness in check as he moved Valor over to the bedroom, offering a quick apology.

As he placed Valor down, he heard the dagger murmur, *“I do think she likes you. But be perhaps a little bit more tactful.”*

Shiv blinked at the dagger. “Uh, yeah, thanks, I guess. We’re just making conversation now, is all.”

*“That’s how it always starts, Shiv. That’s how it always begins. Now, with me gone and no longer feeling the role of an unwilling wheel, talk away.”*

Shiv felt a little bad. “We can talk later, especially at night. I have a lot of explaining to do.”

*“As will I, I suppose,”* Valor said. *“But for now, just enjoy yourself. You’ve had quite the ordeal. I can wait. Because I’m going to have to wait.”* Valor promptly started grumbling about the Composer lying to him and everyone using politics against him. Shiv felt bad, but there wasn’t much he could do about that, so he went out and continued his conversation.

As he took his seat across from Uva—her head still in her hands—she said, “I am mortified and embarrassed. I have shamed myself.”

Shiv nodded. “Yeah, well, that happens sometimes. Valor is gone now, though, unless you want me to bring him back.”

“Please don’t,” she said. “I don’t think my image in the eyes of the great Valor Thann will recover.”

“Yeah, about that. You know I don’t really know anything about him, right?”

“And yet you agreed to deliver him, still.”

Shiv shrugged. “It was Nomos’s dying wish.”

Uva looked at Shiv. “This sounds terrible to say but... I heard Sister Nomos was a dung-eater.”

Shiv snorted. That was a common thread. “Yeah, she threatened to breed me before she died. What’s up with that, anyway? Is that for the Weaveresses? They implant little eggs inside people? Sounds messed up.”

Uva sighed. “We usually use bodies for that.”

“Bodies?” Shiv repeated.

“Yes—the deceased. It’s a sacred ritual.”

“It sounds strange. And horrifying,” Shiv said.

“It can be,” Uva finally admitted. “We sometimes use it on prisoners who have committed grievous wrongs.”

Shiv just stared at her. He was beginning to wonder if he'd made a mistake coming to Weave.

"You will understand in time."

"I guess," Shiv managed. "Listen, can we talk about something else other than, you know, spider breeding via corpses?"

"You started it," Uva said. She was right.

"So, uh, how about that Psychomancy?"

She stared at him. "Now, really? Aren't you tired?"

"I finished cooking for you, didn't I?"

"You barely ate anything."

Shiv shrugged. "I'll eat later. At night. It's when I usually eat anyway."

"At night?" she echoed.

"Yeah, when I'm on my own. When I have my own time."

She nodded slowly, and he felt the first touches of her mana sink into his mind.

"*Can you hear me now?*" Uva asked.

Shiv tensed, but he nodded.

"*Good. We will start slow. We will start with some basic messaging, after which I'll read your surface thoughts. And then I will show you what a few light probing attacks feel like.*"

*We're starting slow,* Shiv thought back at her.

"*Yes, but you are doing this for defense. You were traumatized before—*"

*Wouldn't call it that.*

Uva narrowed her eyes. "*Well, my brave and noble and indomitable surfer, call it whatever you will, but it left a scar, and I can still feel it.*"

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Shiv's expression flattened. *Yeah, okay. Uh, thanks.*



“Now,” Uva said, “*it is the least I can do.*” And he felt a faint trace of something else there—more than words, a building warmth.

*Was that affection?* Shiv wondered.

Once more, she spoke to him, even as the corner of her lip curled upward. “*Don’t push it, surfer.*”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Shiv replied, unable to hide a smile of his own.

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After a few hours of mental conversation and some light probing attacks that left blanks in his memory, Shiv wasn’t any closer to obtaining a Psychomancy skill, but he was less afraid of mind magic overall.

“You have very strong resilience,” Uva said. “Unnaturally strong.”

“Unnaturally strong,” Shiv echoed. “Does that mean it’ll be harder to break my mind?”

“Not really.” Uva winced a little bit. “The principles of Psychomancy are similar to Biomancy. Does your Toughness prevent your flesh from betraying itself?”

Shiv looked down. “No.”

“Yes, Shiv, I can feel how strong you are—how ironclad your will. But if I tell it to, it’ll betray you.”

“So the mind weaver I faced—the feral... The reason I’m not broken right now is because they were weak?”

“Unskilled,” Uva corrected.

“How easy would it be for you to just...” Shiv made a gesture, a clenching fist.

“Not particularly hard,” she admitted.

“Well, thanks for not doing that.”

“Thanks for not pushing my brain out of my eye sockets.”

Shiv shook his head at the memory. “We really got off to an ugly start. Yeah, I was just trying to be tough so you wouldn’t blow my mind.”

Uva stared at him. “We all do what we can for ourselves in desperate times.” Her magic receded from his mind. And then he thought back to what Foreshadowing revealed

about her: the dagger she had at her home, the death of her mother. He wasn't the only one with mental scars. Shiv also realized how fortunate it was that he hadn't thought about that while she was talking to him.

"We should continue this tomorrow. You should finally eat and actually get some rest," Uva said. "You've done a lot of things today. Trust me, in time, people will get used to you. You might be an oddity for now, but if you continue being as you are, we'll come to accept you. Blackedge..." She frowned. "I don't know why you want to bother with that place. Ah. Sorry. I sound horrible. Now I'm a dung-eater."

The Deathless shrugged. "Not all of them are bastards. I owe Georges a lot. And frankly, even though I hate him, I can't leave Roland Arrow to die."

"Because you still feel like you owe him your life. Because it was his choice not to kill you. But it was also his choice to ruin your life," Uva said. There was a little more heat in her voice now.

Shiv looked at her. "You don't know him like I do, and I barely know him, but he's a decent man—he's just not strong enough. I'm going to be strong enough. I'm not going to make the same mistake he did, no matter what."

She looked at him, and he saw in her eyes a burgeoning appreciation. "It's getting late," she said again. "I will see you in the morning. We didn't get to see much of the city today, but..."

"Well, yeah. At least I got to enjoy some cooking. And company."

She tapped her empty bowl. "Thank you. For the food. And for the company."

"It was nice. Not having someone throwing things at me, or screaming at me, or threatening to melt my mind."

She smirked. "We can still get there someday." He walked her to the door, and as she prepared to step out, she looked over her shoulder. "Keep yourself safe, Shiv."

"Yeah, I'm not planning on fighting anyone."

"You don't strike me as the person who plans to do something terrible, but I suspect trouble has a way of finding you."

"I suspect you're not wrong," Shiv replied. "Good night, Sister Uva. Oh, I'll walk you home if you want me to." She opened her mouth, and he guessed what she was going to say. "I'm not going to push my luck, though."

At that moment, she offered a genuine smile. "Good night, Shiv." And she walked away.

He watched her walk for a while, staring at her back and *other things*. “Shiv,” she sent a thought to him with her magic, “*stop staring and close the door.*” He laughed and did as he was asked.

*That was... I was wrong*, Shiv thought. *A few days ago, in that alcove, I thought that was the best day of my life. I think it just got topped.*

As he walked back into his apartment, he took another stroll around, marveling at all this space to himself. Then he made a beeline for his bedroom, because the conversations weren’t over yet.

“Sorry, Valor,” he said, genuinely apologetic. He ran his hand across the dagger and then stopped. It felt demeaning to be stroking Valor Thann like this.

*“It’s fine, Shiv. I was young once, too. I understood... I understand how it is.”* Valor Thann sounded a little miffed, though. *“Still, you know what really offended me?”*

Shiv clenched his teeth. “What?”

*“The fact that you forgot I was here.”*

“Yeah, uh...” Shiv grimaced. “Sorry.”

*“That’s why I want to stop being inside this dagger. Do you understand? How long do you think it’s been since I’ve been cooped up?”*

“Forty years,” Shiv said.

*“Yes, forty years,”* Valor said. *“You... Do you know that you were the first genuinely enjoyable conversation I had for forty years? Nomos... Great One, sometimes silence was better than her.”*

Shiv felt flattered. “Well, I’m glad I could give you that, at least. Still, how did you end up inside the dagger? You said something about your son.”

Valor didn’t reply immediately, and the silence dragged. Shiv felt like he overstepped. “If you don’t want to talk about it...”

*“Not yet,”* Valor said. *“Not about that. But what you need to know is that I was one of the first practitioners of the Dichotomous Soul Ritual. To you surfacers, this meant that I was a lich.”*

“Lich,” Shiv murmured. A term he knew. “So you could resurrect. You... you could move between bodies?”

*“Yes, in a sense,” Valor continued. “It’s much more complicated than that, though. It’s more like you’re multiplying your soul to exist in different places at once, so you can rapidly shift between vessels. Most people cannot achieve this. Even Legendary Pathbearers have a hard time completing the full ritual. I suppose the long and short of things you need to know is that most of my vessels have been sealed away. I was not easy to slay, and ultimately I suspect my captors didn’t wish to slay me—they simply wished to trap me. And so here I am, separated from the other parts of myself, like shackles partitioning my soul into different places at once. This is the only part of me that is truly conscious; the others... Great One knows how they’re being used.”*

“I suppose we’ll find out, won’t we?”

Valor let out a surprise hum. “We?”

“Yeah, you’re a dagger. How are you going to find out on your own?” he said, as it was the simplest thing in the world.

*“That is very encouraging, Shiv. I love being reminded of my predicament.”*

“Sorry.” Shiv exhaled. “But still, you know what I mean. I’m not going to leave you stuck in the dagger. Besides, the Composer said she’d help.”

*“Yes, she did say that, didn’t she?”*

“You don’t sound like you trust her very much.”

*“No, I do. I just—I’m pretty sure it will come with more stipulations and terms. So far, you are the only person I truly trust. And there are caveats to that, too.”*

“Yeah,” Shiv said, letting his breath drag. “You understand why I was apprehensive about letting you know my Path and abilities.”

*“Oh, I do. That doesn’t mean I won’t have an emotional response to it, but I do. And I don’t blame you. Still, what you’re capable of—what your parents did and achieved—it requires a level of Animacy beyond even me. And there is only one person I know of who could have possibly achieved what your parents did with you.”*

“And who’s that?” Shiv asked.

*“Udraal Thann. My son. Yes, the same one who betrayed me,”* Valor said, finishing with a cold note.

Shiv didn’t press that line of dialogue. But now, suddenly, a path took shape for Shiv. His past was open as well. He barely knew his parents; didn’t even remember what they looked like. They were so struck from the record that they might as well not have

existed. But now Valor was saying that they couldn't have achieved the ritual, at least not on their own. Udraal Thann—Valor's son. If Shiv could meet him...

*I just might find out a few things about old mom and dad.* Shiv didn't know how he felt about that. He'd cross that bridge when the time came.

*"So, aside from needing a source of vitality to drain, do you suffer anything else?"* Valor asked.

"No," Shiv said. "I just need vitality, and once it gets to a certain amount, a shadowy cocoon forms over me and I pop out."

*"How fascinating,"* Valor said. *"Well, you will need to tell me more about this and try to level the skill as much as you can."*

"You're asking me to die more?" Shiv said, deadpan.

*"I—well, yes,"* Valor replied. *"Uh, I apologize."*

"No," Shiv said. "I'm fine with it. I just... like busting your chops."

Valor paused. *"It's been a while since someone did that to me. Some might call you brave. Or foolish. I am a very feared man."*

"Well, you're a stone dagger right now," Shiv said. "If you could have killed me, well, I'd be pretty mad at you, considering you didn't help me very much in a direct fight earlier—against the weavers."

A beat followed. *"You have no idea how aggravating and correct you are, boy."*

A comfortable silence followed.

*"Shiv,"* Valor said again after a while.

Shiv hummed.

*"Do you... What is your plan for the future?"*

Shiv considered it. "Well, in the immediate future, I'm going to take some time off. I'll probably go find the Biomancers and that Weaveress who healed me earlier today. But before that, I'll need to go to a bookstore to get those books you mentioned. And, oh, damn it, I probably need to talk with Sister Uva about money tomorrow. And if they have the books in a language I can read."

"I might be able to help with the book matter—and most bookstores come with their own translation services," Valor said. "But that's not what I'm talking about. I mean, long-term—the Quest."

"Oh, yeah, I'm definitely doing that," Shiv said. "A Legendary Skill Evolution is really useful. And, uh, Blackedge does need to be saved."

He licked his lips, trying to think of how he was going to fight Vicar Sullain. "That seems more like a Roland Arrow tier problem right now," Shiv said. "Still, I don't need to fight the vicar directly if I want to save the city. I could do many other things, like perhaps—I don't know—ambush some of Sullain's troops, or even go to the capital to inform them about what's actually happening." And that is when he thought of Adam Arrow. The Young Lord would be useful in a situation like this. They might not trust Shiv, but they would definitely trust Adam Arrow.

*"And you're willing to save them, to fight for the Republic, even after all they did to you?"*

"I'm not fighting for the Republic," Shiv corrected. "I'm just doing what I think is right. And for the people who've done right by me..." Shiv paused. "I don't think of Blackedge when someone mentions the town. I think of all the bastards there who treated me poorly, but I also think of Georges, who's the only reason why I probably didn't end up dead earlier—which might have worked out for me, in retrospect. But I also think of Seymour. I think of the other chefs, I think of Roland Arrow, and how much I want to rub this moment—and everything I did, everything I achieved without him holding me down—in his face."

Shiv paused briefly. "I guess what I'm saying is a town's not a living thing, but it's got living people, and some of them are worth fighting for. That's the way I see it, at least."

*"You're a decent boy, Shiv,"* Valor said. *"Don't let anyone change that."*

"I don't intend to," Shiv said again. "Now, I think I'm going to check out for the day. I'll make some dinner first, then I'll try and figure out how the shower works, and then, well, I'm going to lay down on that bed and see if I can fall asleep."

*"Very well. Good luck, Shiv."*

"I can place you next to me on the bed. Can you sleep?"

*"No. And that would be very weird, Shiv."*

"Yeah, okay. I was kind of thinking that too, but I wanted to be polite."

*"Thank you. But that's not necessary. I think I will return to meditation. You can call out to me when you wake up. Good night, Shiv."*

“See you in the morning, Valor.”

\*\*\*

Unfortunately for Shiv, the next problem came only a few seconds into sleep. It was midnight, and he was snoring softly, enjoying the nice, soft fabric of his bedsheets, when there was a heavy knock on the door. Shiv shot up, his heart rate spiking. He patted himself, looking for a knife that wasn't there.

*Damn it, Shiv thought. They haven't given me back my kitchen knife yet.* He really needed that back. He hoped they didn't lose it.

He staggered to the door, feeling at the outside using his Biomancy. To his surprise, his field was much larger than before—part of the gains he got from slaying the raven-helmed stranger. It extended approximately ten meters away now, maybe a bit further, and he could feel someone standing right there, just outside his door.

He let out a grunt as he shook his head. “Valor?” he called.

*“What is it? Is something wrong, Shiv?”* Valor said, his own voice alert.

“Someone's knocking on the door, Valor,” Shiv said, grabbing the stone dagger. “I might stab them using you.”

*“Good, Shiv,”* Valor said, also sounding annoyed. *“They interrupted a very, very productive meditation session. I'm very blunt right now, so aim for their eyes.”*

“Yeah, I'll try doing that,” Shiv groggily agreed. Before he realized what his field sensed. “No, wait. It's Uva. We're not stabbing her.”

A long sigh came from Valor. *“I'm probably not stabbing her. I can't say the same about you.”*

“What are you talking about?”

*“What did you say to her, boy?”*

“Why?”

*“Because I want to know the damn devil words you used to make a woman you just met—with a threat of murder no less—come back to your residence in the middle of the night.”*

As Shiv staggered to the door, he realized that he was shirtless, wearing only his underwear, but he didn't really care. His Diamond Shell was born of taking injuries



without armor, and he didn't think Uva was going to hurt him. He stared through the eyehole of the door and studied her. There was an urgent look on her face as well.

Slowly, Shiv opened the door, letting it swing wide.

Sister Uva opened her mouth, and then her eyes dropped low, staring at Shiv's undressed state and unnaturally gleaming torso, but she composed herself quickly. "I need you to come with me."

Shiv leaned against the door frame, his exhaustion peeling away. He was expecting her to be mad, but now, he was just curious. "See, now who's pushing their luck?" Shiv said as smoothly as he could.

To his surprise, Valor choked. "*The charm of a devil...*"

Sister Uva blinked before she realized the implications of his words. She rolled her eyes in exasperation. "No, it's... it's an emergency matter—one that requires your attention."

Shiv smirked, unfazed. He pushed off the door frame. "What? What's wrong?"

"It's the other surfer. The one you claim to not know, and do actually know. The Composer said you personally know him. It's about him."

"Oh," Shiv muttered, rubbing the back of his head. "That... that... You remember me telling you about Roland Arrow, right?" She nodded.

"That's his son—"

"*He's* Adam Arrow? The Dread Horizon's child?"

"You remember his name?" Shiv said. *She has a really good memory.*

She gave a weary breath. "Well, the Young Lord has taken a Biomancer hostage at the Cradle of Flesh, and he's demanding to talk with you. He also says that if you don't come, he will—and I quote—'start putting Abyssals to the flame.'"

Shiv took a very, very deep breath. *Of course—right after I had the best day of my life, Adam Arrow has to take a big shit all over it.* "I'm going to kill him," Shiv said very calmly. "I'm going to kill him with my own two hands."

"Well, then you best hurry," Uva said, "because the Weaveresses have assembled several Shadow Cells, and they're only on standby because the Composer told them to be. She wants you to try diplomacy first. After that, he becomes breeding material."

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## 19 (I) Diplomacy

*Beware the fel-touched, the tainted, the alien, and the Abyssal. Know that what lingers beyond the reach of the light can only be born of the grasp of the unholy.*

*Know that the will of the underworld depths is the domain where a man's soul is subverted.*

*And know that with strength and fire in one's heart, with focus and diligence, the shadows may be parted.*

*The prophesied day will come, when all are ignited under the glow of auroral bright, and the sun rising over Yellowstone will make the world complete.*

*-Edict of the Auroral Ascendants, Yellowstone Republic*

19 (I)

Diplomacy

"You," Adam sneered, "are an absolute asshole, Tanner Lowe."

"Hey, that's my line," Shiv said, folding his arms as he arched an eyebrow at the Young Lord. As he did so, he also swept his gaze and his mana field through this wing of the Cradle of Flesh. "You know, I made arrangements to come here tomorrow—well, today," Shiv continued. "I was gonna come here and learn Biomancy and let the Weaveresses prod me a little. But you just had to go and shit all over that, didn't you, Adam?"

The Young Lord was currently dressed in a white medical gown, and holding a shivering Weaveress hostage. He had an arm wrapped around her neck and a scalpel pressed against the back of her hairy spider head. She seemed terrified. Shiv was surprised he read that from her body language. He was getting really good at judging the moods of these spiders.

Meanwhile, everywhere else around the building, there were Weaveresses, Umbrals, automata, and a few other races preparing to breach to rescue the hostages. Things were extremely tense, and it was only the word of the Composer and the arrival of Sister Uva that ensured Adam's continued survival. *Goddamn bastard*, Shiv thought to himself. Shiv caught a few ugly looks directed at him from those gathered because the other surfer—the only other surviving surfer—couldn't behave himself.

“Oh, you really felling did it,” Shiv said, shaking his head at Adam. Behind Shiv, several Weaveresses poked their heads around the doorway, glaring angrily, brandishing large, glowing daggers and mana-forged riot shields. “You really got yourself into a mess this time.”

“What do you mean?” Adam asked. “And why—why aren’t they—” He gestured at Shiv.

“Aren’t they what?”

“Why aren’t you a prisoner? Is this a trap?” Adam narrowed his eyes. “Have you been working with the Abyssals this entire time?”

Shiv stared at Adam as if he were a simpleton. “Adam, you remember a few days ago when I got thrown off the top of Blackedge?”

Adam nodded slowly. “Yes.” His expression changed—a look of shame passed through.

“Yeah. So think about what you just said to me. Do you think that I, in a few days, could establish contact with the forces of the Abyss, commit to them, and complete this great treasonous scheme in record time?” New NOVEL chapters are published on Novel\_Fire(.)net

Adam stared at Shiv. “Maybe. Or maybe you were working with them all along.”

“And maybe you’re a felling idiot. I think you might have hit your head harder than I have—and I’m the one who fell all the way down.”

The Young Lord shook his head, his grimy, blood-red hair moving from side to side. “I’m just...”

“You’re very stressed, and you’ve experienced a lifetime of terrible propaganda,” Shiv surmised. “It happens to the best of us. And morons like you.”

The Young Lord clenched his teeth again. “You’re an asshole. Tanner Lowe.”

“Yeah, you said that already, Adam,” Shiv sneered. “And also, don’t call me that. It’s not my name.”

“It’s the name they gave you,” Adam said. His reply was cold and final.

“Well, I call myself Shiv. I don’t give a shit about the people who birthed me. Not like you do.”

“Yeah. Because what did they ever take from you?” Adam muttered bitterly.

A flare of old pain passed through Shiv, but he ignored it. For now. “A world where I don’t need to negotiate the release of a humanoid spider hostage to save the only other deranged surfer around.”

Adam took in a breath and let it out. “So, what now?”

“What do you mean, ‘what now’?” Shiv said, doing a double take. “You called me here. It was in the middle of the night. I was sleeping soundly in my bed.”

“Your bed?” Adam said.

“Yes, my bed. They gave me an apartment, a proper apartment unit. It’s larger than my house back on Blackedge. A full bed,” he gestured. “Nice sheets. I was asleep. And now your dumbass ruined it!”

Adam’s mouth opened, closed, opened again, and his face contorted in something between raw disbelief and sheer concentrated rage. “If you get a bed... then why am I trapped by monsters in this dungeon?”

“It’s a *hospital*,” Shiv said. “It’s called the Cradle of Flesh, and that”—he pointed to the Weaveress Adam was holding hostage—“is probably a Biomancer.”

“No, no,” the Weaveress cried out. “I’m just a nurse! I’m just part-time! I’m a student. Please!”

Shiv closed his eyes. “That’s even worse. Adam, you are holding a literal student hostage. A spider-child. Is there no depth of depravity you won’t fall to?”

“The spider’s a student?” Adam breathed.

“It’s called a Weaveress.” Shiv sneered.

“And I’m a she, not an it,” the Weaveress added weakly.

“I’m sorry,” Shiv said, opening his hands. “I’m also just getting used to this. But still, Adam, come now.”

*“Shiv, if this fool does not surrender in the next few seconds, please shove me through his eye socket and keep going until you strike his brain—for I doubt the organ’s existence and wish to verify it through tactile confirmation,”* Valor said.

Adam Arrow blinked. “Wait, who said that?” Shiv held up his stone dagger. “What? Is that some kind of communication device?”

“No, it’s a dagger with someone in it.”

Adam stared at him some more. “The dagger speaks? Someone’s in the dagger?”

“Yes, and his name is Valor Thann—the Great Valor Thann, He Who Stills Eternity. He’s a Legendary Pathbearer.”

The last part caught Adam’s attention. “The *dagger*?”

*“And soon I will find myself still inside your vacant head, you stupid fool. You interrupted my meditation. You interrupted Shiv’s sleep. And now you’re causing a diplomatic incident in Weave, holding the people who helped you hostage. You enormous buffoon.”*

Valor’s sharp remarks finally got through to the young lord, but Adam’s face contorted in offense.

“Shiv?”

“Oh, finally, you’re using my name,” Shiv interrupted.

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Adam kept going. “You tell that dagger that I will not be insulted this way. I am an Adept Pathbearer. My father is Lord Roland Arrow. I demand to be treated with proper respect, and not to be insulted. Especially by an inanimate object.”

*“I will make you an inanimate object in a moment,”* Valor growled. *“Shiv, stab him. Stab him now.”*

Shiv sighed. “Everyone, calm down,” he said. He couldn’t believe it—he was now the rational party in this mess. “Adam, let the Weaveress go. She’s not going to hurt you. If you don’t let her go, however, all the very powerful Weaveresses waiting around us will come in and beat you to death—very painfully.” He paused, and he remembered something important about this place. “Then again, maybe not. Maybe they will take you alive. And then they will breed you.”

“B—breed?” Adam stuttered.

“Yes, breed.” Shiv nodded. “I’ve seen things you wouldn’t believe: men strung up, wounds cut open on their bodies, eggs pushed in through the incisions for warmth and incubation.”

“Incubation?” Adam muttered, his face turning pale. He looked at the Weaveress he had a scalpel to.

“It’s not as bad as he makes it sound,” the girl said. “We don’t usually do it to living bodies. Unless they’re prisoners or terminally ill.”

“Living bodies?” Adam whispered.

Oh, this was working better than Shiv could have expected. Going from casual to scary as his negotiation tactic was paying off. It took him all his will not to break down laughing.

“Now, Adam,” Shiv began, “you have no idea how hard I had to negotiate to preserve your life. But if you don’t surrender soon, I won’t even be able to maintain the sanctity of your corpse. They will make you a *mother*. Do you understand me? They will make you a mother. They will make your corpse a mother.”

At this, the scalpel fell out of Adam Arrow’s hands, and he leaned back against the wall, seeming like a terrified boy for the first time in his life. The Weaveress scuttled away, and she cried a quick thanks to Shiv, telling him that she’d name her next hatchlings after him, whatever his name was. She was intercepted by the breach team just outside the door, but before they could move in, Shiv held up a hand.

To his surprise, they waited. One of them even nodded at him.

Shiv slowly walked toward Adam. The Young Lord was huddling against himself, hiding next to an overturned medical bed. His silken medical gown exposed recently-healed wounds that formed white outlines of messy scars. Shiv remembered what the Biomancer told him earlier: If the healing was done right, it shouldn’t scar. Shiv wondered what went wrong with Adam.

The Deathless knelt down just a few meters away from the Young Lord—not getting too close in fear of provoking him to action. On the periphery of Shiv’s mana field, he sensed another team of Weaveresses slowly approaching. He checked the scene and held out a hand, signaling them to wait. To his satisfaction, these ones did as well, and no attacks came. Adam’s life was preserved, for now.

“You’re alright,” Shiv said, moving beyond the amusement of messing with Adam Arrow and checking on his mental well-being. Shiv didn’t much like Adam—but “didn’t much like” wasn’t the same as “wanted him to suffer immensely.”

Adam shook his head, his sky-blue eyes wide and terrified as he stared at Shiv. “I was attacked. In a few days I was supposed to be married,” he muttered. “Everything was arranged. I was showing her the garden.”

“Isabella?” Shiv asked.

“Yeah. Isabella Van Stormhalt.”

Shiv thought about Isabella, about how several things during the attack didn’t make sense, but he put it out of his mind for now.

Adam continued. "They attacked us. Attacked Blackedge." He looked around. "Are these spiders with them? Are we prisoners of war?"

"No, that's another Faith that committed the attack."

Adam looked at him. "Another Faith?"

"The Necrotechs. Actually, not even the Necrotechs," Shiv said. "They're like a splinter faction, led by someone called Vicar Sullain."

"Vicar what?" Adam was completely lost now, and Shiv let out a long sigh. The Young Lord knew a lot less of the actual situation than even Shiv did, and Shiv barely considered himself educated about it at all. It was the blind informing the blind. He explained what he generally understood about the situation, and had Valor fill in what he missed. By the end, Adam's eyes were as wide as saucers.

"Did you... Did they do something to your mind?"

Shiv wanted to say no. Then he thought of Sister Uva. And decided to lie anyway. There was no point in worrying Adam even more. "No. This is what I've gathered: We are not dealing with all of the Abyss. In fact, all of the Abyss doesn't seem to want to deal with us. We are dealing with a splinter group, and they are attacking Blackedge specifically to avenge their failure. Vicar Sullain seems to have a very, very concentrated grudge on your father for destroying him years past."

"How is he still alive if he's been destroyed?" Adam blinked. "He's a lich? An *undead*?"

*"That is not the correct term,"* Valor snapped. *"You... uncouth ignoramus!"*

"Don't use that word," Shiv said.

"Which one?" Shiv tried to say the word, but he paused in fear of offending Valor. "Lich?" Adam guessed. Shiv shook his head. "Undead?" he said again.

"Yes," Valor snapped.

Shiv nodded this time. Adam looked absolutely confused. "But that's what they are."

*"That's not what we are. We are not dead. We are not ghosts trapped inside corpses. It's a symbolic vessel for our... Oh, I'm not explaining this to you.."*

Adam stared at the dagger, still unable to process what was happening.

"There are some things you're going to need to get used to, Adam," Shiv said, barely able to hide a smirk on his face. "There are some things that, when spoken, sound



prejudicial and offensive. And let me assure you, there are people you very much don't want to offend down here. Valor is one of them."

"The dagger is one of them," Adam said, disbelieving.

"Yes, he is a great warrior. He's simply temporarily trapped inside the dagger. It's part of his soul or something," Shiv said. "Anyway, I have good news for you. Before you worry too much, I think I can get us back to the surface."

And finally, it seemed like a spell broke over Adam.

"Why didn't you start with that, you bastard?" Adam snapped. And that was the Adam Shiv knew better.

"I didn't start with that because you had a knife pointed at an innocent person."

"It was a spider."

"It's a Weaveress, and it's a she," Shiv said, correcting his own mistake. He took in a deep breath and glared at Adam. "When we leave here—and we are leaving here—you will apologize to all of them."

"I refuse," Adam said. "They were keeping me hostage. You! You had them bind me! You said you didn't know me."

"Yes, because I was afraid this might happen."

"That what might happen?" Adam asked incredulously.

"That you might get hysterical and threaten people."

The Young Lord huffed. "I didn't get hysterical, and... and..."

Shiv stared at Adam.

"You're a bastard, Shiv," Adam finally said, for the third time.

Shiv closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath through his nostrils. "Well, at least you've used the right name this time. Broken Moon—it seems like Young Lords truly can learn."

"Never mind that. Tell me about going back up to the surface. How are we going to help Blackedge? Will"—Adam leaned in—"will the spiders help us? The Weaveresses?"

Shiv stared at him. “Their goddess might. However, you doing this puts some of that in jeopardy.” Adam looked horrified for the first time. “Yes, didn’t think that one through, did you?”

As Adam sank into his own shame, Shiv decided not to continue pressing on the wound. “Adam. Adam, look at me.”

Adam stared at him, blinking rapidly. “You’re going to be fine. We will go back and save Blackedge. There is something we need to accomplish, however. We need to break the siege, and we need to stop the war. Do you understand me? If we do not, there will be a conflict between the surface and the abyss, and that ended poorly last time.”

“The Eclipse War?” Adam breathed.

“No,” Shiv said.

Adam looked confused. “What do you mean, *no*? Even you should know about the Eclipse War from the histories of the Republic.”

“I’ve learned,” Shiv said, wondering how he was going to approach this conversation, “that there are missing details.”

“What kind of missing details?” Adam said.

“The kind that involves a whole other war—an invasion of the Abyss, conducted by us. Apparently, by your... uh...” Shiv paused. “Your father. He even sacked a Necrotech city called Submission.”

Adam stared at him for a long moment. “Shiv?”

“Yes?”

“I’m now sure they have invaded your mind and turned you against your own people.”

Shiv sighed. “Never mind that. Just know this: We need to get back up. The Weaveresses—and their goddess especially—will have a way for us to get back up. And, ultimately, there is a Quest we need to fulfill. If we fail this Quest, the Abyss will expand to swallow the entirety of Lost Angeles. All of it.”

Adam blinked. “All of it.”

“Yeah, I was surprised too,” Shiv said.

“You even got a Quest... The System must be—Wait, why didn’t I get this Quest?” Adam asked.

“Because you didn’t accept it,” Shiv said.

“Well, I couldn’t accept it. I was... I was here.”

Shiv nodded. “And I was off dealing with proper matters.”

“You... So... what’s the reward?” Adam said, narrowing his eyes.

Shiv looked back at him. “That is restricted information, Adam. I will tell you another day,” Shiv said. “Maybe if you behave. I’ll see if they can give you your armor back too.”

“Shiv,” Adam snarled, his voice severe. “I’m going to...”

Shiv simply grinned. “Adam. The Weaveresses are only holding themselves back because of me.”

Adam opened his mouth, but Shiv beat him before he could say the word *bastard*. “I’m a bastard? Yes, I know.” Shiv said it with such pride that Adam’s expression turned sour.

A silence lapsed between the two, and Shiv offered his hand. The time for overdue bullying was over. “You want to get up and get out of this place?”

Adam blinked. “I—yeah, I really do.”

Shiv nodded. “All right. I’ll see if I can get you somewhere else. I am staying at a place right now. Well, I believe there’s a couch in the living room.”

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## 19 (II) Diplomacy

19 (II)

Diplomacy

“A couch?” Adam said.

“I’m not letting you take the bed,” Shiv said. “It’s *my* bed. You interrupted my sleep. Be glad I’m letting you have the couch and not the bathtub.”

“They gave you a bathtub as well?” Adam said incredulously.

“You—” Shiv glared at him. “You know what? I’ve changed my mind.”

“No, no,” Adam said. “I’m sorry. I really am. Just—” He looked around. “Do they know what you are?”

Shiv sneered at Adam. “I am not an Omenborn anymore. That Curse broke. And also, they don’t care about that kind of thing here. They’re not as judgmental as people on Blackedge. Now, I’m disliked for another reason: Being a horrible, light-cursed foreigner from the surface.”

“No, no, not that.” Adam said. “Not the curse. Your Path... The other thing you do now.”

For once, Shiv respected Adam for his prudence. Shiv pressed his lips together. “The goddess knows. She sees all. She sees everything. She’s the reason why you’re still alive. Because she trusted me to handle this diplomatically.”

A look of realization dawned on the Young Lord, and he shook his head. “I came close to dying, didn’t I?”

“Much closer than you think,” Shiv said. “Now, take my hand and let’s get out of here.”

Adam looked at his hand one more time. “You’re really willing to do this for me?” He looked confused and almost grateful. As grateful as he could be to Shiv.

“I don’t like you, Adam,” Shiv said. “In fact, I kind of want to humiliate you a little bit more. However, we are the only people we have right now, and ultimately I don’t think you should suffer—not that much, anyway. We also have a home to save. So, if you’re willing to help me, I’m willing to help you, and we can get back and help the people we care about. It’s that simple.”

Adam swallowed, then nodded. “You’re no coward, Shiv. I’ll give you that.” And that was as much niceness as Shiv could have expected from Adam Arrow as well.

He reached up and, with a surprisingly strong grip, pulled himself up. Shiv guessed that Adam’s Physicality was still higher than his own, but the Young Lord’s flesh felt soft.

*The armor has left his Toughness underdeveloped,* Shiv guessed.

Adam frowned as he stared at Shiv’s hand. “Why’s your skin gleaming?”

“Oh, that’s my new Adept Skill Evolution for Toughness: Diamond Shell.”

Adam stared at Shiv for a long moment. “Didn’t you just become a Pathbearer, what, three days ago? Was it?” He shook his head. “I don’t know how long I was in that delirium. That raven bastard... I’ll kill him. Wait, I think he came with me...”

“Oh, him. We won’t be seeing him anymore,” Shiv grinned. NEW NOVEL CHAPTERS ARE PUBLISHED ON

Adam stared at Shiv. “What do you mean? Did someone kill him?”

“Yes,” Shiv said. “I’m that someone.”

“I—” Adam paused. “You.”

“He was badly injured and brutally crippled beforehand. I suspect some of the Weaveresses might have beaten him down to capture him, and he escaped after.” Shiv awkwardly shrugged. “But, yes, I did kill a wounded, High Adept or Low Master Pathbearer.”

Adam continued to stare at him. “You? I can’t believe you. I wanted to kill him. I wanted to take revenge.”

Shiv stared at Adam. “Then why’d you let him beat you up in the first place?”

Adam’s eyes widened in absolute outrage. “Beat me? You abandoned me halfway through that fight!”

“I’m sorry, who died the most?” Shiv said, pointing at himself.

“I... you...” Adam nearly bit his tongue off in rage.

“I’m sorry, who drained his vitality while the other member of this fight”—he pointed to Adam—“spent most of his time laying in the dirt?”

Adam grimaced and then growled. Shiv shook his head, and the Young Lord fumed. “Now, let’s get to the part where we walk out, and you apologize to all the staff.”

“I... I... I... hate you so much.”

“The feeling is mutual,” Shiv said with a wide grin on his face. “And if you don’t do it, the spiders will breed you. And I won’t stop them.”

“I’m in the deepest of the hells,” Adam whimpered.

\*\*\*

Shiv wasn’t lying about making Adam apologize to every Weaveress Biomancer, nurse, and anyone else he’d scared during his brief episode here.

‘I’m sorry,’ Adam bowed, mimicking the same gestures the Umbrals used when they greeted the Composer. Shiv had taught him the gesture, and he offered a wide smile

each time Adam performed it. He counted diligently: by the end, Adam had apologized to 413 Weaveresses, Umbrals, and automata.

The Weaveress Shadow Cells gathered in preparation to eliminate Adam Arrow were the next targets of his apology. He apologized for wasting their time, for having a psychotic break (as Shiv described it), and ultimately for interrupting their sleep.

Finally, Shiv held up his dagger. "Now. The last and most important person you need to apologize to."

"I will not," Adam said, his jaw clenching.

*"You will,"* Valor said. *"Because if you don't, Shiv will discover how hard it is for me to get inside you."*

"Likely not hard at all if I shove it in the right place," Shiv said, a wide smile on his face.

Adam glared. He pointed a finger at the Deathless, then realized he was wearing nothing but a hospital gown. "If I had my armor and my bow, I would—

"What, kill me? Oh, so scary," Shiv mocked. Adam clenched his teeth again and said nothing else.

"Shiv?" a voice called from behind.

Sister Uva approached, more apprehensive than normal, eyeing Adam Arrow with deep suspicion.

"Uva," Shiv said, his expression shifting from a shit-eating grin to a genuine one. "This is Young Lord Adam Arrow. He is the Dread Horizon's son. He's going to be helping us. And staying with me, for now, I suppose."

She eyed Adam as if he had the plague, and Shiv found himself immensely gleeful to see how this would play out. Adam looked at Sister Uva, blinking quickly. "Are you... an elf?"

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"An Umbral," she corrected.

"There are many terms you will have to learn," Shiv said. "Many things as well. Thankfully, you have me and Sister Uva to instruct you. Valor, I'm not so sure about. He doesn't much like you."

Adam let out a slight whimper as he looked between the dagger, Shiv, and Uva.

"This... this must be a version of Hell," Adam mumbled.

"Very much not, I'm afraid," Shiv said. "Now, sister," he continued, "as much as I enjoy spending time with you, I'll be taking this fool back to the apartment so I can actually get on with my day tomorrow."

Uva frowned. "Are you sure that's wise?"

"Do you want to leave the rogue surfer alone for another episode to happen?" Shiv asked with an arched eyebrow.

"I'm right here," Adam sneered.

Both Uva and Shiv ignored him.

"You're probably right," Uva said. "I'm very sorry I had to trouble you with this."

"Not at all," Shiv replied. "And don't think of your presence as trouble. Quite the opposite, in fact."

She looked away, shaking her head, muttering about how he just couldn't seem to stop.

"Shiv," Adam began, but his words died as a look of raw disbelief overcame him. "What is happening? Shiv, what are you doing?"

Shiv held up a hand. "I'm not talking to you right now, Adam. Anyway... I apologize on behalf of my fellow light-cursed surfer. He is... He's always been a little bit temperamental. And simple."

"Shiv..." Adam growled.

"As you can tell right now," Shiv said, gesturing toward Adam.

Uva eyed Adam up and down, sneering slightly. "As I can tell," she said, "and you had to put up with this your entire life?"

"Practically every time I met him, he was always sour—always. Practically about everything. It's understandable why when he was a child but." Shiv looked at Adam and shook his head disapprovingly. "One needs to grow up."

Adam's left eye was twitching now. Shiv thought that was just about enough teasing—any more and this might actually devolve into violence.

"I think we will retire for good tonight," Shiv said. "Adam will be on the couch, I will be in the bed, and I will see you..." Shiv smiled at Uva, "in the morning. Oh, do you want breakfast?"



She pressed her lips together. "I wouldn't be against it."

Shiv nodded. "Well, I'll see what I can surprise you with."

Uva closed her mouth, and a slight smile played across her face. "I'm sure you'll come up with something creative."

"I'm sure I will," Shiv said.

The two locked eyes and slowly shared a mutual grin.

The Young Lord's head swung between the Umbral Psychomancer and the Deathless. His facial expression looked like he was undergoing a series of very painful muscle spasms. "What? What are you? How did you... What is even happening anymore?"

*"Charm,"* Valor interrupted with a voice filled with pride. *"It seems that Shiv has a tongue made for charming. And the intent to use it."*

Shiv grinned.

"I best accompany you back, *charming*," Uva said. "I have a feeling that you two might get into more trouble without a proper escort."

"I wouldn't be against that," Shiv said.

\*\*\*

The trip back to the apartment was uneventful. Adam looked around constantly, gawking and blinking at all the structures. Shiv got that through his system earlier in the day, but he couldn't blame the Young Lord. It was a very impressive place. It would be more impressive when Shiv wasn't so exhausted.

As he landed—and Adam spent a few moments staring, trying to process that he just rode on a demon—Shiv saw a few Umbrals taking a midnight stroll and waved to them. To his surprise and satisfaction, one of the younger ones waved back.

"You know, I was worried there for a second," Uva said, walking ahead of him. "I was worried that things were going to go wrong."

"Well, you had a lot more faith in me than I did. I was worried for a lot longer than just a second. Still, someone needed to take care of poor Adam. I couldn't leave him on his own."

"You're a godsdamn bastard, Shiv," Adam said from behind as they passed another group of Umbrals—one of whom Shiv saw earlier, the daughter and mother. The child

pointed at them. “Look, Mama, there’s another surfer! And this one’s not wearing pants. I can see the crack of his butt!”

Adam turned around, covering his rear, trying to keep his hospital gown tighter around himself. Shiv couldn’t help it—he threw his head back and laughed.

“You can indeed, child,” Shiv said. “Savor the sight. You won’t see anything rounder in quite some time.”

And that broke Uva as well. She folded over, clawing along the walls as they entered the elevator. “Shiv, don’t say that.”

Adam Arrow looked between all of them, and the Umbral mother looked especially horrified. Her expression was mirrored on Adam’s face as she pulled her child away.

As they marched toward the elevator, Adam’s face went through several shades of red, and he kept his back pointed to the corner. “This is a nightmare,” he muttered to himself. “This is a nightmare. It must end soon. This is a nightmare.” It quickly became a mantra.

Once Uva and Shiv got themselves under control, she hit the button, and they started going up.

“I’ll get him some clothes in the morning,” Uva said.

Shiv blinked. “You got me some clothes awfully fast after my fight with the raven,” he said.

Uva smirked, offering him a knowing smile. “I did, didn’t I?” And that filled Shiv with a certain something. It was a pretty *warm* something.

“This is a nightmare,” Adam muttered again.

As they got back to Shiv’s temporary apartment unit, Uva opened the door for him, and Shiv gestured for Adam to go in. The Young Lord stumbled inward, looking around the corner as if expecting attacks, his body on alert. Shiv, meanwhile, smoothly spun and leaned against the door frame again.

“So,” Shiv said, “morning, breakfast, surprise, creative.

“Those are words.” Uva chuckled. She then looked behind him and frowned slightly. “You’re going to be fine, right? He’s not going to try to kill you or anything?”

Shiv shrugged. “Oh, he might try. Doesn’t mean he’ll succeed.”

“Well, if he does, I’ll come by and avenge you in the morning,” Uva said. And the warmth inside Shiv only grew.

“I’ll be most flattered. Now, sister, you look a little bit tired. You should go to sleep—get some more rest. It’s been an eventful day for you, too.”

“Good night, Shiv,” she said.

“Technically morning,” Shiv replied. “But yeah, I’ll see you in a few.” She turned to leave. He stared at her until she told him off mentally, and finally he closed the door.

He turned and nearly ran face-first into Adam Arrow.

“Adam,” Shiv said, inching back a few steps, “you’re standing a little close.”

Adam continued squinting at him with his arms crossed. “How long have you known her?” he asked, his voice high with suspicion.

“Since a few hours ago,” Shiv answered honestly.

Adam blinked. “Impossible.”

“Very possible,” Shiv said. “Anyway,” he grabbed Adam’s shoulder and pointed at the couch. “That’s you.” He pointed at the bedroom. “That’s me. I’ll see you in the morning. Try not to go insane.” Then he started walking toward his bedroom.

“Wait, Shiv!” Too late.

“Sleeping time, Adam. If you bother me, they’ll breed you. They’re in the walls. They live here too.” As Shiv finished his words, Adam started looking from side to side, twitching at shadows. “Valor, time to go back to meditation.” Shiv closed the door behind him as he heard Adam calling out again. “Sorry, Adam. I’m used up for the day. Very exhausted!” He climbed onto the sheets, peeling off his clothes before placing the dagger on the desk nearby.

“*You... you can be quite amusing, Shiv,*” Valor chuckled.

“Yes, you too. With all the ‘shove me into his eye’ thing.”

“*I was being very honest.*”

“Oh,” Shiv said. “Well, I would have done it if he fought me.”

“*I know. That’s why I told you to do it.*” They both laughed. Life was good. “*So, you and Sister Uva?*”

Shiv smiled. “Well, there’s no ‘me and Sister Uva’ yet,” he said. “But we’ll see what she says after breakfast. I might push my luck then.”

*“Have you talked to many women, Shiv?”*

Shiv considered it. “No.”

*“Well, you seem very comfortable.”*

Shiv shrugged. “I found out recently that I enjoy talking to people, I suppose, when they’re not mean to me.”

*“Don’t we talk comfortably?”*

“Yes. But not like that. Although, who knows. I might find out you’re really pretty when you pop out of the dagger.”

*“I think I’m starting to understand your charm a bit more, now, boy. It’s a casual audacity. Almost instinctual.”*

“I suppose so. What’s the worst that can happen beyond death? Or a mind-breaking?”

And then, from the living room, Shiv heard Adam start muttering about how everything was a nightmare again.

*“Of course, after the company you’ve kept for most of your life,”* Valor began, *“I’m beginning to understand why you’re having such an easy time with us.”*

“It’s good when people understand,” Shiv said. “Good night, Valor. For good this time.”

*“Good night, Shiv. If he interrupts us again—”*

“Yes,” Shiv said. “I will kill him with you.”

*“That’s all I ask,”* Valor said.

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## 20 (I) Charm

*...After the brutal battle at Passage that many onlookers described as “like two toadhounds ripping into each other” and “a piece of the sky falling,” official sources have stated that the victorious surfer is not, in fact, a hostile agent of New Albion, but rather a wandering Pathbearer on a mission of peace and security going by the title “Shiv.”*

*Afterward, though wounded, the surfer continued on with his Umbral and Weaveress escort to meet the Exalted Mother. However, things weren't to end for our intrepid guest. Here, another of his erstwhile companions—so we have deduced from unnamed sources—went to the Cradle of Flesh after midnight to resolve a most unanticipated and intense hostage crisis. Their companion, noted to be disturbed of mind and suffering from immense shock (described as a “dung-eater” in the most stable of times), had to be talked down from holding several of the Cradle's staff hostage by our newfound surfer ally.*

*It is not known if this “Shiv” is drastically different from other surfers, or if he stands as the general norm among his people, but we at Vibrations are watching his movements closely.*

*Whatever the case, I'm sure more interesting times will be ahead of us, and our newest guests as well...*

*-Vibrations, Weave Tabloid*

20 (I)

Charm

The Deathless had gotten up early that morning, despite his midnight interruption, and began his preparations. To his surprise, he only slept for three hours, and yet it somehow felt like the best rest of his life. Valor told him it was a natural part of increasing his Physicality, and the higher that skill climbed, the less rest Shiv would need in general.

On the other hand, Adam, despite how amped up he was the day before, had fallen asleep after repositioning the couch and tucking himself in a corner. He clearly believed Shiv's speech about there being spiders in the walls a bit too much.

After making sure the other surfer was still breathing, Shiv went through his pantry and fridge in detail, marveling at all the ingredients that were stocked. Usually, he stayed late at the Swan-Eating Toad just to do a bit more experimentation. Georges usually didn't have a problem with this, so long as Shiv cleaned and then locked up. Here, though—here was a place that was at least temporarily Shiv's own, and he could do whatever he wanted with this food.

Shiv laughed, his chuckle growing dark and devious. “Oh, there's no one that can stop me now. There's nothing you can do to stop me from making you pristine.”

*“Shiv, please don’t do that,”* Valor implored. *“It’s very strange when someone makes an evil speech to their food.”*

“No,” Shiv replied, adamant. “They must know I’m the chef.”

*“By way of an evil speech.”*

“Fear is a flavor.”

*“They’re inanimate, Shiv.”* Shiv stared at the dagger on the table next to him. *“Were you just staring at me right now? Because I’m technically an inanimate object?”*

“Yes.”

Valor sighed. *“Monologue away.”*

After a bit of searching, Shiv found what he thought to be yogurt in the fridge, some fruit, strips of meat that looked ready to be fried, and, interestingly enough, some form of vegetable that smelled remarkably fresh and delightfully cold. He experimented for a while, testing nibbles and mixing things together.

“Breakfast doesn’t need to be grand,” Shiv muttered, “but it does need to put a punch in someone’s step and kick-start the beating of their heart. How you eat in the morning is how you face the rest of the day.” And Shiv, despite everything, intended to face the day with more fire in him than the day before.

After a good two hours of testing and cooking, another knock came at the door, and Shiv found himself grinning. A loud groan sounded from the couch, and his grin faded slightly. Right—he had a *freeloader* with him now. But that, too, pleased Shiv: to have Adam Arrow in such a precarious position.

“I must be in a dream,” Shiv said, mocking Adam’s statement from yesterday about how everything was a nightmare. And so Shiv welcomed his guide, growing friend, and perhaps *something else*, into the room as she brought in an assortment of clothes. To Shiv’s surprise, they weren’t only for Adam, but for him as well.

“I thought you could use a few sets yourself,” Uva said, holding some new pants for Shiv.

He held them up and blinked. “This is some kind of leather?” This content belongs to

“Moleskin.”

“Moleskin,” Shiv said. He looked down at the pants he was wearing—and winced. All the constant fights and the traveling he did to reach this place had left the clothes on his

body looking like a ragged mess. She placed a few more sets of clothes for him on a nearby table, and dumped a color-clashing mess where Adam was sitting.

The Young Lord blinked blearily. “Why does he get the nice-looking ones?”

“Because I cooked for her yesterday, and I’m doing it again right now,” Shiv said, sneering at Adam. “Meanwhile, she had to get out of bed to deal with you having a psychotic episode.”

“It wasn’t a psychotic episode! I was—I woke up and found a group of humanoid spiders performing surgery on me. How would you react to something like that?”

Shiv considered Adam’s words. “Probably assume that one of my fellow chefs misplaced the wrong kind of brownie in our team dessert. Anyway.” Shiv placed a bowl in Adam’s lap too. The Young Lord blinked twice. “What? You have to eat too, don’t you?”

Adam stared down at Shiv’s efforts. A soft and creamy expanse of yogurt mixed with cut fruits and glistening vegetable clumps awaited him. “You... didn’t spit in this, right? Or add laxatives.”

Shiv leaned down very, very close to Adam. The Young Lord stared back, frowning. “Adam. If you ever insinuate that about me again, we will felling get bloody. It will be on until one of us dies for good. I don’t spit in the food of people who don’t deserve it.”

“I don’t deserve it?” Adam said.

“I don’t like you, Adam,” Shiv said, “but if I learned one thing from Georges, it’s that you can not like a lot of people in the world, and still only spit in the food of those who treat servers like garbage and constantly complain about something being too spicy—when there aren’t any spices in the food at all.”

The Young Lord gawked at Shiv for a moment, but the Deathless was no longer talking to him. Instead, he moved back to greet Uva, and he presented her a bowl of breakfast with a great deal more warmth. He even did it with a smile. ‘Now, sister,” Shiv breathed. “How did you sleep?”

“With anticipation,” she said, eyeing Shiv briefly before sinking her spoon into the yoghurt. “Did you add havadels to this?”

“Is that what the vegetables are called?”

“Yes. They’re usually for appetizers.”



“Hm. Forgive me and my ignorant surfer ways. I tested it a few times and thought the crispness might go well with the fruit assortment and the creamy texture. Have a taste. Tell me what you think.”

Uva took a bite, left the spoon in her mouth, and blinked several times. “It’s...” she shook her head. “You’re right. It is fresh. But...”

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Shiv leaned in, narrowing his eyes. “Go on. Be honest.”

“I think the vegetable blunts the sweetness.” Uva swallowed slowly. “I rather like the sweetness of fruit.”

“Ah. I’ll keep that in mind.” He hummed. “Georges might have noticed that better. My greatest problem has always been an insensitivity to clashing flavors.”

“I wouldn’t call it a problem. Just a place to improve.” She took another slow bite, and he watched her expression. “It’s really quite good.”

“Ah. But you can’t blame me for wanting to get yesterday’s reaction out of you again.”

“We can’t always make something divine,” Uva said.

“No. But we can always try.”

They stopped talking and just stared at each other for a moment.

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On the couch, Adam stared as he ate awkwardly, fighting the urge to go finish elsewhere.

*“It’s like he doesn’t have any doubt or fear,”* Valor muttered on the table. *“Has he always been like this?”*

It took Adam a moment to realize the dagger was talking to him. He swallowed. And winced. Dammit, the food was *really* good. “I... am not the best person to ask about how Shiv has been. We’re not friends. Pretty far from that.”

*“Yes. The ritual. I know of that. You do understand that’s not his fault, yes?”* Adam stared at the dagger, but continued eating his food. He let silence be his reply. *“For what it is worth, I am not blaming you. It is a dark deed. One that has scarred more than a single life. And that is all I will say now.”*

The Young Lord eyed the dagger again. It seemed Valor knew just how far to go without starting something truly messy. “So. Where’s the way back up?” Adam said, scooping another spoon of yogurt. “And when are we moving out?”

His dramatic interruption failed as Shiv was accounting his thought process behind the creation of breakfast, and Uva was just... She was staring at him, watching him talk. The Young Lord couldn’t believe this *shit*. It was like the Abyss was some kind of inverted world where he was the hated outcast who ruined things for everyone, and Shiv was some kind of beloved *casanova* for pale elves and spiderfolk.

Adam didn’t keep track of Shiv for good reason. Their history was an ugly one, and if Roland Arrow hadn’t regularly kept Adam informed about Shiv’s continued status as a Pathless, Adam would have simply pretended the Omenborn didn’t exist if he never ran into him. The Young Lord paused. That might be a lie, though. He remembered sensing Shiv in the Slayer’s Guild. He could have let the Omenborn pass through then, but... But he couldn’t help himself.

The hate was still there. Even now.

But there was something else as well.

Shiv didn’t need to die fighting the raven over and over to help Adam. Nor did he need to let Adam stay in his apartment. These things didn’t make up for the wounds of the past, but Shiv was right to an extent: Didn’t like and even hate was very different from didn’t respect at all.

*And the breakfast was kind of good too*, Adam begrudgingly admitted. *Godsdammit. Maybe it would have been better to have him be a Chef. That might have helped me avoid... whatever this is.* He watched Uva place a hand over her mouth as she fought to stop herself from giggling as Shiv recounted a brawl he apparently had with a “rodent of unusual size” in an alleyway. *Broken Moon... This isn’t an act.*

Adam’s stomach made a noise. And somehow, that broke Shiv’s conversation. The former Omenborn turned to regard the Young Lord with a wince. “Wait, Adam, how long has it been since you last ate?”

“The spiders tried to feed me some... *paste* at the hospital,” Adam muttered. “I kind of spat it out. Before that...” Before that, he could only remember bits and pieces of everything. He spent a time in a feverish delirium after the raven captured him. The damned assassin drugged him with some kind of vial—but they were attacked at some point as well. The past three days were more like a chaotic haze than a series of coherent events. “So, maybe Blackedge. It’s fine. My Physicality’s on the verge of a Skill Evolution. I can probably go almost a month without food or water.”

“Yeah, but it won’t be a comfortable month, will it?” Shiv said. He shook his head and handed his own bowl to Adam. The Young Lord blinked. “I can make more. Just eat up. We’ll deal with other matters afterward.”

Adam stared. “...Thanks.”

And then, with that, Shiv went back to detailing his desperate childhood battle, and described Georges coming out with a cleaver to finish the rat off as Shiv held it down—only for it to catch the descending blade with its teeth. After that, they let the rat go and named it an honorary chef for a worthy battle fought.

Uva’s efforts to keep herself poised broke, and laughter rang out from her like a morning bell. She reached out and brushed Shiv’s arm.

All the while, Adam just watched. *What the felling hells. Does... does he have some kind of Charisma Skill as well?*

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“So, from what the Composer told me, our way back up to the surface will be through a gate—but it doesn’t sound like the gate is controlled by Weave. I haven’t gotten more details yet, but I suspect it’ll either be a place we have to pass through quietly or that we have to capture.” Shiv stopped talking briefly as he put a plate down in front of the Young Master, its contents minced meat and spices wrapped in some variation of lettuce. “Try this.”

Adam didn’t even hesitate anymore. He just tore into the food. Though his excuse was that he’d been starved for three days, the honest truth was that somehow, Shiv was just unnaturally *godsdamned* good at cooking even without having a full chef’s Path. So as the Young Lord’s breakfast turned to brunch, the once-object of his loathing recounted everything he’d been through.

“You fought a high vampire?” Adam asked while wolfing down a mouthful of food.

“Yes,” Shiv said. “It’s the reason I developed Biomancy—”

“Yeah, that too: How? Mana usually takes years to attune—” Adam trailed off. “Right. You hunted lesser vampires to earn a Path.”

Shiv grinned as his cover story worked. “I think I wasn’t that far from attuning before, anyway. I just needed a Path.”

“Still that’s... You managed to survive a lot.” Adam nodded.

Shiv snorted. “Do you have a Curse I don’t know about, Adam?”

“What? No? Why?”

“Because you act like complimenting me might make a demon hatch from inside you.”

Adam frowned and made a warding gesture. “Don’t even joke about that. The taint is—”

“Only associated with a specific demon,” Shiv said, eyeing Uva. “From the Dimension of Flies and Plague.”

The Umbral smirked. “You remembered.”

“I did. It helps that the speaker I heard it from has such memorable lips.”

*“He just went for it,”* Valor whispered off by the side. *“No hesitation. Like he’s talking about the weather. Monstrous...”*

Uva shook her head and half-heartedly chided Shiv for pushing his luck, but she didn’t seem put off at all.

Adam thought back to his own courtship with Isabella, and something inside him trembled. *Could I say that with a straight face? Could I pull that off?* He looked back at Shiv, and studied the easy smile on the Deathless’s face, like how he cleaned a plate as he worked. *Maybe. Definitely. I’m not a coward. I’m not.*

But Adam did doubt himself often. It came with the territory of being the son of a Town Lord—and a great hero of the Republic. And so, ultimately, it was Isabella who approached him after they spent some time making eyes at each other. Which was after months of awkward attempts from his side at getting closer and signalling his intent. He even had flowers mysteriously delivered.

Suddenly, another horrible thought materialized in Adam’s mind: he imagined Shiv going to the academy as well—and the image of Shiv being the popular boy at school spread through Adam’s being like a forest fire.

*No, no! Gods! No! PLEASE ASCENDANTS, NO!* Adam swallowed. *No, they’d surely realize something’s wrong with him. His eyes, perhaps? That would keep people away from him... Wait? When did he get irises? What even is this? Am I jealous of his confidence? I hate this! I hate him!*

“It goes in your mouth, not all over the table,” Shiv said, pointing a fork at Adam. The Young Lord looked and saw his hand shaking, with some of the minced meat leaking out. “If you don’t like it—”

Adam tore into the food again, like a dog starved for days. Shiv drew back and shook his head, muttering about understanding the spiderfolk more than he did his own people.

“Anyway,” Shiv said. “We’re not leaving the city. Not for a bit. Not until the Composer summons us again and elaborates on the route we take.”

The Young Lord gulped down another bite of food. He was about to voice his protests when Shiv laughed.

“What?”

“Cooking went up.” Shiv said.

“Again?” Uva said, narrowing her eyes.

“Again,” Shiv said.

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## Cooking > 22

“That’s... unnaturally fast growth,” the Umbral said. “But I will not complain. This pleases my tongue and stomach, after all.”

Shiv gave a coy smile. “And I’m honored to please your *tongue*. And *stomach*.”

“Shiv...” She rolled her eyes.

“*How?*” Valor groaned off by the side. “*How does he say these phrases so easily? And why do they work?*”

Shiv blinked at the dagger. “Because I mean them.” Then, Shiv shrugged, as if it was no big deal.

## Skill Gained: Silver Tongue 1 (Adept)

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# 20 (II) Charm

20 (II)

Charm

*Huh*, Shiv thought, his face turning into a wide grin. *This is unexpected. But very welcome.*

“What?” Adam moaned. “Why are you smiling like that?”

“New skill,” Shiv said. “Another Adept.”

“Another?” Uva leaned back. Even she sounded disturbed.

Shiv smiled at her. “Would you doubt me if it has something to do with tongues?”

Uva’s eyes narrowed.

“It does,” Shiv said. “I seem to have developed a bit of a... *Silver Tongue.*”

Adam began ripping the remains of his food apart in a fit of absolute rage, imagining he was biting into Shiv’s neck with every clench of his teeth.

Both Shiv and Uva stared at the Young Lord’s rage-eating.

“Calm down, Adam. I’ll make you more food if you need. Broken Moon. I should have made the raven die slower. He really must’ve damaged your metabolism with those drugs.” Shiv scowled.

“Anyway,” he said. “While we’re here and waiting, we should make good use of our time. I want to see the city and explore. The first place I want to go is the bookstore—there are some books I need to purchase.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea for another reason,” Uva said. “You’ll likely need a pair of enchanted reading glasses to deal with the local texts. Otherwise, there won’t be much hope of you reading at all.”

“They sell those?” Shiv asked.

“They sell those everywhere,” Adam said. “Practically all bookstores in the Republic offer the service. It’s hard to read primary sources without them.”

“The Blackedge public library didn’t have this,” Shiv muttered.

“That’s because some of the Slayers would have stolen and sold them for booze money,” Adam deadpanned. “Father tried as much as he could, but we still live in a fortress-town, Shiv. It’s your home too. You should know this.”

“Well, I would know this if everyone didn’t treat me like I was *vermin*,” Shiv almost growled.

The atmosphere in the room changed, and Uva looked between Shiv and Adam. The Deathless shook his head. "Doesn't matter. I'll need some books on Biomancy first. Then, I'll need to visit the Cradle again to see if their offer is still open after the Young Lord's mental episode."

"I hope they breed you," Adam muttered.

Shiv shrugged. "By this point, I don't care if they do. So long as I can learn something from it. After that..." He looked to Uva. "I would like my kitchen knife back. And the Young Lord has some armor with you as well."

"Quite so," she replied, eyeing Adam. "*Legendary* armor. Our smiths can't even identify the material. Or if it can even be broken."

Shiv paused. Then turned to stare at Adam. "Legendary?"

Adam folded his arms defensively. "Father... wanted me to train hard and develop myself in practical situations. It's hard to do that while constantly getting injured."

"Did *father* get you this armor as well? From some kind of Legendary Gate?" Shiv shook his head. "Valor, how hard is it to obtain a Legendary set of armor?"

"*Nightmarishly so,*" the dagger said. "*It would take a Legendary Crafter at the height of their Path a great deal of time to create consistent pieces of Legendary Armor. Or the closing of a High Category Gate to earn them as System rewards.*"

Now Shiv was glaring at Adam with jealousy. "And somehow, you still lost to the raven-helmed idiot."

"The armor is unbreakable! My limbs aren't!" Adam shot back.

"What is your Toughness?" Shiv asked.

Adam scowled. "It's high."

"Do you have a Skill Evolution for it yet?"

The Young Lord's scowl deepened. "Soon I will."

"In the span of months or years?" Shiv asked.

"How about you come clean this plate, too, hm?" Adam snapped. "I'm done with the food and want service."

"And I want that armor," Shiv said. "And to not be hated my entire life for a mistake I didn't make. But I suppose things don't always go the way we want them to."



"You cleaned her plate!" Adam complained.

"There's a difference between you and her: It's the difference between an undercooked, moldy length of sausage and an enchanting five-course meal with outdoor setting, an assortment of wines, and a proper band playing in the background. A *Legendary* band."

## **Silver Tongue > 2**

*"And it still somehow leads back into this,"* Valor murmured. *"This power is unnatural in the hands of one so young..."*

Uva, for her part, rolled her eyes but looked rather smug. Adam seemed more offended that Shiv was capable of *maintaining* his charm offensive on the Abyssal elf while also insulting the Young Lord.

"Sister Uva," Shiv said, placing her cleaned plate in a rack. "I think I had enough of being inside. I'm going to go out. I'm going to be at the bookstore and move onto other things. I don't know what the Young Lord's plans are, but I would ask that he doesn't get himself into any more trouble. However, if I might be so bold as to ask your plans for the day..."

The Umbral smiled. "I need to report back to the local headquarters in a while to retrieve your personal items. After that, I have some patrols outside before I return in the afternoon." She reached into a bag she brought with her and placed two brooches on the table.

Shiv's eyes widened and he laughed. He pinned one of the brooches on his collar without needing her to explain what it was. "I talked to Nomos through this. It wasn't a very pleasant conversation." His voice came out through Uva's collar, indicating a successful connection. "You, however..."

She closed her eyes and giggled. "Shiv, stop... Please... Don't you get tired?"

"Of you? Is that possible?"

Slowly, Adam reached for his own brooch, unwilling to even look at Shiv.

As the Umbral finished laughing, she elaborated on the brooches' functions. "The brooch is routed through headquarters. There is an operator listening on the other end, and they will connect you to the person you request based on name, identification number, or code phrase. All conversations are recorded, so be mindful of what you say." Shiv opened his mouth, but she interrupted him. "I'm serious, surfer. These are connected to official security channels. It is a major act of trust on the part of the Composer to let you have these. Do not use it to flirt."

Shiv winked. "Don't worry. I won't embarrass you in front of your sisters through the brooch. No promises about doing things in person though."

"You're hopeless," Uva replied with a sigh.

"Only when I'm struck by incredible beauty."

She covered her face and groaned. "I need to leave before this gets too much. Even for me. I'll take you both to the largest bookstore in the area. You'll be able to find a map and the necessary enchantments you'll need to navigate the city there, as well as all the books you're looking for."

"And I'll see you for dinner, at least?" Shiv asked.

The dagger started laughing off to the side. "*I can't believe this.*"

Uva just stared at him. "You might see me earlier than that. I'll call you when my daily duties are done."

"Well, make sure you don't take too long," Shiv said. "Otherwise, I might have to voice an official complaint to the Composer. You *are* supposed to be my guide."

"I have other duties too," Uva sighed.

"You can show me these other duties sometime. Do they cook for you too?"

"*Great One... Great One please... You overblessed this one... Take some of his confidence away from him.*" Valor was literally praying now.

The Umbral got up and eyed Shiv. "Go get changed. You should look presentable when you go out. I am sure the tabloids will be ripping into you."

"Fine," Shiv said. As he walked over and gathered his clothes, and looked over his shoulder and fired a final shot. "Hey. Thanks for these. They look very tasteful."

\*\*\*

Shiv walked off into the bathroom, and Adam noticed the *bloody* Umbral staring at him, not even blinking. She even bit her *tainted* bottom lip. Slowly, Adam reached for his miss-matched mess of color-clashing clothing. "I should change too, right?"

Slowly, Uva turned and regarded Adam as if he was a cockroach she spotted crawling underfoot. "I care little what you do."

And that was all she said to him.

Adam's despair grew. *If my soul has testicles... she definitely just kicked them...*

This story originates from a different website. Ensure the author gets the support they deserve by reading it there.

\*\*\*

"This is complete bullshit," Adam muttered, gritting his teeth as the other patrons in the library started eyeing him from the moment he entered. His new blouse was the color of dying grass, his pants hot pink, and the shoes she got him were mismatched in style. It was like the Umbral was taking revenge on him for something.

Shiv, meanwhile, walked in an all-dark blue ensemble. Silk shirt, leather jacket, leather pants, leather boots, and a wide grin. That being said, Adam did notice the tremor in the former Omenborn's hands as all eyes fell on him.

*He's not entirely comfortable with a crowd at all,* Adam blinked. *He just hides it. However, with the girl...* The Young Lord caught the Psychomancer sneaking looks at Shiv.

"Hello," Shiv said, smiling. "I-I'm not actually a surfer. I'm just an Umbral with a skin condition. And an ear condition."

"Shiv, be serious," Uva chided. She reached over and slapped the laughing Shiv on the chest as Adam shook his head.

*I think I'm going to be sick,* Adam groaned internally.

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With the surfacers delivered to the district's local bookstore and library, the Umbral Psychomancer prepared to depart for the day, her other duties awaiting. "Shiv. Do what you can to stay out of trouble." She eyed Adam, and all the warmth in her expression died like a candle in a blizzard. "And watch him, too. He's your *responsibility*. If he does something, you will be held judged on his behalf as well. Especially after yesterday. You're lucky the Composer is so magnanimous."

Shiv couldn't help but grin at the word "responsibility." *How the wheel turns for the son of Roland Arrow.* "You don't trust me?"

"I'll tell you after dinner," she said. "But for now..." She handed him a purse. "You have ten thousand scale in here. I doubt you can spend it all even if you tried. It will at least be enough to get you the books and items you need. Don't lose it."

Shiv reached out to “receive” the purse, but accidentally “missed” and wrapped his hand around hers as well. She looked at him. “Oops,” he said. “I apologize. I meant to grab the purse.”

“No, you didn’t,” she replied without an ounce of offense. She placed the money in his hands and let out a breath. “Shiv. Remember what I said.”

“I won’t push my luck,” he said. “Much.”

The Umbral sighed. “*Much*, he says. Composer watch over you.”

“And you as well,” Shiv replied.

“*Shiv*,” Valor began. “*Did you at any point in the past few hours think twice about what you were about to say to Uva?*”

The Deathless frowned. “No. Why? Did I do something wrong?”

“*No... You are a terrifying boy*,” Valor finished.

Shiv blinked. “Where’s this coming from?” He didn’t get it. “If you weren’t stalwart and certain in Georges’s kitchen, you would get destroyed. There was no slack or easy way out: Just be good at what you do and never doubt yourself.”

“*I think I would like to meet this Georges someday*,” Valor mused.

“I’d be happy to introduce you,” Shiv said. He looked at Adam and snorted. “Well. Come on, Young Lord. Let’s get you an education as well.”

“I graduated with Esteemed Honors from Phoenix Academy,” Adam spat. He looked around the library with a sneer. “I assure you, what I had access to in the Capital—”

“Adam,” Shiv said, his smile turning forced. “We are surrounded by Umbrals and the spiderfolk. They are all looking at us. Finish that sentence, and we might not be able to get anything done here. And if Uva has to come back, she will be upset. Which means I will be upset.”

Adam glared, tired of being bullied. “Which means what to me?”

“Which means you might need to find lunch and dinner elsewhere.”

It seemed Adam could put up with being bullied a little more. And so he stopped talking.

“Thank you, Young Lord,” Shiv said, letting out a breath. “I will remember this sacrifice.”

“You’re a real bastard, Shiv.”

The library—bookstore? Shiv wasn't entirely sure which it was now. Seemed these things were mixed here in Weave. It had five tall levels to it, each with walls and shelves stacked full of books. There were floating quills flying through the air as well, guiding the shoppers toward the texts they sought. While Shiv marveled at the establishment, the locals gawked at him and Adam. Slowly, they gained a few shadows as Shiv made his way to the front desk.

"Hello," he said, leaning down and smiling at one of the Umbrals working there. For once, the Umbral seemed to be obviously male. Shiv blinked in surprise.

"I—*oh*," the Umbral librarian said. "I... are you *the* surfacers?"

"We're surfacers in search of a few books and reading aids. We require enchanted reading glasses to start. A map of Weave—along with other navigational materials you might recommend. After that, can you point me to a few books? Namely *The Basics of Biology and Anatomy*, *Core Medicae*, and... *Odes of Blood and Flesh*."

The librarian just kept staring for a few moments. Then shook his head. "I—Yes. Yes, of course—wait, *Odes of Blood and Flesh*?" He looked disturbed. "That book is restricted for general use. The only reason we have a copy is for research purposes. That is only for certified personnel from the Cradle."

Shiv stared at the Umbral. "Is this a certification that money can solve?"

"No!" the librarian said, offended.

"I see," Shiv said. Then, he employed his backup strategy: He held up Valor.

"Give him the book, boy," Valor said.

"I—what is this?" the librarian asked.

*"I am Valor Thann. Now, you can doubt who I am, but if you inconvenience us... it will likely not result in much trouble for you. This is not a threat. However, Shiv does require the book, and we will contact the headquarters of the Arachnae Order if need be for permission, which might cause some interesting conversations to happen between you and your superiors. I don't want that. So. Directions please."*

The librarian blinked. With a shaking hand, he reached under the table, clicked a mechanism Shiv couldn't see, and a flying quill drifted over him. "F-follow that," the librarian said. "P-please, f-forgive me V-V-V—"

"It's fine, boy," Valor said. "You are spared. I will speak highly of you to the Composer."

A single tear fell from the librarian's face, and two of Shiv's social skills advanced at once.

## Intimidation > 5

### Barter > 10

*Talk about borrowed strength*, Shiv thought, looking at Valor. “Hey, Valor?”

“Yes, Shiv?”

“I think I want to be you when I grow up. And maybe get sealed in a dagger.”

*“And I think I wish I was you when I was but an angry youth. Who often failed to interest the fairer sex.”*

Behind them, Adam looked on, utterly alienated from the process.

Shiv had a grand time following the quill around and picking up the books he needed. *The Basics of Biology* and the *Core Medicae* were easy to find—and there was a special auto-enchantment table to get the reading glasses he and Adam needed. The Young Lord seemed to follow along in a daze, his eyes locked mostly to Shiv and no one else, his expression one of paranoia. The other Umbrals, weavers, Weaveresses, and more were also incredibly aware of the surfacers among them.

But by this point, Shiv didn’t care. *Finally. I’m going to learn about the basics of felling magic. I’ve been waiting to do this my entire life...* His heart raced as he was led through a set of magically sealed vault doors into the restricted section. There, two Weaveresses playing what looked like a complicated card game shot to their feet, saluted Valor Thann, and then *literally* took out keys to unchain the *Odes of Blood and Flesh* from its cage at the far wall of the room.

The book lived up to its dark reputation. Shiv’s Biomance felt a faint field around the book, and the leather that bound it was made from skin. *A high vampire’s skin*. It also had a set of eyes and teeth lining the back, so one could cut themselves holding it the wrong way.

“What the Broken Moon is that?” Adam breathed.

“Something I look forward to reading,” Shiv said. “You can have a peek as well. Apparently, it seals you in the body of a series of torture victims while teaching you about anatomy and biological functions.”

The Young Lord stared at Shiv like he was daft. “And why do you want to read that?”

“For Biomancy? Why else?”

“Aren’t the basic textbooks enough?”

"I'm more of a hands-on learner."

*"And it's not like pain or the threat of death scare him, it seems,"* Valor mused.

As Shiv thanked the Weaveresses and added his final book to his basket, he decided he was going to look around a bit more before leaving. He encouraged Adam to explore as well, but the Young Lord treated all the locals like how he treated Shiv when he was still Pathless.

*He's probably still dealing with all the Republic's propaganda,* Shiv thought. *He probably got a lot more of that junk in him than I do.*

As they wandered, Shiv picked out a dozen more books—five of them a collection of local recipes, one of them a pop fiction novel with a rather muscular-looking weaver fighting demons with a cursed axe, a history book on the surfacer invasion of the Abyss on Valor's recommendation, and finally an introduction to Psychomancy—because that was the next magical skill he was trying to develop.

"So," Adam said. "Are we done? We've been here for an hour."

"Just about," Shiv said. "Why are you in a hurry?"

"Because our home is being attacked by literal monsters from the dark," the Young Lord hissed.

"A rogue faction," Shiv corrected.

"Whatever! They need our help! We don't even know—"

"The Quest hasn't failed yet," Shiv reassured him. "And we won't make it if we just go rushing back right now. Not without the Composer's help. We'll get lost or killed. Now, I have no problem with the getting killed part, but you?"

Adam sighed. "I know they *treated* you like a monster. But—"

"Georges. Seymour. Tran."

"What?" Adam said.

"Not everyone treated me like a monster. And I don't want Blackedge to sink into the Abyss either. You might care about the town more, but I have people there too. I'm not blowing this off. But I'm not rushing back blind." Shiv paused. "You don't know what it's like out there. I walked through the wilderness, and I got through that the hard way. Then, when I finally got close to this place, a Dragon-Knight obliterated the mountain maze I was supposed to enter in a fiery tantrum. I didn't do anything wrong a lot of the time. But I still fell. There was just no winning sometimes."



Shiv eyed Adam. “I don’t want you to die. Despite everything. I won’t blame you if you want to go right now, but I don’t think I’ll ever see you again if you do. And I don’t think you’ll ever make it home to your dad or your beloved either.”

Adam swallowed and nodded. “Fine. But the moment the Composer calls—”

“I’ll answer—” Shiv bumped into an Umbral, and she dropped the book she was carrying. He turned and winced. “Ah. Sorry. Surfacers are clumsy when they speak to each other.”

Unlike the other Umbrals, though, this one simply stared at him with a blank expression. He reached down and picked up her book. Using this as an opportunity to test his new reading glasses, Shiv examined the cover.

*“Mana-Physics: An Advanced Text on Magically Enhanced Engineering,”* Shiv read. “Sounds complicated. I’ve fixed a magical freezer before. For a kitchen. Is there a chapter on that?”

The Umbral just kept staring at him. There was a distant look to her eyes, and he noticed a hive of scars running down the left side of her face. The kind of scars one got from an acid burn. As she took the book out of his hand and placed it back on the nearest shelf, something hit Shiv—and hit him hard.

**Foreshadowing: She imagines her bomb going off. She tries to conceive of the light—the heat. She tells herself she will likely be dead immediately. That there will be no pain. But she’s not truly worried about herself.** The latest\_episodes are on\_the

**She doesn’t know why the crow-faced men targeted her specifically—or why the raven that led them is forcing her to do this. All she does know is that if her bomb does not go off within Passage by the afternoon, her son is going to die.**

**For the past three months, she has spent her time quietly assembling it within one of the teleportation anchors. There are unused spatial passages—and with the blindfold they gave her, even the Composer is blind to her actions. And so she worked, while at night she wept. For what was she supposed to do? They were always watching, and the raven brought her letters from her son every day at midnight to prove they had kept him alive.**

**Whatever these agents of New Albion are planning, it is beyond her—it will swallow her life. But the contract they gave her promises the life of her son. So it is going to happen. She is going to betray her Exalted Mother, kill her sisters—and so many other people coming and going from Weave. Along with herself. Because she doesn’t want to live with it. Because she can’t...**

**The time is nigh. She went back to her favorite library one last time. One last moment of comfort from the past. Everything is going to be bright soon.**

**Foreshadowing > 7**

**Quest Gained: Stop New Albion's Aviary from bombing Passage and crippling Weave's critical teleportation anchors.**

**Success: Mask of False Paths (Heroic); Cloak of Midnight's Kindred (Adept)**

**Failure: The Compact gateway leading to the surface will become sealed.**

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