

## Deathless 201

### Chapter 201 (I) Neath [II]

Shells and false semblances are one of the most illegal—but also most valuable—commodities offered by the Neath. When one seeks to establish their position in life, they usually arrive at one of a few following places: What is your Tier? How wealthy are you? How connected are you? And what can you provide with the skills you do have?

For most, life is a catch-22. You won't be able to gain grand skills or level quickly because you simply aren't important. You haven't gotten the chance to evolve, so you won't evolve, and thus you languish until your skills are crippled by inaction and mundanity. Indeed, a great many bottlenecks are formed from such inaction, because you've taught your own legend to expect nothing, and so you will be nothing.

To break free sometimes, or to escape from past sins, there are those who assume false identities—a layer of fake skin for their soul and body, so to speak.

Shells are simple, comparatively. They are effectively a mold of tissue or alloy woven along the exterior of someone's body. Usually, they degrade over time, though how long they last depends on the Tier of the forger. This allows someone to shed their physical visage and adopt a new face. It won't be able to change any of your actual skills, but it can give you an aesthetic makeover, and for some, that is all that is needed. This generally requires a level of Biomancy, Kinesiology, or even Metallurgy and Smithing, depending on whom the subject being treated is.

The harder part for everyone, however, is the semblance. Your soul sends out information in the form of the mana radiating out from you. Your skills broadcast who you are to the System, and when someone with a high enough Analyze skill gazes upon you, they will read truths about your history that can't be denied. They will glean from you your Path, they will see your Skill-Tiers, and they will be able to tell just how much of a threat you are.

Masking this is difficult. Usually, people choose a more direct route in terms of stealth, avoiding notice entirely, but oftentimes, stealth is not enough. If you want to live in society and exist among people, you must accept some extent of voyeurism. As such, you need a greater forger, one that has delved into psionics and stealth in equal measure and achieved a skill fusion between the two.

Soul forgery is not making a new sword; it's simply rerouting some of your mana so it displays other things. This too degrades, and far faster than your body's shell. The more you use your skills, the more your false semblance disentangles. It's like undoing and redoing a fragile knot over and over again. But while it lasts, when someone lays their gaze upon you, they will see another rather than the truth of your soul.

But there is a limit to this as well. For if the one who gazes is a being of considerable power, and they pit their soul against yours, it might shear your false semblance apart instantly and unravel your ruse.

-What Lurks Below: An Exposé on the Hidden World of Organized Crime (Banned by Republic authorities for unlawful slander and fearmongering)

"...And that about sums up the ugliness of our situation," Adam finished. As he recounted his experiences over the past few months, Shiv kept his eyes fixed on Irons's expression. The captain was stoic, disciplined. He wielded his body as one would a blade, betraying nothing. But even so, there were minor flinches, grimaces, brief clenches of the jaw.

The more Adam spoke, the darker Irons's features got, but through it all, he listened. Quietly, attentively, and he never raised a single objection.

Psycho-Cartography: This is what it looks like when a man of extreme discipline and loyalty undergoes a crisis of faith. Be straight with him. Honest. You can reveal ugly truths without him reacting emotionally,

but avoid being cruel for the sake of it. He will likely respond without speaking. And by that, I mean violently.

Two conversations were unfolding in the forger's office. Off by the side, the Educator continued interrogating Custiel. The goblin was sitting upon his operating table now, and a series of bashes rattled the heavy wooden doors on the far side of the room. The Pathbearers tasked with guarding Custiel were barred from entry by a few border sketches. They tried reaching in with mana as well, but were quickly repelled as the fields they projected were scarred by the flaying touch of the Educator's brush.

Shiv wouldn't consider himself anything close to a master diplomat. He wouldn't even call himself particularly peace-inclined. But the Educator seemed determined to start as many problems as she could with her incessant demands and her propensity to use her bruising tone to resolve any situation with someone she deemed inferior to her.

The longer we stay by her side, the more problems that we're going to encounter, Shiv thought to himself. They were already running from the Ascendants and most of the capital, and now, in their first foray into the underworld, he suspected he might have a nasty first encounter with the so-called Dragon Brokers that ran this whole Neath thing sometime soon.

"Captain? Captain?" Adam said, sounding slightly worried. The Gate Lord was nervous, more nervous than Shiv had ever seen him outside of active combat. Adam had spoken highly of Irons, and under these circumstances, part of Adam still wanted to impress his former mentor, Shiv realized.

Psycho-Cartography: Let's section this under 'ammunition to bully Adam with.'

Let's maybe not, he thought, lying to himself. He was definitely going to use this at some point.

Despite his attempts to be more upright, Irons's response came in the form of a long, deep sigh, the sigh of an exhausted man. His breath reeked of stress, but also resolve. Shiv knew because he had made the same sigh before, when he decided to throw himself upon a Necromancy spell to deliver a greater wound to adversaries he couldn't beat otherwise. Irons was burdened, but Irons was mustering his strength to shoulder that weight.

"I had a feeling," Irons began. He looked Adam dead in the eye. "I had a feeling that your life would be like this." Adam opened and closed his mouth several times. "I, uh, am not blaming you," Irons continued. His gaze fell. He opened and closed his fist, popping his wrist in an act of reflexive stress relief. "It's not your fault. The System plays favorites, and because of who your father is, because of your talents, you were never going to live a life of peace. I just hoped you could have tread that middle ground, hit Heroic-Tier maybe a century earlier than most, and at least get to taste some stability in your life."

Adam leaned back and pressed his lips together. "Captain, was that hope and optimism I just heard? Are you developing a fever? Have you picked up a drinking habit, perchance?"

Irons snorted and shook his head. "I see your tongue still waves before your thoughts settle."

"It's a habit that's grown worse due to bad influences." Adam briefly looked at Shiv, and the Deathless simply folded his arms.

"No idea who you're talking about," Shiv said. "I'm surprised you're taking it so well, though."

"I'm not," Irons deadpanned. "I'm just choosing not to react."

That earned another bit of respect from Shiv.

"Part of me would like to deny it," Irons went on. "Part of me wants to accuse one of you of being a liar, of running a scheme against the Republic after being turned by hostile powers."

"But..." Shiv added, spinning a finger.

"But," Irons continued, "I know Adam. He's not the traitorous kind. And I know Roland well. He's an insufferable, rigid fool when it comes to his morals and ethics, and particularly emotional when it comes to being swayed by his own feelings. But put a bow in his hand and give him an army to command, and you'll see the finest example of a Pathbearer to ever exist on Integrated Earth."

Shiv suppressed a moment of sourness and doubled down on punching Roland in the face at some point, now that he had a Legendary skill. Maybe he wouldn't be obliterated instantly. Maybe he could get close enough. But then he saw something else. Irons's eyes were still on him, and the man had noticed.

Psycho-Cartography: He's watching you too. He trusts Adam. He doesn't know anything about you, and you cannot blame him for that.

"I didn't know Harlon had a kid," Irons grunted. His eyes narrowed, and they left Shiv, falling upon Adam once more. "You never told me about him."

At that, Adam winced. He gave Shiv an apologetic look, but the Deathless didn't care anymore. They'd been through way too much for him to give a shit about old slights, about ancient history. Adam had plenty of grievances before they ended up in the Abyss, before they were forced to become battle brothers, before Shiv returned Rose, before the Tarrasque, and before even darker truths about Shiv's lineage came to the surface. Frankly put, Adam's bygone animosity was barely more than a pinprick compared to the impalement inflicted upon Shiv by Udraal's actions.

"Let's just say it took a little bit of active combat and shared near-death experiences to get over some problems with family history," Shiv said dryly.

Irons drew in his lip in distaste. "I see. I've had my own experiences with such things. And I'm glad the two of you found a way. I wish there was another way to be, but I suspect people like us need to be blooded and broken before things can be mended."

Yet, there was still something the man left unsaid. His eyes still lingered on Shiv, and the distrust between them continued. Shiv suspected that unless they experienced some mutual, shared conflict, and the man got a measure for who he was, that tension would remain. The Deathless resolved to settle that, if they had to work together.

"Well, we explained that utter pit of shit we're in. But Captain, what are you doing? Trying to break into Flamecrown Castle? How did you find yourself on the business end of Daughter's dagger?"

"I was on the trail of Melissa," Irons said.

"Melissa? Melissa Harrington?" Adam was suddenly animated. His back straightened. He blinked twice.

"Know who he's talking about?" Shiv asked.

"She was an underclass student in the first year by the time I graduated. Brilliant girl. Path of the Investigator. Had a habit of finding things out that she really shouldn't have and asking questions that made people around her uncomfortable. Especially powerful people."

"She went missing," Irons said, and there was a shudder in his breath. The man wasn't just worried now; he was outright fearful. "She went missing looking for a younger sister, Hannah. She told me this when she showed up at my residence three weeks ago. It was completely out of the blue. She was in hysterics. She went on and on about how there was a grand conspiracy unfolding through the orphanages of the capital, how select children who experienced significant trauma but retained their innocence were being kidnapped and moved to other facilities."

Adam bit his lip at that, and Irons continued. "At first, I simply thought she had suffered a Psychomantic attack after escaping from somewhere she shouldn't have been in the first place. She was an inquisitive girl possessed of unparalleled perspicacity, but she was also obsessive. She dug for every morsel of information incessantly. I knew there would be a time when she overstepped too far. Being an amateur detective on the grounds of the academy is one thing, but it has its own dangers as well. Corruption hates being revealed. All corruption. And I guessed she had overstepped, found some deviant thing a minor noble was doing."

Irons's gaze grew even darker. "But then she brought things out. Evidence. Documentation. Sigil letters detailing the selection and specific grooming of certain children. These were exchanged by the matrons of over eighty orphanages and the Harmonious Communal Outreach arm of the Republic's Inquisition."

Adam's old teacher let out a harrowed breath. "I didn't want to believe. I didn't want to think that the rot had sunk in so deep. So while I offered her a place to rest, I tried to convince her to go to the higher authorities, to see things settled through proper channels."

Adam winced dramatically. Meanwhile, Shiv pulled a sigil letter of his own out from his cape. Irons stopped talking, and Adam looked at Shiv, confused as to what he was doing.

"Hey, Educator," Shiv called off to the side.

The Forgotten Ascendant glared at him, interrupted by his sudden call. "What?" she almost snarled.

"Got a pencil or something? I got some writing I need to do."

She scoffed and ignored him while going back to tearing into her victim.

"Jackass," Shiv muttered under his breath. "Alright, plan B then." He pricked a hole in his own finger with his Biomancy and began stroking characters into the page of the sigil letter.

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

"Oh, nothing. I'm just telling someone what a piece of shit they are."

Dear Veronica, my godsdamn immortal fucking bitch of an absentee grandma:



Did you know that one of your Ascendants is going around kidnapping orphans? Well, in case you don't want to go down as the worst Councilwoman in existence, maybe consider cutting Daughter out of the equation. The 12 Ascendants doesn't sound too bad either. Maybe give that a think. Might be the smart thing to do.

He put his sync-letter away just then and saw Adam looking at him. "I'll tell you about that in a while. But keep going. I'm guessing Melissa didn't much like that suggestion."

"No," Irons said, shaking his head. "By the next morning, she was gone. And she stayed gone for the rest of the week, and the week after that. As she has no surviving next of kin aside from her missing sister, no one was driven to make a report."

"No one but you," Adam said.

"No one but me," Irons concurred quietly. "Despite this, I knew that the local constables and Investigators would not do anything, so I took things into my own hands. When I returned to my residence, I found some of the evidence she'd discovered hidden behind my shield in the armory. It seemed that Melissa suspected this might happen and left just a sliver of a chance for someone else to follow in her trail. So I did. But I knew I couldn't operate openly, not with my identity so easily verified."

And then, Irons looked toward the goblin sitting upon the operating table, and Shiv realized how the man had gotten into this mess.

"You bought a shell and a false semblance?" Adam gasped. "I—that just doesn't seem like a 'you' thing to do, Captain."

Irons shot Adam an odd look. "Do we really know each other that well, Young Lord Arrow?"

Adam's mouth opened and closed several times. A part of that statement seemed to sting. "I suppose not," he muttered.

"You suppose right," Irons said, but there was no malice in his voice. "You didn't know the me from years ago. I wasn't always a dutiful servant of the Republic, a proper soldier. We were all young once. We all had yearnings and periods of wanderlust, and during some of these periods, I simply drifted toward things that were ill-advised for me. They came with scars and opportunities."

"They came with you being a piece of shit!" Custiel suddenly cried out. The goblin had a mess of piercings, and his leather vest flapped about with the violence of his gestures. "What did you bring to my establishment? I told you, Irons, no trouble! You'll be hearing from the Dragon Brokers for this! You'll be wishing—"

Suddenly, the Educator reached down and seized the goblin by the neck. "I wasn't finished speaking with you," she said. Her voice was cold, and there was a promise of death behind every word.

The goblin choked. "I, yeah, of course, I'm just..."

"He is no longer a matter," she continued. "I am your only matter. I am your only client. You will not see anyone else for the next week, or however long it takes for you to complete all these shells and false semblances. We need to be gone from the city. We need to be gone fast. Furthermore, we require safe houses, locations that even the highest powers in the Empire will not think to search."

"Define 'highest powers'," the goblin said. "I can hook you up if you're just dealing with the Guard, but things outside don't sound so good. From what I heard, even Harlock's all over the place. The capital's in lockdown. I mean, what the hells did you people do? Piss off one of the Ascendants?"

Shiv and Adam looked at each other, and both of them snorted. "Try all of them, goblin," Shiv said with a grunt of bitter amusement.

He chuckled awkwardly. "Oh, is that a joke?"

Chapter 201 (II) Neath [II]

"I wish," Shiv said. "But no, we got some serious heat coming down our ass. So, can you help or not?"

The goblin's expression grew pained, and he slowly turned back to the Educator, glaring at him. "Listen, lady, I... Look, Legends, Heroes, I don't know what you guys are. I'm sympathetic to your problems, okay? I don't much like the authorities either. But the Ascendants? I might be a Heroic-Tier Forger, but I can't hide you from Divinities. They'll take one look at you, Analyze you, and all my hard work will go up like that." He snapped his clawed fingers. "The shell will pop apart, and the semblance will break into itty-bitty pieces. Your real body and soul will slip out! It's just not possible."

"Then we've come to the wrong place, have we?" the Educator said, gripping the goblin's throat tighter. Custiel gave a keening wail of misery. He reached up and tried to pull the Educator's hand free, but where she was among the greatest powers on Integrated Earth, he was but a Forger—someone who masked souls and created false skins for people to wear, not even a Martial Pathbearer.

"Perhaps another recommendation is in order," the Educator said. "Someone capable of rising to the occasion."

"I tell you, if I knew someone who could do that..." the goblin muttered, his fear finally crossing over to a point of desperate anger. "But there's no one better, at least not in the city right now. If you want to find a Legend, then you're out of luck. You gotta go and wait. Make an appointment with the Dragon Brokers, and they'll send a specialist, assuming they think it's worth their time and you have the mithril. But you kill me, and they give you nothing. The Neath won't put up with this."

"The Neath will not know," the Educator answered, her voice falling to a growl. "They'll just find your body with his weapon lodged inside of you." The Educator pointed towards Irons, and Shiv realized her plan.

"Yeah, no, they won't," the Deathless said, folding his arms. The Educator's ire scythed away from the goblin, and her hateful glare fell upon him once more. He rolled his eyes. He wasn't going to deal with this messy bullshit. "Look, you want to frame someone for the murder of someone else? Great, except I'm not good with that. And frankly, you're just making more of a mess for the rest of us. You gonna let her do this, Adam?"

The Gate Lord responded by forming a Veilpiercer and drawing moisture out of the air. Irons's eyes widened as he felt the Gate Lord's Hydromancy, saw his body turn fluid, turn into a churning mass of raging tides.

"You will fight me for him," the Educator said, her voice colder than Gate Theborn's winds during Confriga's reign.

"I don't really know Irons, but Adam does," Shiv said casually. "And you're not doing shit to Adam or anyone he cares about. That's my position. Step over and we get bloody."

"I'm trying to help you escape, you fool!"

"You're trying to serve your interests and Udraal's. I know that I'm a part of that interest, but everyone else?" Shiv shrugged. "Maybe he wants Adam too? Gone, the Hydra, Irons, everyone? No, you don't care about them. Frankly, you care about me only as much as you want to use me. So that's what I'm going to propose right now." He took a few steps closer to the Educator. She didn't back away. She wasn't afraid of him, but with how she clutched her brush, she was wary. Her eyes jumped between him and Adam. She remembered what happened with the Necromantic rift last time. Shiv suspected she might have a counter, but traumatic injuries were traumatic injuries for a reason.

"Use you?" she said, her voice barely a whisper as she tried to control her boiling frustration. "Use you how?"

"You let me talk to him," Shiv offered. "You stay off to the side. You take a breather, whatever it is you need. Read through your tome, or I don't know, sketch some birds. You're clearly not into this whole 'human interaction' thing, so let me take a swing before you jump us into the murder and frame-job solution."

Shiv and the Educator held their stare of mutual loathing for a few moments, but then the Ascendant once known as Maia scoffed and stormed away. "Do as you please, then. Let's see if you can find us a way out. This one is useless, and that one's just a witness. We will need to settle this in the end, regardless." As she turned away and ripped the tome off her back, he heard her mumbling about how Udraal should have just let her paint everyone into her tome and mentally crippled the Deathless when he had the chance. Shiv wanted to spit at her feet while she retreated, but mustered a bit of self-control to bring the building animosity between them to an end.

"Alright," Shiv said, looking down at Custiel. The goblin was still terrified, but there was a slight hint of relief in his eyes now that he wasn't dealing with the Educator's anger issues anymore. "Custiel, is it?" Shiv said. "You might be glad to know that the people in the wine cellar aren't dead."

Custiel blinked twice. "They're not? Oh, oh, okay. What do you want for them?"

"Don't want anything. They're currently just sleeping off a few bad knocks. We got people there. They're hiding out for now. But I want to know a few things. I want to know what services you can provide and what you'd recommend for us to do."

"Recommend?" The Educator laughed out loud from where she was leaning against the wall a few meters away. Her voice was a scornful hiss. "You're treating the goblin as a consultant now, are you?"

"Hey, how about you paint quietly?" Shiv guessed, with more than a little bark in his own words as well. "I'm gonna try to figure out what we can get by having an actual conversation instead of just spitting orders at this guy. You can shit-talk me if it fails, but for now, shut the fuck up and go back to your book." He turned away from her before he could get the stink eye again. The relationship between them likely wasn't going to last. Sooner or later, one of them would take the first swing, and after that, it would be on. With that in mind, Shiv decided that he wanted to be the one who took the first swing, and he wanted to be the one who got rid of the Educator instead of the other way around.

Not waiting to get my throat slit, the Deathless thought to himself. He looked back at the goblin expectantly as the Educator started aggressively drawing in her book while continuing to mumble.

"Alright, so I'm a forger, right?" Custiel said. "I can provide falsified aesthetics and a fake soul for you. Let's you get into certain places and do certain things you might not be able to in your everyday life." He cocked his head in Irons's direction. "Did just that for that guy there. Made him a special identity. Malcolm Turner, a Hero-Inquisitor. That shell and semblance were real pieces of art. Not many semblances and skins can get you into Flamecrown Castle, but that one did."

"It also broke apart," Irons said with a growl. "It broke apart when I ran into one of the Ascendants."

The goblin threw up his hands. "Yeah, of course it did. They're Divinities! I told you there would be a limit!"

"No, you claimed that even if one of the Ascendants laid eyes upon my semblance, it would endure without suffering any harm at all."

"I was boasting!" the goblin shouted. "I was boasting! I was trying to sell my work. Don't you ever sell your work?"

"My work speaks for itself," Irons said, and the implication was clear.

The goblin just scoffed. "Yeah, great. Killing a bunch of people is just the same as making a work of art. Totally."

"Alright, alright," Shiv said. "So, you can't make a false semblance good enough to fool an Ascendant, but you can make something that can let someone get past a Legend?"

"Sure," the goblin said without a moment's hesitation. "That's easy. Legends, most of them don't have very good Awareness, let me tell you. And people with Legendary Awareness, they usually don't have a Legendary Analyze skill."

"Most Legends may be easy to fool, according to you, anyways, but what about those rare Legends with the right Analyze skill?" Adam asked.

"Well," the goblin coughed, "it'll survive the first glance, at least. I can tell you that much."

"Alright, so not a long-term solution for them either," Shiv said. "Will it work for those Observers outside, though?"

"Yep," the Custiel replied. "They're pretty easy. Sure, they got Divination, but Divination's pretty stupid if you know how it works. See, the System likes to tell people specific details, but it's real messy about how those details are delivered. And ultimately, the System wants you to fight each other, but it really doesn't specify how. A clash between a good disguise and an inquisitive eye is also a fight in the System's eyes. So, if I build the semblance a specific way? No problem. Not even a little."

"Alright, so how fast can you make a semblance?"

"I don't know, big guy. How fast can you make a piece of art? I mean, if you're capable of making art."

"Well, that really depends on what I'm cooking. Couple of hours, usually. I wouldn't call what I'm doing now true art yet, but we'll get there." Slowly, the goblin's gaze fell to the frying pan Shiv carried.

Custiel clearly considered saying something cute but held himself back.

"Smart," Shiv commented under his breath.



"Yeah, I sure do save my own ass sometimes," the goblin lampooned. "Probably the only reason my ass is still alive after so long, really. Look, to answer your question, um... What's your Tier?"

"Legend," Shiv said casually.

"Legend?" the goblin choked out. Irons narrowed his eyes; he didn't believe Shiv. It didn't matter. "Well, if you're not bullshitting me, that's gonna take, I don't know, a week to be complete?"

Both Shiv and Adam groaned.

"I'm not waiting around for a week," Shiv sighed. "And we have a hell of a lot more than just one Legend that needs to be disguised."

"What a pointless waste of time," the Educator snapped off in the corner. "He has the means. And if not him, then the Dragon Brokers can provide. This I know. Where is the Whistler? Speak, goblin!"

"Whistler? Wha—He's dead, lady!"

She scowled. "Dead? Since when?"

"Since Chestnut Hall got raided by a group of Inquisitors in the middle of the night. After Whistler decided to get a little cute about his working arrangements and start skimming some mith off by the side." Custiel sighed. "They arrested everyone else in the parlor but left his beaten corpse shackled to

the bottom of the staircase. Shackle had an insignia of a dragon on one end and the Republic's emblem on the other."

"Ah," the Educator said. "A Neath-sanctioned execution?"

"Neath-allowed," Custiel said, shuddering. "The Dragon Brokers probably tipped the Inquisitors off. Just because you get to be a Legendary Forger doesn't mean you're good enough to be a free agent. Told the dumb bastard that so many times. But he never listened. Not once. Stupid shit..."

Shiv rubbed at his face. "Was that your main backup plan, Maia? The dead guy?"

"The Brokers must have another," Maia declared, seemingly too offended by his implication of her lacking foresight to remember to be offended at the casual use of her name. "They owe me grand favors."

"And you'll get those grand favors paid once the Midnight finally lifts his veil, because no one is coming in or out without him noticing," Custiel replied. "Or the other Ascendants, for that matter." He whimpered thereafter, clutching his head. "Oh, oh, this is baaad. Lockdown... My business is going to be so felling jacked up. I need my meds too—how am I going to get the Ragiff now..."

"What?" Shiv said.

"It's a drug," Adam explained. "Specifically for goblins that develop mana allergies. It's grown only in Gate Hoidvest in Lone Star."

The Deathless mulled over everything just said and stared at Adam. A few unspoken things went between them. Radio was still in Shiv's cape. And if they were desperate, they could see if the orcs had any ideas too. On top of that, there was still Veronica and Udrael in play—but Shiv really didn't want them to be involved in this final escape any more than they already were.

The Educator waved her brush dismissively. "Enough, goblin. Begin your work. Start by creating a shell and a semblance for the Deathless. You have a day." She was spitting commands again, and Shiv was all but certain she'd been degenerated by her own godhood as well. The way she spoke to everyone was like how a ludicrously strict headmaster spoke to a pupil that wouldn't listen. He was quite certain a Pathbearer on her level couldn't possibly be this unreasonable unless something was genuinely wrong with their mind.

"A day?" Custiel sputtered. "Hey, listen, do any of you know how hard it is to forge something? To create a perfect disguise for someone's soul without damaging their mana? To make them a proper physical shell that looks like it fits and moves in accordance with their biomechanics? No? Okay, then, less complaining. And before you keep going, yeah, I meant what I said earlier. I'm your only choice. Now, unless you're willing to wait several months for a Legendary-Tier Forger to pop into the Republic—which probably isn't likely going to happen now since the capital's in lockdown—I'm the best you're gonna deal with."

"I suspect all Forgers might say that," Adam said. "What did you tell Captain Irons earlier, that you were 'boasting'?"

"Yeah, about my work, not about this. There's a reason you came to me, Irons, vouch for me!"

"Your semblance failed," Irons said from between clenched teeth.

"Yeah, 'cause you ran into someone that was too damn powerful!"

"See if he can do anything with some of that added help," Adam muttered to Shiv. "Show him the mask. If someone in the Neath can get that fixed, it will at least spare you from being noticed by everyone on the street when the System screams for them to rip your head off in exchange for almost a dozen Legendary skills."

"Yeah, I know." Shiv hesitated slightly before he pulled out another thing from his cape: his broken Mask of False Paths. He held it out to the goblin.

"What the hells' this?" Custiel asked.

"Just take it. You might know what it can do once you see the notification pop up."

The goblin did, though he accepted the mask's pieces apprehensively. A second passed, his breath hitched in his throat. "Holy shit. Perfect Semblance? Do you have any idea how rare this thing is? Heroic-Tier." The goblin smacked his lips together. He pressed the broken halves of the mask and aligned the cracks along the middle. "Still won't be strong enough to survive an Ascendant or another Divinity, but this thing will give you a free pass against practically anyone who isn't a god, assuming they aren't already suspicious. And if a deity is suspicious of you, you're fucked either way."

And that's not too bad, since the Educator can help us blend in, Shiv mused. Cripple's also available, so we have some cover from the others at least. Still doesn't solve the problem of escaping the Republic entirely, though. And we do need to get out. We need to find Blackedge again.

"Right," Shiv said. "You know anyone that can fix it?"

The goblin paused. "Well, maybe. But we don't really work for free, if you catch my drift. And I might be forgetting a few things from all the mistreatment I've suffered so far."

"The goblin thinks he suffered mistreatment?" the Educator snapped. "He doesn't know what mistreatment is."

"Ignore her," Shiv said. "Say we can pay for it. Say we have mithril or another way to pay. How fast can they fix the mask? And, uh, can any living arrangements be made in the meantime?"

"Hells, everything's possible through the Neath, but the entire Ascendancy coming after you? That's a pretty big bill for you to foot. Not saying it's impossible, though." In fact, a slow smile crawled across his face, and he started looking at Irons once more. "I think everyone in this room can help each other a bit."

As the goblin smiled, the captain frowned.

"How's that?" Shiv asked.

"Well. Fixing this thing is going to take a Heroic-Tier Crafter and a Heroic-Tier Enchanter to make sure everything works right. And if you're just looking for a way out of the city, I might got an idea."

Both Shiv and Adam leaned in. "Right. We're listening," the Deathless said.

“Well. There are two people known to provide circumspect services at a certain Academy...”

Adam flinched.

Irons groaned. “Hero-Smith Concelhaunt and Hero-Enchanter Merrielmel?”

The goblin laughed. “Familiar with them, are we?”

“I always did think they lived a little too lavishly. Even for nobility. Even if they are tenured.”

Custiel grinned. “Yeah. Well. See, they contacted me about finding people desperate enough to be subjects in a new project of theirs. Something about making a device that will let someone briefly slip to, uh, some place Outside before dipping back into reality as a means of travel, if you catch my drift. Good, High-Tier warriors that are desperate at that. Their last batch didn’t quite make it back.”

Shiv and Adam looked at each other once more. The Gate Lord shuddered. The Deathless felt a sense of wariness and hope flicker inside him.

“Listen,” Custiel said, holding up his hands. “I can make a few arrangements. You let me go, we head outside like reasonable adults and discuss this, and I might be able to get you all into the academy. City might be under lockdown, but there are still plenty of ways to get around inside. And the capital’s a big place.”

Shiv breathed out and nodded. "Well. I did always want to go to an academy. Irons? Is school still in session?"

Adam creased his eyebrows in thought. "It's... What, the end of week three?"

"Too late for me to get enrolled?" Shiv asked jokingly.

"Not unless you steal the identity of some poor, dead student with your repaired mask." Adam chuckled. Then they both fell silent. Their mirth faded. The idea stayed. "Say, Captain," Adam muttered. "Have there been any... unfortunate fatalities so far?"

For the first time, Captain Irons's face tightened with discomfort.

Chapter 202 (I) Sewer

It always starts the same way: desperation.

Desperation for revenge, desperation for money, for a new lease on life, to break free from who you were—be that because of a mistake or because you can't quite get out of that stink that clings to you. You know the stink. The stink of poverty, the stink of your parentage, your bloodline. The stink that comes with being called a bastard and being called the son of a traitor.

Desperation. Desperation makes you give yourself to strange places and take ugly risks. And the Neath, they're always waiting, they're always watching for you, people like you, to take those risks.

You asked me how they managed to get their hooks in me? They always had those hooks in me. Without them, I would have never made it to Captain of the Guard. Without them, I would have never managed to pay off my father's debt. Yeah, I had the skills, was pretty good with a sword, and plenty tough. Had a pretty rare Awareness-Deception Skill Fusion, too.

But guess what? Half the kids in the academies are special. They don't make it to Guard because there's no one giving them that extra push, no one helping them cut through lines. And ultimately, they're not desperate. They got the world in front of them. They're not nobody—only becoming somebody because the Neath and the Brokers decided to make an investment.

I suppose they saw something special in me, too. No deal was done on the part of charity, sure. It wasn't my bloodline, though. It might be because they thought I'd be loyal—probably not, though. More likely, the fact that they know they have me by the neck, and that I don't have any problems doing things that don't make other people sleep so well at night. Whatever the case.

Yeah, I did kill that one. No, I don't know what she did. No, I didn't know she was one of your informants. Yeah, I know what comes next. But let me tell you what you can expect from them, right? You can torture me. You can have your Psychomancers reach into my mind and rip every memory out of me, but it don't matter anymore. Because the moment I didn't check in, the moment one of their observers watched you guys pick me up, that's the moment their people made their move. Every speakeasy, hidden establishment, or whatever that's dealt with me has been relocated already.

The capital's a big place. There's plenty of abandoned buildings, plenty of gaps between the architecture. Now, the Ascendants, we say they're all-powerful, but I don't think so. I know they're not, because the Dragon Brokers, they seem to have some kind of arrangement going with you guys. Which is why there are only two of you inquisitors. Where's the rest of your squad, Master-Interrogator? Where's your torture kit? Where's your Psychomancer? Not here.



So, I know what comes next. My name is not going into a file in the Inquisition's ledger. In fact, I don't think most of them know I'm even here. I think the guys who picked me up won't know that their efforts didn't mean shit for piss. I'm not leaving this room. In a few days, my body's gonna surface in some lake somewhere, or I'm gonna be killed in some kind of freak accident. That's what the report will finally say when it reaches the coroner's office.

Anyhow, you tell the Brokers "thanks for the life." Couldn't have done it without them. I guess this day was always coming. But loose ends are loose ends, am I right?

-Interview with Salt Guthrup, Former Captain of the Constabulary for the Rosehearth District of the Capital, Yellowstone Republic

There were, in fact, a few casualties at the start of the school term. A group of prospective students, bound for the capital from Mount Verne, near the border between the Republic and the frozen wastes of Torontus, were ambushed by some Jotun raiders. A battle ensued, and though the party managed to repel the Jotun, a few students-to-be and their accompanying guardians were tragically slain.

Though they suffered losses, the party was from a battle-hardened region of the Republic, and they decided to continue on, as they were a considerable way into their journey. Moreover, they wished for the Auroral Council to witness their dead so that a proper response could be mustered against the northern brutes. The caravan continued on, arriving with their fallen fellows in tow.

The deceased were preserved by crude measures of Cryomancy, keeping them frozen and free of decay. And now they resided in a Royal Morgue of Archmortalis in the East Highvine district. In time, their surviving family would come to the capital to claim the remains themselves. Teleportation was not a possibility; considering these children were from Mount Verne, there was more than a little chance that whatever was cast from the capital to their frozen homeland would be intercepted by Jotun Jump Magi.

And the bodies of the fallen had experienced brutality enough.

"Adam," Irons began, trying to push through the discomfort as he finished relaying the information. "I'm going to ask you to tell me something, and I'm going to hope that your answer is no. You're not going to do something Necromantic to the bodies, are you? Please tell me you don't have a Necromancy Skill."

Adam stiffened for a moment. Irons closed his eyes. "Arrow," he groaned under his breath.

"I have the Necromancy Skill," Adam admitted. He straightened his back and tried not to wilt before the disappointed stare of his mentor. "But I'm not going to use it on the dead. I wouldn't. It's a level of foulness that I'll never be able to sink to. We're not dragging a shadow of a deceased student back to do our bidding."

"Then what do you need a body for?" Irons asked.

"I'm the one that needs the body," Shiv said. "It's for the broken mask. If I want a Perfect Semblance, I need a body to copy it from. Are there any of the dead that are orphans or something? Because I don't really want to burn up a body that has a family waiting for it."

The captain grew even more disturbed. "I'm not certain. There were twelve slain in total. Eight of them were prospective students, children selected for their merits, combat or artistic and intellectual talents. Promising Pathbearers. I looked over the bodies and interviewed the survivors." Irons fell silent, and Shiv recognized the man to be someone possessed of considerable empathy, despite his stoicism. "I don't like this," he said, "and I would be utterly against it, if it wasn't you

asking."

He meant Adam, but Shiv thought a bit more persuasion was still in order. "Yeah, I know, I don't much felling like it either. I don't like the fact that my mask burns up bodies, and I don't like the fact that I'm probably going to have to steal the identity of a dead kid to get what I want done."

"Kid?" Adam asked, turning to gape at Shiv. "You're barely older than any of them. Well, maybe not older at all."

The Deathless winced. Right, he was still eighteen as well. He didn't really feel eighteen anymore, though. After all that bloodshed, he wasn't considering himself a boy. Wait, when did I last consider myself a boy? Shiv paused as he ruminated on that. He was practically his own man the moment he left the orphanage. No one really cared for him aside from George, and with him making a living wage and supporting his own lifestyle, he had practically been a functional adult for nearly a decade by now.

"It's the best I can do," Shiv said. "The best play we can come up with right now has me operating on Academy grounds. I can't be doing anything in the open, and I can't be exposed by the System every time someone sees me. And the way I see it, you need my help just as much as I need yours. Especially since you're rolling up against our gods."

Irons's expression hardened as he regarded Shiv. "I don't know you. All I know is that you are Adam's companion and there is a considerable bond between you." He hesitated before he finished his statement. "But I also don't know Lord Arrow anymore either. War changes a person. And if half of what you two say is true, then your allegiances... Who do you fight for?"

"We're fighting for the 'not letting the Ascendants get away with being bastards' side of things," Shiv began. "I'm fighting for my life, yeah. That's true. But we were doing everything we could for Blackedge. You know who wasn't? The Inquisition. They intercepted Slayers from Blackedge and tortured them. Killed some too. They were preparing to sell an Animancy Core to an Abyssal Lord."

The captain blinked twice, and Shiv drove into him harder. "Yeah, you heard me right," Shiv growled. "Animancy Core. Inquisition. Our people." Irons tried to look at Adam, but Shiv snarled. "Don't look at

him. Look at me. You know I'm not lying. You know something is wrong. You want proof? We can show the survivors. But you're already looking at the ugly shit. You ran up against Daughter. And there's no way back from that."

"These are words," Irons said. But he swallowed hard, and his Adam's apple bobbed up and down. "Anyone can speak words. Words are the first refuge of the deluded and treacherous."

"My words are more than just sounds and wind," Shiv said. "You can feel it. And I'm more than words too. I'm the reason you aren't dead."

Shiv pressed. He folded his arms and looked Irons up and down. Psycho-Cartography told him to challenge the man, to provoke him into thinking a little deeper. "Listen, I respect you, Irons. I really do. You're trying to do right by one of your pupils, and you're trying to be a loyal citizen still. I can't judge that. Frankly, you're among the few not-pieces-of-shit I've met in the last few days—and trust me, that makes you platinum-tier in terms of company." He ignored the Educator's glare and kept going. "But you went up against Daughter. You fought an Ascendant. You got a sight of what they are, who they are. It doesn't really matter what you want now. They came for Melissa, and they're gonna come for you."

Irons betrayed nothing. The man's face was blank and hard. That stole another measure of respect from Shiv. Not everything needed a reaction. The Deathless was learning that point himself. Only when he was ready did Irons finally reply. "You might be right. Or you might be trying to turn me. You might be taking advantage of what I've learned. Even so, my loyalty is more than just faith. It's to the people that I've served, the people I've fought alongside."

"And I get that," Shiv said. "And I'd like to help you protect these people as well." He scoffed. "Look, I get the paranoia. I get that you don't like being here and this whole cloak-and-dagger bullshit thing that we have going. I get that figuring out one of your gods is a psychotic woman-child who uses orphans to channel the power of her soul is kinda fucked up. But right now, you and I only have so many choices. You can choose to do nothing, in which case, Melissa's definitely gonna die, or worse. And this thing you ran into, it's bigger than you. It's too much for one person to handle. Since it's looking like we might be

stuck here for a bit, I'd say we can help each other. Because good man or not, you're not a Legend. And you're gonna need more power behind you if you want your student to survive at all."

"You think you'll succeed where I did not?" Irons challenged.

Shiv shrugged. "Well, again, I am the one who gave Daughter that scar. You're alive because of me. And I did break out of the prison with Adam and some others. So. Yeah. Let's face it, captain. We're all here because we're desperate.

"

Sticks and Stones 56 > 57

The captain fell silent at that. He looked at Adam, and the Gate Lord simply nodded. A quiet sigh slipped out of Irons, and Shiv knew his grip was sinking in.

"Even if I go along with this," Irons said, "I can't get you into the morgue. I need specific identification to get in. They record everything on the registry there. It's carefully monitored."

"Oh, we probably have a few means for that problem," Custiel cut in. "Getting into the morgue, well, that's easy. We got plenty of people working there. But you're not going to the morgue first. If you want to do this, you're going to the academy. We got people there too. More than just the two who are going to repair that mask of yours. Actually, that's where we stash a lot of our travelers, you know."

Irons's eyes suddenly snapped at the goblin. "What did you just say?"

"I mean, you guys got a lot of unused space there. Quite a few kids and plenty of faculty, but the academy grounds are big. Practically a small city inside a city, if you ask me."

"Where?" Irons growled. "Who have you been hiding in my academy?"

"Ah, ah, ah," the goblin said, wiggling a finger. "My job's already done enough. Besides, these guys are going to find out for themselves, and they're going to be assigned a liaison to make sure they don't end up telling nobody where we hide our special guests." Custiel leaned back in his chair. "The only reason this is working out is because you're going to be doing the Dragon Brokers some favors. And you're all part of the Neath now too, if you're getting down and dirty. But I want to give it to you straight. You take up this deal, and there's going to be a ritual at some point. You're going to be putting a few skills up for insurance. No diving into the muck unstained. For any of us."

That brought a beat of silence to everyone. But then Shiv regarded the Educator once more. "So. When'd you get tainted. And what skill did you put up for auction?"

Maia huffed, but said nothing.

"Big godsdamned favor, then," Shiv muttered. "Let's get on with this shit."

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With all that was happening across most of the capital, they couldn't just walk in through Phoenix Academy's front gates. But ultimately, they weren't going through the front door anyway. Everything

the Neath did, it did under the skin. And Shiv knew enough about human biology to know that there were a great many other systems circulating beneath the epidermis.

The circulatory system, for one. Blood surged along its channels and fueled the body. The architecture of a city was not so different. Buildings and streets were the skin, but connected to them were sewers, springs, and underfloor channels carrying mana. Spells needed to be directed from place to place. Water needed to be dispensed in every home for hydration and cleaning purposes. And from every home also came rubbish and biological waste.

That was how he discovered where the forger's den was. Though he'd been drawn across a series of brass pipes before finally being teleported into another section of the city altogether, he had expected himself to be under some kind of ordinary building, perhaps a residence or an even larger brewery.

The truth was beyond his ability to suspect.

The moment they stepped out of the chamber, waves of oppressive heat washed over Shiv. It wasn't nearly extreme enough to cause him any harm, but Adam hissed, Irons tensed, and the goblin forger stifled a slight growl of discomfort. "I always hate coming out this way. This is your fault, you bastards. I could be getting moved through the pipes, but now my den's getting burned. Everything's gonna get stripped down."

The air was so dry, Shiv felt his tongue shrivel. There was a faint shimmer in the air from the extreme temperatures passing through this place. Worse yet was the wailing whistle that constantly climbed and climbed. They weren't in a normal tunnel. The walls were made from some kind of heat-resistant material; the texture was rubbery, and its coloring was pitch black. Even so, steam rose off from the sides, and Shiv guessed that the insides of the insulating matter had coolant stored within.

A small squad of Pathbearers was waiting for them as well. They were dressed in heat-resistant armor, pulsing waves of cold radiated forth from them, and they held their weapons high, lowering them only when Custiel gave the say-so. One among them was dense with Biomancy mana.

They weren't dressed like the others. In fact, Shiv didn't even know what kind of being they were. They resembled a humanoid ant to some extent, but their face was mostly a slit with teeth running down the middle like a zipper. The rest of their body was chitinous as well, with several lashing antennae extended behind them. The strange creature stood amongst the other Pathbearers and made a series of hand signs using their forearms. They directed their silent language at Custiel, but the goblin just waved them off.

"Yeah, yeah, Reggie, I'm fine," Custiel said. "Came to an agreement with our friends here. Turns out everything was a bit of a misunderstanding."

Shiv could have said something, but the Educator let out a haughty hmph. At least she was going along with things for now. If she complained any further, he might've just gotten into a fight with her out of pure annoyance.

Chapter 202 (II) Sewer

He regarded the Pathbearers standing before him. Most of them were clad in full sets of nondescript adamantine armor.

Adamantine wasn't cheap, but the armor also didn't fit these people. They were slow and sluggish, and the fear spilling out from them—fueling Shiv with power—told him that they weren't seasoned warriors. Someone had spent a great deal of money supplying these Pathbearers, but their skills weren't up to snuff.



He suspected there might only be one Master among them, and that was the ant-like creature's Biomancy. The rest were merely Adepts, which told him one of two things. First, these people didn't see much action and were simply a deterrent, more of a watchguard than actual warriors. Second was that they were a statement in and of themselves, because adamantine, again, wasn't cheap at all. If someone could supply someone with adamantine gear while you were still an Adept, that meant they were a good employer to work for.

Just then, the world outside rumbled with noise, and he felt the heat climb another few degrees. A groaning followed, and the walls around him began to gurgle with splashing fluid. "Where the hells are we?" he asked.

"Inside an incinerator," Custiel said. "Well, inside the coolant pipes of one of the incinerators meant to process waste for the capital. We're in the Sapphira district, so the big gun upstairs is constantly running, churning, and burning all the stuff that people throw out."

"What? Are you serious?" He studied the goblin's features, trying to see if the forger was shitting him. He really wasn't. Adam's eyes were aglow, and he was trying to confirm Custiel's words directly. The Gate Lord's mouth opened slightly.

"Broken Moon, why do you have your business open here?"

"Because it's not like you can be a forger in the open, can you?" Custiel snapped. "Let me tell you, it took the Neath a good few years to find a way into the coolant pipes, locate a spot that was stable enough to build in, and start making some minor tweaks to the infrastructure to fit my establishment in. Oh, that, and they also had to rewire some of the pipes. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got to have a brief conversation with my partner here. Munson will see you guys moved to the academy grounds. Won't you, Munson?"

A low grunt came from one of the guards. He stepped forward, and though he was large, Shiv stood a bit larger. He regarded the armored man trying to size him up. Shiv lifted an eyebrow, and just then, his notification loaded. Now all the guards were looking at him.

"Listen, if any of you are feeling greedy, and if you think you can take my life from me, just go for it. I won't even kill you if you try. I will, however, cut your arms and legs off with my frying pan, then I'll leave you like a bunch of nuggets on the ground. See how fast your Biomancer can heal you." A few of the guards responded with increased fear. Munson, meanwhile, continued staring at Shiv for a few seconds longer before waving for the rest of them to follow.

"Hold on," Shiv said. "We still got a few people in the wine cellar. They need to be coming with us too."

"Do they, now?" the Educator said, and Shiv caught her meaning.

"Yeah, they do," he deadpanned. "They helped us get out of the prison; we're helping them get out of this mess. We're not dumping them like trash. Godsdamned... If I have a problem with one of them, I'm just gonna finish them off myself. None of this backhanded betrayal bullshit. If you have a problem with that, feel free to stop me physically. Seems to be the way the world works, anyway."

Unlike all the times before, Shiv didn't get into a contest with the Educator. He simply marched back into the forger's den and went to the jetting pipe sticking out from the other side of the room.

A few minutes later, the escaped prisoners, Solzimort, who was swimming through the floor due to the cramped nature of their surroundings, and all the orcs were across with Shiv, and they followed Munson as a rejoined party.

Munson was a man of few words, and Shiv was ultimately fine with that. He gave him a few minutes to observe the insides of the coolant system. As he looked up, he felt a faint presence brush against his Pyromancy. He guessed that was the core of the incinerator working somewhere above him. Quite a bit of power going through that too. Not nearly as much as a Hero—maybe at Master-Tier.

Not a bad place to hide a criminal enterprise, Shiv admitted to himself. The Pyromancy likely masked some of their activity, and ultimately, it was a counterintuitive place to look. After all, who would be hiding inside an incinerator?

Their walk was ultimately a short one. After moving through the rubbery tunnel for a few minutes, they arrived before an open cleft. It looked like someone had cut a gap in one of the walls, and between the separated material bubbled globules of murky white water. However, though the globules pulsated and burst, none of it spilled across the ground or flooded the inside of the cooling pipes. Munson grunted. Shiv shot the guard a look and left another temporal anchor in place in case he needed to conduct another escape.

He went across first. The moment he did, he felt a crushing sensation seize him. Once more, he reminded himself to relax. He stopped fighting it using his Shapeless Tides, and he was drawn across a new set of pipes before being teleported again. This time, it was harder to follow what was happening to him Hydrokinetically.

He was moving fast, faster than ever before. As his travel speed alternated and the number of teleportations he experienced increased, Shiv began to suspect that the Neath had a team of Dimensionalists, Hydromancers, and Pathbearers with Heroic-Tier Awareness under their payroll. How else would they know where he was? How else would they be able to use their magic to surgically move him?

All of a sudden, he came to a halt. In that moment, he managed to get a feeling for the environment beside him. He was still in a set of pipes; he could tell that with his Hydromancy, but aside from that, there was a great deal of waste moving alongside him. Human waste. And some of that waste was gliding through him as well. A feeling of utter disgust coiled through Shiv as he guessed he was in the

sewer system now. That was another place most people wouldn't look. Perhaps some smugglers had hideouts leading down from manholes, but how many of them were transported after being turned into part of the wastewater themselves?

My life's full of shitty first experiences, Shiv thought to himself, and a little chuckle followed.

The entire ordeal took around two hours, and for most of that time, Shiv moved fast in bursts of speed, his only companion human waste and his own thoughts. He looked forward to asking Adam how he enjoyed this trip, but for the moment, Shiv preferred the solitude. There was a great deal for him to think about.

Or not.

Frankly, it had been a while since he had a chance to not think about anything, perhaps to just cook or prepare food. He was starting to go through what felt like withdrawals, and the faces of the dead, dying, and all the other horrible shit he'd dealt with recently kept flickering behind his eyes.

Can't believe I'm saying this, but being among flowing shit is kind of peaceful. At least the shit's not trying to kill me. He felt another particularly thick specimen of shit pass by him, a shell of undigested nuts dotting its exterior. How about you, friend? You actually my dad or something? You steal his mind just like Udraal stole my mom's? Am I a shit-baby too? Another near-delirious laugh passed through Shiv, and it became a shudder. Fuck me. What is my life?

But the Deathless got a hold of himself. My life's whatever I make of it. My life is whatever I do, whatever I decide. To hells with Udraal. To hells with the Educator. To hells with the Ascendants. I'm gonna keep trying to do what's right, and I'm gonna try to win this game, whatever the hell this game even is. I'm not gonna just let them drag me around like I'm some kind of dog on a leash. I am my own man. That means being a little bit more... That means growing up and facing the ugly shit around me.

That made Shiv grunt again, but he didn't quite manage a laugh. It was old by now, but it was still true. He needed to deal with things, no matter how unpalatable they were. Just because Veronica's revelations left him disgusted and feeling alienated from his very self, he didn't need to react to it. He didn't need to let his thoughts run wild.

Can't control the feelings, but I can decide how to respond and what I'm going to do in response. And I got quite a bit of control. More than the Educator would like me to have, anyway. Pushed her pretty hard, and she just kept letting me off. Means I'm important to Udral, and she knows that. It also means that Udral needs to tread carefully with me. Same thing with Veronica. I got them all working against each other on my behalf. And with this whole 'breaching the Outside' science experiment these two people are doing at the Academy, maybe we don't need to go to Blackedge at all. Maybe we can bring Blackedge to us right here. Or at least I can cross over and find Uva and the others myself. There are opportunities all around me. I just need to make them work. I will make them work.

Philosophy 28 > 30

Psycho-Cartography 91 > 93

Psycho-Cartography: Yes, good. Maintain this scheme of thinking. We will likely run into more traumatizing situations, but that doesn't mean we should succumb to them. In fact, maybe we should dunk our head in feces-infused water some more. It seems to be good for our mood.

Absolutely goddamn not, Skill. What the hells is wrong with you?

Psycho-Cartography: In the absence of Adam, I must treat you as Adam. It has become a reflex for us to jab at someone, and all we have is each other.

Hey, listen. I'm not the Adam. You're going to have to be the Adam. You're the smart bit of me, you know that?

Psycho-Cartography: Are you admitting Adam is smarter than you?

Shiv paused. You know, in certain, specific ways, he's more learned. And, uh, he's got a keen awareness of things.

Psycho-Cartography: Indeed, he does. Do you think he's smart enough to argue with himself to distract from the fact that he's effectively being suffused in wastewater?

Shiv paused. That made him start guffawing internally with new gusto. He realized what Psycho-Cartography was trying to do, an insinuation that his subconsciousness was crawling toward.

Adam was a great many things. More intelligent than Shiv in terms of tactics and strategy? Absolutely. But psychologically and emotionally, the Gate Lord was... not likely to deal with this trip well.

That was something Shiv couldn't wait to see.

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"What in the Broken Moon was that shit?" Adam snarled. "I'm absolutely never doing that again. I mean, what the hells? Just throw me out in the street. Let the Ascendants take me again. Let Stormhalt ruin my mind! What was that? They sent us through the sewer, Shiv. They turned me into piss, Shiv!"

Shiv was right. Adam did absolutely hate that, and it was an utterly glorious meltdown to behold. As Shiv emerged from his final exit in a splash of fetid water, he realized he was standing in front of a damaged toilet. Adam arrived not a few seconds later, and the Gate Lord sputtered and gagged. Even though their bodies weren't soaked in the waste—the reason being that they were turned back into things of flesh and solid matter, rather than actually being suffused by the wastewater—the effects were the same.

Adam could still feel the disgusting sensations clinging to his side. He could still sense and smell everything around him, and that was the worst thing of all. Adam had Heroic Awareness, and for two hours, he had endured the conditions of their transit.

After a bout of violent heaving and cursing, the rest of their group arrived, with Solzimort being flung out and phasing through the walls, while Irons staggered free with a shake of his head and no other reaction besides: "Well, that was interesting."

"Terrible, absolutely unpleasant, but also interesting," Five commented.

"Fuck interesting," Kura muttered, shuddering. "I'm with the pretty boy. Prison's barely better than this."

For once, Gone looked like she was in agreement with the elven Chronomancer.

"Oh, don't be dramatic," Helix sniffled. The few other orcs were forming up on the outside of the restroom, securing the premises. Mold clung to the corners, while the ground was caked in a layer of grime and a mess of dead bugs with bits of smeared tiles shining in between.

As they finished getting their bearings, Captain Irons looked around, and a grimace crawled across his features. "I know where we are," he said. "We're in the sealed wing of the old Aenerial Coliseum."

Adam stopped choking and turned to stare at his former instructor. "What? The one that crashed down on the Yithvelhul dormitories during the sabotage? I thought it was completely destroyed."

"Sabotage?" Shiv asked.

But before anyone could say anything else, a knock sounded from the far end of the room. Past a set of cracked mirrors was a rotting door. From behind it came another rattle, but this time, a piece of the door fell off—a rectangular chunk that showed the one who was knocking. Shiv saw half a face. Elven. Bronze skin tone. And what looked to be a tall and pointed hat.

"'Ello?" The stranger whispered. The orcs were still. All of them were staring at the unexpected visitor like a pack of wolves that had just noticed a lamb. Kura manifested a shadow. Adam shaped an arrow. Irons, however, held a hand up, stalling everyone.

"Hello? Are you... Are you the... the volunteers? I was told by the... the liaison to come here. To make sure I was alone. To—to come and help with your final... relocation. Oh, and—and I am Hero-Enchanter Merrielme! I—ahem! Welcome to Phoenix Academy. There are, oh, there are many of you. Orcs too... Why... And... Irons?"



Captain Irons just glared at the other man through the crack in the door. “Merriemmel. How long? How long have you been under them?”

“Ah. Eh.” Merriemmel’s voice was soft and stutter-wracked to begin with. Now, he sounded like he had throat problems. “A few years. Ever since—since—”

“The Sivoron Core Collapse,” Irons said with absolute certainty. “I wondered how you didn’t get fired after that.”

“Ah. Ah.” Merriemmel coughed. “How... But you...”

“Melissa. She’s still missing.”

Merriemmel went still. He sighed, nodded, and pulled the door open. “I see. That... that makes more sense. I am glad that you gave yourself away for a good reason.”

“I’m not,” Irons replied bitterly. “But it still needed to be done. Where’s Concelhaunt?”

“Ah. Eh. He’s, eh, occupied.” Merriemmel coughed. “Best to... come out first. Come out fast. We are... This place will not be secure for long. The city—the Ascendants have placed the capital under lockdown. And... and...” And just then, Shiv’s Hidden World Quest Notification loaded again. “I... Oh... You are... You... You’re my volunteer?”

The Deathless breathed. “Yeah. Oh. Me. Volunteer. I’d say it’s nice to meet you, but I don’t know if you’ll be feeling the same way in a while.”

## Chapter 203 (I) Academy [I]

Some judge a nation by how many Legends it possesses under its banner. Others by how vast its territories are. A few even use esoteric means, writing theorems to guess at mana variabilities. But I reject all those metrics in exchange for just one: How much does a nation give a shit about its own children?

And how much effort does it spend trying to make those children proper Pathbearers? How competent are its academies, sects, cults, whatever you want to call them—halls of learning and training meant to fashion the young and innocent into tomorrow’s geniuses and killers. Because the amount of resources one devotes to a child indicates how much investment they’re willing to put in for their nation to grow stronger, how many experiences they’re willing to feed their undeveloped so that they can emerge as Adepts when their rivals are but Initiates.

Sure, Legends can live for a long, long time. Heroes with the right skills can make it centuries, even cross the thousand-year threshold in rarer cases. Except they’re pretty rare. Most of us have a date with death coming sooner rather than later. Doesn’t matter if it’s natural or not; it’s coming. You feel it on your neck. The System will spit plagues at us, invasions, and at some point, if you’re not the best of the best, a mistake will follow, and you’ll be cut down. So, you gotta be replaced. We all gotta be replaced. And the children that follow after? All we can hope for is that they’re a little better.

And that’s what these academies are for. They’re that whetstone, sharpening the ever-growing blade of every nation.

Of all the academies on Integrated Earth, I think my greatest appreciation goes to Phoenix Academy, if only for their militaristic rigor and willingness to indulge in a live-fire type campus. For you see, Phoenix Academy believes in experiencing conflict to condition its students to it. Doesn’t matter if you’re a Martial or a non-Martial; you have to experience conflict.

Which is why the entire campus is built around a grand gate, a primal gate at that. You want to describe the buildings there? They're more like fortress walls. There are children manning the turrets, children watching from on high, children tasked with maintaining the defensive positions of their dormitories.

Now, most of the Primal Dimensionals have been neutered a bit by the time they come to raid by the wards put up on the inside, but still, they do come and play.

The unprepared get their walls breached all the time. When they do, they're penalized. Damages to your dorms must be repaired by your own hand, or a major tithe is required. Get one of yours kidnapped? Doesn't matter. They still need to be in class on time, so the rest of you are going to get them back, or you're going to fail together.

And that's just another thing: you're graded together as well there. You can say a lot about the Yellowstone Republic, but you can say this for certain: they treat warring seriously, the same way they treat child-rearing properly.

Give your young a taste of the blood. It's coming, so they'd best be ready when the steel falls.

-Legend-Swordlord Hank Nakamura

As soon as Merrielmel led them out of the room, Shiv noticed a few floating objects hovering in the air, and he wasn't the only one. "D-don't mind those," Merrielmel stuttered.

The floating fragments gave off pulses of violet mana. The pulses slowly dissipated, but they caressed Shiv, folded around him. Rather than sinking into his body, they formed a protective layer, turning near-invisible as they stabilized. However, Shiv could still feel the mana gliding against him, and it greeted his Shapeless Tides like two pieces of sandpaper rubbing together.

“Don't mind that either,” Merrielmel explained. “It's simply to ensure that even a Diviner can't tell that we're here, and there are a great many Observers outside! A great many. Divination—it's a very specific kind of magic. One of the few that can peer into this place regardless of all its—uh, well, I can't call it nature, they're more so unnatural protections. Yes. Yes!”

Hero-Enchanter Merrielmel was a particularly eccentric elf from dress alone. He had a pointed cap that was a bit too large and too tall for his head. His robes were a mess of tassels, and each of them had a mess of badges hanging along their lengths. They all resembled a chain of large buttons, and as he moved, they clattered together.

Underneath his robes, Shiv had caught sight of leather armor. Studs of metal glinted from the armor, and they radiated with magic as well, dimensional magic. Furthermore, there were all the gems, jewels, and rings the Enchanter was wearing. All of them were suffused with magic, and it came together in a messy mélange of colors. Some of them clashed hard, mana fields bounding off one another, creating bursts and sparks in the air. Every few seconds, it seemed like fireworks were going off around Merrielmel.

And then there was his face. Merrielmel was utterly hairless. He had no eyebrows, no chin hair, no hair along what little of his scalp that Shiv could see. He was bare, and his skin was smoother than a baby's bottom.

And then there were his teeth. Shiv only caught a glint of them, but he knew most of them weren't real. He knew that because they didn't register when Shiv briefly bounced his mana hydra off Merrielmel's body. Accidentally, of course. Considering Shiv couldn't tell what type of mana they radiated, he guessed

they were Geomancy implants. But for the life of him, the Deathless couldn't guess why someone would have a set of Geomantically charged teeth.

Merriemmel stumbled and limped along ahead of them. And while they walked, Shiv surveyed the surroundings. His surroundings. When Adam said that this place crashed into a dormitory, he wasn't understating anything. The restroom in this wing of the Coliseum was surprisingly intact. But behind, an entire section of the building had collapsed inward, utterly smashed to pieces by a brutal impact. Light spilled through cracks lining the sides of the structure ahead. Shiv saw that light radiating from the surface of Gateways or when someone was doing something extreme with an Unattuned Skill. Then, from the ceiling rained flakes of darkness. It passed through without ever brushing matter, and Adam hissed. "Shit. That's... that's from Harlock!"

The darkness splattered down on them. Shiv held his breath, but Merriemmel didn't seem too worried. And neither did the Educator. Her tome kept them hidden from the other Ascendants, so long as no one could physically see them. And the Master-Enchanter's strange, cube-shaped flying contraptions continued projecting their anti-Divination fields. Shiv counted twelve of those contraptions, and they always remained equidistant from each other.

"They mask our presence," Merriemmel began. "So you don't need to worry, so long as we are not directly exposed. But, but, well, the Ascendants, their divinity, they have specific abilities in specific places—domains. Harlock has a great amount of control, but Harlock—this is utterly blasphemous to say. I'm very sorry, Irons. I'm very sorry. I don't, I didn't, never wanted you to see me like this. I never wanted you to think so lowly of me."

Irons ignored Merriemmel while the Enchanter stuttered on. But then came a bursting crackle of static in the air, and Harlock's darkness vanished from the world entirely. A second later, Can Hu let out a mechanical groan and stumbled as if something had struck it. Shiv paused mid-step.

"You alright?" Shiv asked.

Can Hu hesitated. It reached out and used the Deathless's shoulder to steady himself. "I am fine, but there has been a massive signal-based attack directed across the city."

"Signal-based? From who? The Ascendants?"

"No, I don't think so." Can Hu's optics flickered, and for a moment they almost winked out. A burst of ones and zeros exploded out from it, and Merriemmel let out a surprised chirp. The orcs had stopped as well, as had the other prisoners. Adam was beside Shiv, and Can Hu was between them. A building sense of worry grew inside Shiv.

But after a moment's struggle, Can Hu managed the first step and then another, and they were moving once more.

"What the hells was that?" Shiv asked.

"A signal-based attack," Can Hu repeated. It briefly stammered, and a loud squeak came from inside its chassis. It was still somewhat damaged from the escape, and its legs were little more than sparking stilts. Despite this, it insisted on walking using its own power, not having Kura and Five hold it up anymore.

"I think it was one of the prisoners," Can Hu said, "an automaton like me. They might have broken free from the quarantine and unleashed the attack to overwhelm the guard. If they inflict enough harm on the machine lifeforms in the capital, it will disrupt things and cause even more chaos. I suspect it was their strategy to slip through in the confusion. They have stopped now. I assume they are dead, as the cessation of the signal was too abrupt. Or perhaps they teleported. I cannot be sure."

Shiv's worry was transmuted into a heavy weight. He saw Adam looking down at the ground, unable to face him. There were consequences for everything they did, and this was one of them. They'd successfully managed to collapse the mana core of the prison, but their escape was accompanied by many others, and now others might pay for that with their lives.

Valor had told him something about consequence. There was no way to avoid it. No matter what you intended, there was always a cost in the end.

Irons noticed the quietude developing between Shiv and Adam, but he said nothing. Not to them, anyway. "Where are you taking us?" Irons said.

The Hero-Enchanter giggled. "Oh, just downstairs. This is going to be grand! Grand!" When Irons didn't respond with any kind of mirth, the man stopped giggling. "I, you have to understand, not all of Aenerial Coliseum was destroyed upon impact. This wing... This wing was particularly protected because the center of the arena cushioned it. Several parts collapsed around this wing, and it effectively protected some of the infrastructure as well. That's how I managed to repair the pipes so easily. That's how I managed to reconnect them with a few underground..."

Merriemmel kept looking over his shoulder and licking his lips. Irons never stopped glaring at the man. Shiv understood how it would be unnerving, but Merriemmel was naturally anxious anyway, it seemed. "Yes, well, we'll just be heading down. There is, I managed to create a special section downstairs. Another place that was spared from the destruction."

As they followed Merriemmel, he ducked under a door that was half caved in. A mess of rebar and other debris cluttered the room they had to squeeze through. The orcs groaned, and the ground splashed like a puddle as Solzimort slithered in behind them. It was at this point that Shiv realized Merriemmel hadn't noticed the Hydra at all.

To Solzimort's credit, he was applying a great deal of stealth, doing his best to make no noise. Shiv made eye contact with the tip of Solzimort's nose and simply shook his head. He wouldn't reveal the Hydra if the Hydra didn't want to be revealed. It would be another ace up their sleeves in case this went south. Getting real tired of being paranoid of everyone too, Shiv thought.

As they shimmied under more debris, they crossed through the room and found themselves walking down a set of stairs. The stairs kept going. One floor, two, then ten, and so on. It was pitch black by the end. Pitch black except for one faint glow flashing against the walls from far below. By the time they hit the very bottom of this place and could go no further, mainly due to the ground ending as a mess of rubble instead of an extended set of steps, Shiv saw a symbol of a set of crossed swords glowing over a set of doors. They seemed to be made from reinforced titanium.

"The hells are you hiding in there?" Shiv asked.

"I can't believe this," Irons mumbled. His stoic demeanor slipped slightly, and Shiv read the sheer disbelief coming from his narrowed eyes. "You managed to secure a training room too? How?"

"Oh yes, I was surprised as well," Merrielmel said without looking behind. He placed a hand on the door, and just then it gave a rattling noise before it hissed and snapped open. "Yes, yes, yes, okay. I still left enough power inside. I didn't need to, I didn't need to lever it open this time. That's good, so good."

The insides of the following room were dark, but even so, Shiv could tell how wide it was. Merrielmel's words echoed, and the air didn't stink so much down here. There wasn't that much dust, either. There was a cleanness to it that told him this place was well-ventilated, well-used, and a rush of wind made him all but certain his guess was true.

As their party filtered in, Merrielmel held up a finger, and then there came a lance of lightning from the tip of his hand. Shiv narrowed his eyes and realized the Enchanter was an Aeromancer, but he wasn't a



particularly powerful one. There was no static around him, and the bolt he sent was feeble at best. However, as it struck something on the ceiling, a rush of crackling energy traveled through the rest of the chamber. A second thereafter, everything lit up.

Lights flared ablaze, and it was like standing beneath several suns. Shiv winced and turned away. Adam fared even worse. The Gate Lord snarled, and his frustration was evident as he mumbled a string of curses.

“Oh, I do so love vision damage,” Helix commented bitterly. “There's nothing I like more than regenerating my lenses. It is a comforting activity that excites me to no end.”

“Sorry, sorry,” Merriemmel muttered. Two more bolts left his finger, and both struck the same point. The first made the room even brighter, and soon Shiv couldn't see anything but blinding light, even through his eyelids. The next, however, brought everything to a twilight level of dimness, and as the spots left his vision, he realized that the light wasn't natural.

Orbs of Pyromantic energy glistened above, but it was more than that. Every time he stared at them, they stabbed at his Awareness. They sizzled upon his vision despite his Tides, and Shiv realized those lights weren't even normal magical lights. They seemed to be things that affected one's perception directly, however that worked.

“I had to add in some of my own constructs for this place,” Merriemmel said, gesturing upward. “It's meant to be a safety measure as well. A means of blinding someone if they were trying to, uh, eh, steal something from here. They—they can also detonate.” The Enchanter shrugged. Then he shrugged once more. Awkwardly, he stopped, blinked, and turned away.

Chapter 203 (II) Academy [I]

But Shiv was no longer looking at the ceiling. Instead, he was looking at the rest of the training arena. There was a large section of the room cordoned off, wooden boards stacked high and packed tight. It did

look strange in a sense. Like they were fused together, with barely any separation between the boards. Something made Shiv want to slam into it—to see how they might splinter if struck. He pushed the intrusive thought aside. They were hammered in place by a masterful hand, each nail driven in at the exact same point across each and every board. But even with that barricade set up, the rest of the room was still forty meters wide and twice again as long.

Nearby, there were eight-meter-wide circles painted on a padded mat, and if the Deathless recalled correctly, this was what people used to train their grappling. To be pushed down was to lose points. To be pinned or have one's joints twisted was to lose points. To be controlled was to continuously lose points. He'd heard Tran talk about facilities like this, but it was more than just a few grappling mats on the ground.

There were bars jutting out from the sides of the walls. Some of them had targets on them. Others had rings one could do acrobatics through, or perhaps even swing past for aerial practice. A training dummy lay propped against a wall. It was decked in rusted armor, but a trail of glistening enchantments spilled out from its torso in a winding spiral. It looked like the thing was sprouting wings, wings that splashed against the alloyed walls of this place.

Shiv guessed there used to be other things meant to assist warm-ups and training exercises here as well, but they were buried under a collapsed section of wall to the right.

Upon the leftmost walls was a large, detailed mural, a painting of a phoenix soaring high above the sky. Below, a vast campus unveiled itself to Shiv.

The exterior of Phoenix Academy was a grand ring. Colossal buildings that resembled more the battlements of a fortress encircled the rest of the grounds, and within them came a square. At the four edges of the square were towering spires, their tips mithril and glistening with magic. At least that was what he could tell from the depiction. And within the square were a mess of other buildings. Some of them were like interlocking U-shapes, all stacked together, with small patios between. Others were round buildings with clear, transparent tops.

There were even a few structures that hovered in the air above, floating like small fortresses. And then, at the very center of the campus, seemed to be a large archway. The archway resembled the entrance leading into Gate Piety, and that's because it was the very same kind of entrance. His eyes widened as he realized there was a gate at the center of Phoenix Academy.

"Welcome," Merriemmel said, "to... Well, this is what the Academy looked like two hundred years ago. It's far grander now. The structures then were positively archaic, far more unattuned. With the present level of mana density, we have expanded the school grounds. We have incorporated a great deal more dimensional enhancements to every structure, and so our acceptance rate and training facilities have been greatly expanded as well."

Shiv stared at the Enchanter as he searched for something to say. "Sounds to me like you're trying to pitch me enrollment here."

The elf threw his head back and giggled. "Of course, I would recommend everyone spend a semester at Phoenix Academy. In fact, as many semesters as possible." He sighed blissfully. "I would do this until I perish or until time itself turns to dust. It is a wonderful place, and I wouldn't give it up for the world."

"And you didn't," Irons said. There was a slight growl in the man's voice. "You didn't, even after your mistake. Three hundred and twenty lives... Three hundred students."

Merriemmel coughed and then stammered. The Enchanter flinched away from Irons, but the captain was no longer dredging up old history. Instead, his interest fell somewhere else. "You knew we were coming."

“Yes, yes, I think I told you, but the liaison—I have a Neath liaison with Divination abilities—they sent me a notification. Now, you don't have one yet, but...”

Irons held up a hand. Merrielmel's words came to a messy stop. “Stop. What did they tell you to do?” Irons asked.

“Oh, I, eh, I am here to provide accommodations and services. And this—this is the perfect place for both.”

Everyone, aside from Merrielmel, looked around.

“Here?” Adam asked. “You want us to just... sit around here?”

Merrielmel coughed. “Well, we do use this ground as a place for some of our experiments. I used the dummy there to test certain things, certain small-scale enchantments, but no, no, it's uh, we have the rest of the space for ourselves. Here, let me show you!” His hand rose, and he pointed at the wooden barricade sealing off half the room. “My workshop! Some of my special facilities! They're hidden on the other side. Would you like to see? Please, everyone, come and take a look. We will...” The Enchanter coughed, and his words failed him once more. He staggered off awkwardly, and Shiv cringed.

Yeah, it doesn't feel entirely right to call him a Hero, Shiv thought to himself. Hope he makes a pretty mean enchantment, because this guy feels like he's gonna crack under any kind of pressure at all.

As Merrielmel got to the other end of the room, he pressed his face against the wooden boards, and Helix sighed. The orc clasped his hands behind his back and shook his head.

"Insul, I have doubts about our strategy." The orc said it aloud, and Shiv watched Merrielmel's posture flinch as if he'd just been whipped.

"Yeah, well, you're not the only one," Shiv replied. "But we need to be out of the way for a while. And if this place can serve as a safehouse..."

A laugh came from Mortar. The large orc looked around. "Might not be safe for long. How far underground are we, elf? And where's all this mana coming from?"

Merrielmel held up a finger, instructing the orc to wait.

"Oh, that's a tiny finger. I think I could fit his whole arm in my mouth. And I don't think I'd even taste anything when biting down."

"Easy, Mortar," Shiv said. "You're not eating him. Yet."

Just then, Merrielmel knocked on one of the wooden boards twice. And with a sudden burst of motion, he drove his fist into it. The wooden board cracked, but then it spun. And as it shifted positions, something within clicked. The entire barricade began to turn. And as it did, a spill of Dimensionality washed through the air.

It was at this point that Shiv realized just how much was being hidden here. Adam gasped as a veritable flood of magical power passed over them. Shiv's Shapeless Tides rattled like plate armor enduring a hail of arrows. Before him, the room went from the ragged remains of a training pen to a set of stairs. They

ran high and up, and as the group continued on, they kept going and going. When everyone passed the barricade, the wood made a cracking noise as they snapped back into place and sealed the route behind.

As he got to the top of the stairs, the space before him loomed. This wasn't just another room; it was the size of a small block. A vast, open field greeted him, but the ground beneath his feet was made from reinforced stone. And ahead, there were raised walls shaped from said stone separating several sections across two kilometers of space. It resembled a maze, but it was a maze made in the heart of an arena.

The outer walls of this arena rose high and resembled the edges of a smooth bowl. Above, a translucent shell glowed a faint purple, bathing everything below in a near-bioluminescent glow that made Shiv miss the Abyss.

"How the hells did you manage to hide this under the administration's nose?" Irons breathed.

"Oh, it's really quite simple," Merriemmel chirped happily. "You see, when the arena smashed into the dorms, chaos unfolded. A good section of the central arena was detached from the other structures. It was an infrastructural flaw from the beginning. I've mentioned this several times, but ultimately, no one bothered to listen. So it detached, it fell through the ground, and it was embedded with this small wing of the entire arena. While the rest was being moved away, it was uncovered by me and Concelhaunt. And so, well, we decided to request some aid, because there was no way we could move it on our own. However, we could disguise it..."

"Through a series of mana explosions," Irons continued, with additional heat in his voice. "That's what it was. It wasn't the rest of the mana core power in the Coliseum coming apart at the end of the crisis. That was you."

“Technically, that was, oh, well, yes. But no one was hurt. We made sure of that. It was professionally done! And most importantly, we needed this. It was essential for our work. Irons, you have to understand. After the Core Collapse, I...”

“After the Core Collapse, you should have been gone.” The Captain was furious now. His voice didn't get any deeper. He didn't clench his jaw. He didn't even glare any harder. But you could feel the scorn radiating from the man.

“I... I...” Merriemmel retreated from Irons. “Well, the rest of you, there are sections of this place. Please, go up. Seek a place for you to set up. It's not exactly perfect for a residence, but it is well-hidden. Very well-hidden, in fact. We are currently masked entirely, after all. Ah, we're hidden by the gate, of course.”

And now Adam made a gagging noise. “Wait, you... We're underneath Gate Infernius?”

“Infernius?” Shiv asked, confused.

“The Category 10 Gate you saw earlier in the painting,” Adam snapped. “The one at the center of the academy! Merriemmel, you had the remains of the central arena moved under Gate Infernius?”

“It was quite the undertaking,” the elf said, “but it was ultimately the most effective thing we could do. After all, it will take an inquisitive eye to detect a separation of different mana signatures, and with the sheer amount of mana radiating from Infernius, it's very hard to tell. Truly.”

“And should anyone find anything, you'll simply shut off all the mana flowing through here,” Adam finished. “It's... This place is also siphoning mana from the gate, isn't it?”

“Well.” Merriemmel folded his hands behind his back and looked aside, as if shy about what he was doing. “Not truly. Somewhat. It's going to my experiments anyway, and my experiments benefit the school. Dramatically. Why, just last week, we had another breakthrough.”

“What's this?” Tequila cried aloud. He stood over a tall stack of crates and leaned down.

Merriemmel paused and let out a pitched cry of terror as the orc ripped the top off a crate and reached in. “No, don't!”

The orc pulled out a large bag of glistening blue powder. It radiated with Biomancy mana, and Helix sneered. “Oh, good. Dathoro. I see that you're also a connoisseur of fine drugs, Enchanter.”

Merriemmel gestured at the orc in outrage and hissed. From under his tasseled robes, there came a few screaming darts. They were the same objects that unleashed pulsing waves of Divination mana, and they collapsed around Tequila's hands, snatching the bag out of his grasp. The orc let out a brief grunt of surprise before Merriemmel teleported through the air. He snatched the bag from his own construct and chucked it back in the crate.

“Do not touch my things! Do not, do not, do not!” Merriemmel's voice rose in octave and anger, and soon he was jabbing a finger into the orc's chest. The terribly anxious man was gone, replaced by an enraged Pathbearer. Still, Merriemmel didn't seem too dangerous, but with the contraptions he had, Shiv suspected the man was not short on ugly surprises.



Shiv noticed Tequila's finger twitching, and he let out a growl of frustration as he moved as well. "Tequila, no!" Shiv said. But the orc turned, and then he saw the look on Shiv's face. It wasn't a look of rage or threat. It was simply a pleading look. Shiv was tired. Merriemmel was clearly unbalanced.

And by this point, from what Shiv could tell, Merriemmel was also at least a part-time drug mover, if not a drug grower. Still might not be enough reason for an orc to kill him, but he definitely wasn't clean. Especially not with all the other ugly history evident between Merriemmel and Irons.

"Oh, gods," Adam said, pinching his nose. "Was this happening the entire time?"

"A question I share, Young Lord Arrow," Irons growled.

Tequila let out a low moan of frustration as he stepped back from Merriemmel. "That's right, you!" he shouted in faux outrage.

Shiv immediately seized the elf by two tassels and began pulling him away from Tequila. "Merriemmel," Shiv said under his breath. His voice was cold, but he needed to make a few things known. "Listen. Listen really, really carefully. I'm not threatening you right now. I'm just letting you know that the only reason those orcs are not flaying your skin off to make new shoes or pants for themselves is because I'm here. I'm their Insul. Additionally, the only reason I haven't just left or smashed this place is because we need each other, and I need your help."

He pulled out the two halves of his broken mask. "You're going to fix this, you and whoever else you're working with. I need that done as soon as possible, and I need you to show me whatever Outside-shifting item you're trying to build. We need to get this done and finished as soon as possible so we can get out of each other's hair."

The Deathless's grip tightened, and he pulled Merrielmel in closer. "Because I don't think we're going to like spending time with each other. Again, this isn't a threat. I'm just guessing from how I feel right now. You seem like a nervous man, Hero-Enchanter. I'm not a nervous man. I try to be decent, but sometimes, when the situation really, really pushes me here, I get kind of violent. Don't let me get violent."

Merrielmel stuttered for a few moments before he quickly nodded. "Of course, but wait, let me see that." He reached out and snatched the two pieces from Shiv's hand. Immediately, he placed them together, and he narrowed his eyes. "This? This is a Heroic-Tier piece. Perfect semblance. Very, very remarkable. Wait, did someone build this for you? No, no, it's too, too convenient. I haven't seen a Perfect Semblance enchantment naturally created in the past, I don't know, 100 years? 120? Perhaps. That's hard to tell. Need to wait for Concelhaunt to get here, get here. And then—"

"Get here and what?" a loud, booming voice sounded. And from the direction of said voice, a stout-looking man approached, but not an ordinary person. Instead, it appeared to be a goblin piloting what looked to be the chassis of an automaton. Hissing steam sprayed out from its sides, and the chrome-colored machinery of the chassis sang with every step. It resembled a skeleton wrapped in interlocking rings, and on its hip swayed a large hammer, while there was an anvil magnetized to its back.

"So these are our volunteers? Holy fuck!" Hero-Smith Concelhaunt cried aloud. "Irons, what the fuck are you doing here?"

"Being disappointed," Irons muttered coolly. "Him, I understand. You. Why?"

"Ah." Concelhaunt swallowed. "Well. Uh. Oh, shit, Adam! You're here too."

The Gate Lord just folded his arms. “Hero-Professor. Funny meeting you here. How’s your daughter? Does she know about this?”

“Yeah. Funny.” Concelhaunt sighed. “Fuck. Uh. Merri. Show me that there, uh, mask thing. Say we need to fix that first, right? So, uh, let’s do that first.”

Chapter 204 (I) Academy [II]

It is a double-edged thing, being a non-martial. You can see this in the name itself. You are not capable of fighting, or at least not as capable as someone dedicated to the art of combat. And in a world ruled by strife, that makes you lesser.

It doesn't matter that you are the core of any nation's economy, that you produce the most goods, that you're in charge of manufacturing, that you grow all the crops, that you offer the bulk of the arts, that the scientific and magical insights discovered are all tied to you or people like you. But ultimately, how many non-martials rule in government? How many non-martials decide their own fate?

Simply look upon the non-martial faculty at Phoenix Academy. Many of them are brilliant Pathbearers. They're recognized for their Tiers and expertise, but they are so often traded, tied to other Lords or their own Houses. Their services are offered without their consent, their decisions shackled by means of tenure and binding contracts.

Specifically, the Republic values non-martial pursuits more than a great many other nations. But the Heroes that we deem non-martial all share a trait in common: they are combat-capable, and they have learned to use their initially harmless skills offensively.

The Songbringer is no victim. The Genius is no victim. Councilwoman Chandler is no victim.

And that is the deciding factor. For however enlightened we profess ourselves to be, we are still children of the System.

And until that changes, we abide by steel and spell before anything else.

To think you will live a peaceful life if you choose to stay away from the blade is a delusion. Violence is coming.

-Path of the Harmless

(Essay draft written by Melissa Harrington)

Concelhaunt and Merrielmel fled into the maze with haste, and the others followed close behind. As Shiv passed between the stone walls, he looked up and caught sight of a crack lining the gleaming material that made up the ceiling.

Through the fissure in the protective dome lining the top of the arena, he could see rows and rows of seats rising upward, and a feeling of wrongness came upon him. There was a haunted feeling to this location, like it shouldn't have survived its final impact, like it was being forced to serve long after its expiration. There were people here once, sitting above, looking down into the arena, watching games of skill, strength, and magic.

Shiv could still taste some of that magic in the air. The white walls of the maze were shaped by Geomancy. The light above radiated with a bit of Divination between the sprinkles of bioluminescence. But there was also a pervasive sense of coldness in the atmosphere. It felt more like they were on the side of some mountain, where the oxygen was thin, but every gulp of air one drew in was refreshing.

Powerful Aeromancy had to be at work here, which made sense. They were deep underground, after all, and from what they had discovered, the Enchanter and Smith were siphoning mana from the gate positioned right above them.

The more Shiv thought about that, the more questions he had. The repositioning was ingenious. No one wanted to destabilize the foundation of a gateway; there was too much risk involved. Mana did strange things when it was destabilized. Furthermore, with the amount of magic radiating from the gateway, everything here was masked, allowing the two rogue professors to conduct their trade.

And what a trade they were conducting. Just how many people are addicted to this drug shit? Shiv thought to himself. Even back at Blackedge, there had been many chefs on something or another. Too many.

As Merriemmel and Concelhaunt led the others along a winding path filled with sharp twists and sudden turns, Shiv saw more of those crates, and his Biomancy detected more hidden drugs within. But by now, he didn't need his magic to tell what they were hiding. There was a smell in the air as well, a particularly foul smell that reminded Shiv of burning mold.

"Despicable," Irons growled as he glared at all the crates stacked against the stone walls. Some of them climbed all the way to the top, and each crate was large enough to hide half an orc. "To think that this was taking place on academy grounds, and to think that I didn't notice at all."

"More people than you have failed," Adam said, trying to placate his instructor. "The Ascendants seemed ignorant as well. The Inquisition, the Guard. It's not your duty to investigate these things, Captain."

"I disagree," Irons shot back. "Their failures do not forgive my own. This was my station. They were my colleagues. You were my student. I had a responsibility to all of you. I still have a responsibility to all of you."

Shiv grunted in open approval. "If only more people thought like you, we wouldn't be in this much shit."

Irons grunted in agreement. Shiv grunted again. They both grunted in disgust as they saw even more crates around the corner.

Adam looked between Shiv and Irons and simply snorted. "I knew this would happen."

"What would happen?" Shiv asked, looking over his shoulder.

"That you two would find each other good company." The Gate Lord licked his lips and adopted a serious expression a moment later. "But I suspect they're not growing this. There's no soil nearby. Not from what I can smell. I think they're just holding this for the rest of the Neath. This is a transportation hub, meaning that there is traffic coming here, likely to claim or leave more drug crates."

Shiv didn't like that. Frankly, Shiv didn't like anything he couldn't fully control. Dealing with the Dragon Brokers was just a means to an end. He suspected he would be seeing one of their representatives soon enough to do some kind of ritual. He wasn't exactly keen on having one of his skills bound, but considering he could mend shattered skills, breaking the deal wasn't nearly a permanent wound for him or anyone he was allied with.

"We're here," Merriemmel cried from in front. Shiv didn't know where 'here' was. From what he could see, looking over the shoulders of the goblin and elf, they were staring at a dead end. The ugly surface of

a stone wall greeted him. The only thing special about it was the crack running down its center. Then Shiv saw the first specks of static leaking from the crack, and he realized what was happening.

A moment later, the wall tore open, revealing a hidden space inside. It was like one of Adam's dimensional rips, except when it expanded, rather than revealing a pathway, it just opened a pocket of space that resembled the insides of a cavern.

Shiv guessed that there were fifteen meters of room within the pocket, and at the center was a large furnace that churned with boiling-hot bursts of Pyromancy. The walls and floor here were cluttered as well. There were several workbenches littered with a variety of tools, half-cut metal sheets, and discarded metal bars piled on the ground.

At the center of the room was a basin, filled with some kind of mercury-like liquid that drew Can Hu's attention. "Interesting," the Penitent declared, and Shiv soon understood why. It was the same kind of glowing mercury that Can Hu could wield thanks to the mana core's special Skill Fusion ability.

As everyone surveyed the room, Shiv was surprised to find even more mechanisms to his left and right. There were tall, distillery-like apparatuses, and churning sounds rattled from the brass tubes connected to them. At their base was a slot. Most of the apparatuses held nothing within their slots, but one of them gave a final ringing cry and spat out a piece of alloy. It was in the shape of a ring, perfectly smooth around the sides, and it was shaped with precision and quality.

Then, at the very far end of the room was a wall with a series of capsules installed on it. The capsules glistened mithril-bright, and within came the muted glow of mana. Something magical was stored within those capsules. Shiv counted sixteen sphere-shaped containers on the wall, and Concelhaunt made for the rightmost one on the bottom, punching it in the middle, callously, for seemingly no reason at all.

A second later, it opened with a click, and the goblin reached in. His automaton chassis flared with a rush of mana, and soon, a layer of stone clung to the chrome exterior he piloted. There, in the right hand of his chassis, was a mana core, small and bright, pulsating but crystalline in material. He handed it

to Merriemmel, and they briefly exchanged a few whispers. Both of them turned to regard Shiv, and then flinched away as they realized the Deathless was glaring at them.

"Ahem," Merriemmel cleared his throat. "So, your mask. It was a substantially powerful piece of equipment, and it will require a good amount of mana to fix. Furthermore, its damage is severe, and it's been destroyed for some time. It will need to have a few skills invested into it to make up for what is lost, and that might require a period of delicate care."

Concelhaunt sniffled. "It's also going to need to be rebuilt." The goblin gestured toward the pool of mercury. "We're going to chuck it in there first, and then we're going to use that Geomancy core to make it all soft and shit. Now, I've got to warn you. There's a chance that it might not work out."

"A chance it might not work out?" Shiv growled. "I brought my item for you two to fix, not for you two to tell me things 'might not work out'."

"We're just being transparent," Merriemmel said, holding up his hands placatingly. "But it is not a high chance. We are both Heroes, you see, and we are well-versed in preserving a piece of equipment. Why, you know, restoring something and repairing something is far easier than creating something new. The chance is small, very, very small."

"Well, I hope you can make it non-existent," Shiv said calmly, "because if I can't use that mask, you're gonna have to make me another one. Or, odds are, that notification that keeps popping up in front of you telling you that I'm the Deathless, trying to provoke you into killing me... That's going to keep going off for everyone, and sooner or later, someone's gonna follow me back here."

Shiv ran his tongue along the inside of his mouth as both Concelhaunt and Merriemmel flashed bright, their bodies briefly resembling glass. His fists throbbed with a trembling force. "The people after me are



mean and vicious bastards. They'll come after you, they'll break everything you have, and then they'll break you. We don't want that, do we?"

"No, no, no," Merriemmel said, shaking his head vigorously. "We can make sure that the repair goes smoothly, but that will take some time, perhaps a day, twelve hours at the very least. You have to understand, though I have seen a great many enchantments in my time, Perfect Semblance is a very rare enchantment, very rare indeed. Actually, however..." Merriemmel coughed.

Concelhaunt eyed his fellow professor and then groaned. "Really? You gonna do this fucking right now? Shit, if you are, just ask him."

"Ask me what?" Shiv said.

"I would like to take a look at the enchantment in deeper detail. It might add some time, but it might also..." Merriemmel began to steeple his fingers together nervously, "...let me build something for the others, potentially allowing me to replicate the enchantment of the mask and apply it to other items. I would be most obliged. In fact, I would be thankful. We can discuss..."

Shiv waved him off. "Look, I don't really care how long it takes, so long as it doesn't take a month, and so long as you don't break the mask in the end. Well, any more than it's already broken."

"Of course, of course," Merriemmel chirped. "So, uh, we can begin. In the meantime, well, we might not have specific living quarters set up here. This is not exactly, uh... technically, uh... What do the people of the Neath call it?"

"A safe house," Concelhaunt provided.

"Yes, it's not exactly a safe house, but if you wish to make yourself comfortable here, we would not be against it."

"Not be against it, he says," Helix scoffed viciously, "as if these two can protect themselves, as if they can decide anything at all." The orc Biomancer stepped up and regarded the other two intellectuals. He gazed down upon them from the bridge of his nose, and his glasses hung low in a demonstration of his scorn. "This is pitiful. What use the Neath can find in you is beyond me. What purpose is there in pursuing knowledge if you cannot protect it, if you cannot protect yourselves?"

Suddenly, Merriemmel and Concelhaunt's postures changed. They were still terrified, but there was a slight shift in their demeanor. The goblin had his chassis reach down and wrap its fingers around the hammer it carried. It also wrenched the anvil from its back. Merriemmel, meanwhile, slid one of his hands under his tassels. Just then, Shiv caught the smirk crawling up the left side of Helix's face. The Deathless realized what he was trying to do and put an end to it.

"Hey, if anyone starts fighting each other right now instead of fixing my mask or doing something else that's useful, I'm just gonna kill them myself." The tension in the air burst. Three sets of eyes fell upon Shiv, and Helix gave his Insul a frustrated sneer.

Shiv remained unimpressed. "I'll find some way for you guys to scratch your itch soon enough," he said. "In the meantime..." Shiv trailed off, not sure what they were supposed to do in the meantime, but he had a few thoughts.

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For the next half-day or so, the group convened and recovered. Solzimort remained hidden underground, and the orcs began going over their equipment and taking stock of what they had. Adam rested as well. But that didn't mean the Gate Lord was idle, for during this period, Adam's Shattered Star flared bright, and a restorative radiance alleviated everyone's exhaustion—and Can Hu's damaged body especially.

Frankly, it had been a while since Shiv had had any downtime at all. Not actually particularly long, actually, but a lot had happened since they moved out of Gate Piety to intercept the Inquisition and everything went to shit thereafter.

He still wouldn't consider this much of an actual break, but with no one killing him, no one hunting him, and with no other matters demanding his immediate attention, he could finally have a moment to just sit down and catch his breath alongside the rest of his fellow fugitives.

Across the room, the two rogue professors tossed another mana core into the mercury puddle and continued channeling their own magic in the process. It was the fifth time they repeated this—citing significant mana and item damage. They also argued incessantly as they worked, hissing at each other in harsh tones as they debated on how best to restore the Mask of False Paths.

Every now and again, they would cast a nervous glance at Shiv and the orcs. They also whined about how the Neath's liaison hadn't arrived yet, leaving them to deal with this themselves. Shiv was curious about that as well, but it wasn't too surprising, with the city under lockdown and Harlock running around.

For a while, things in their impromptu safe house were quiet. There was plenty to talk about, but everyone was spent, and even with Adam's Shattered Star, some took longer to recover from their wounds fully. Information and business could wait for a while. Candles spent his time lying on a crate and looking at flickering lights on the ceiling, lazily waving his arms at them and giggling every now and then. Five picked at damaged cybernetic implants in his arms with his claws, trying to reattach some severed wires, while Gone paced around the room, seeming happy to be able to move around in a space

larger than a jail cell for the first time in ages. Irons, Adam, and Kura seemed content to stand and watch the professors work.

For a few hours, Shiv just flipped his new pan in his hand and nursed his mind on jumping thoughts about Blackedge and their immediate situation, trying his best to keep his mind from wandering toward Udraal and his history.

The moment, however, didn't last, as Shiv was also aware that the Educator spent the entire time glaring daggers at him, and if he didn't address that, he would try to throw his pan through her face at some point.

Fuck this, Shiv grumbled internally. I'm tired of this overdramatic tension bullshit. We're getting this dealt with right now.

"Educator," Shiv grunted. The Forgotten Ascendant kept staring at him without ever bothering to offer him a response. "We need to talk about Udraal. Actually, we need to talk about all your former friends too. Let's get a few things straight. Or, let's skip straight to the violence if we can't decide on that. I'm tired of wasting time."

Chapter 204 (II) Academy [II]

She said nothing. Instead, she released a cold, harsh breath. Shiv wondered if it would have been better to be fighting someone instead. "Alright, let's start with this, Maia. Does your plan to escape your divinity have anything to do with me?" Shiv had to admit that she was doing a remarkable job communicating scorn with only her eyes, so Shiv took things a step further. "Did Udraal promise you a resurrection through me? Is he going to transplant whatever skill that's binding you to the Great One inside me? Is that the long-term plan to fix your godhood problem?"

As if this question struck something hard, the Educator turned away and clenched her teeth. A patch of her face turned to glass. "He told you, the damned bastard," she hissed.

"No, I guessed! Had nothing to do with him telling me!" Shiv nearly snarled. He wasn't actually mad at her, however. Instead, most of his rage was directed at his creator, because the bastard seemed to have one trick when it came to Shiv, and that was using him as some kind of counter-death incubator womb. "He used me to bring Rose Van Erren back into the world. I'm supposed to still have Adam's sister inside me somewhere. He's going to have me do the same for his mother; he's planning to do the same thing with the Great One, so of course he's going to do the same thing with his lackey."

The Educator turned away from Shiv, and the people in the room nervously watched as her expression went from vicious to uncertain and then determined once more.

"You know about the degeneration," Maia said. It was less of a question and more of a statement.

"Yeah," Shiv said, "I know about it. I know it's affecting the Starhawk, affecting all the Ascendants. I'm guessing from how you act that it's affecting you as well. Is that why you paint and sketch inside your tome so much? To remind you who you were, to hold on to the history of yourself?"

"Stop using your feeble Psychology on me," she hissed, and in her eyes, he saw something else aside from the usual distaste she had for him. There was a genuine feeling of hurt there. "Do you think I do not know? Do you think I am not sickened by my own state? Every day? That I am not aware that I am a stereotype of myself? A caricature?"

She didn't like being seen. She didn't like being less. And she definitely didn't like the fact that he was taunting her over it. The cruel bit inside him wanted him to continue digging his finger into that wound, to make her angry, to provoke her into violence so that they could see this thing done one way or another.

But his sensible side took over instead. Even if he infuriated the Educator and somehow managed to kill her for good, there was still Udraal out there, still Veronica. And thus far, despite being pretty shitty company, it was she who allowed them to avoid Harlock's notice; she was better on their side than not. At least for now.

"Fine," Shiv said, offering her a concession. "I'm gonna stop psycho-analyzing you all the time, stop poking at your wounds. But I want something from you as well." She opened her mouth, but he cut her off. "Listen, I don't wanna argue, but every time we talk, we get pretty close to ripping each other apart. You don't like me. We're never gonna like each other. It's the way it is. But right now, so long as we're gonna work together, I say we act like adults and just deal with things. I'm tired of playing the two snarling dogs bullshit when I'm with you. Just... Let's stop doing that. Waste of time. Pointless."

As he said that, he looked at the ground. There came a pristine whiteness as he focused the Chef Unwavering, and over the whiteness, there manifested a grid for him to cut into. He sliced down with his Last Morsel and began carving chunks out of the floor. Irons shot a look at Adam, and the Gate Lord grunted in discomfort. "You'll understand in a minute. But maybe not. Most things that relate to Shiv are either ridiculous or absurd. Or bloody and horrible, but that's mainly when he gets a terrible idea for a new weapon, or feeds himself to some monster."

The Deathless gave Irons a demonstration as he threw a few pieces of severed rock into his frying pan. He carved a snippet free from a mote of fire he conjured thereafter, and soon it was cooking. Shiv caught sight of Merriemel shooting his pan looks. Brief looks. Shiv didn't think much of the Enchanter, but having him check the Last Morsel at some point might also offer some insight. But that depended on what the man did with his mask.

As the lid of the pan lifted, Shiv held the well-cooked stones out to the Educator as a peace offering. Instead of being badly burned chunks of rock, a pungent smell that evoked feelings of well-smoked brisket filled the air.

"What?" Irons said. Even the man's surprise was deadpan, but the utter disbelief was written clean across his face.

The Educator stared down into the frying pan and snorted. "Truly, this is your idea of diplomacy? Cooking stones?"

"It's the only thing I do well other than hitting people with my fists, stabbing them with a knife, or mangling their insides," Shiv said, shrugging. "I didn't really get a chance to develop any other skills. The System kept getting in the way of that over and over. Now try it. It's not bad."

"He speaks truth," Whisper muttered from beside Shiv. "And the pan is a wonder. Do not be scared, little god. It is not wise when the Challenger is watching. You don't want to give him your measure, do you now?"

All the orcs were grinning at the Educator as well, trying to use what little peer pressure they had to get her to partake. She hesitated for a moment and reached down. With the end of a pencil, she skewered a cooked piece of rock, and its texture parted much like a piece of meat would. After a final uncertain look, she placed it inside her mouth and chewed. Her first bite was hesitant, expecting to greet stone with enamel. When her teeth sheared right through, a confidence flowed through her, and she hummed in surprise as she consumed the meal.

"You're not much of a red meat person, are you?" Shiv asked. The Educator didn't say, but he could tell. "Actually, I don't think you're much of a food person at all. You probably don't think that much of food. You're the type to get lost in your art and not do anything else for days. You eat when you're hungry,

and no other time. You feed yourself to stay alive; you don't stay alive to keep feeding yourself. And as a kind of god, you probably don't eat much at all these days."

Sourness returned to Maia's mien. "I told you to stop using your Psychology against me."

"I'm not using my Psychology. Not really. This is cooking, pure and simple. Most people who enjoy eating, they got preferences. The way they chew, how fast they chew, how fast the food goes down tells you how much they like something. But you just look uncertain. And uncertainty means that you don't know enough to form an opinion. That's alright, though. It'll come in time."

Shiv spun the Last Morsel in his hand and dipped a finger down into the center of the pan. As he did, he felt himself press against nothing. His digit simply descended further and further. It was like he was reaching into a bottomless pit. Only after he fed the pan with both material and flame would its bottom manifest any kind of solidity at all. Got plenty of things to test this on. Mana types, different alloys...

As the Educator listened to Shiv speak, her skin briefly adopted the texture of stone. She looked down at her hand with a raised eyebrow, and a few seconds later, the boost she gained from the Last Morsel faded. Her rocky exterior collapsed into a spray of dust, and then it further dissolved until there was nothing left.

She scoffed once more, but there was no heat in her voice this time. "Let it be said, Deathless, that of all the people I've faced, and of all the people I know, the System seems to favor you the most. Its hand is heavy upon your shoulder, its expression vulgar, and it wishes for you to war, to struggle incessantly." He met her stare without flinching, but there was a building intensity behind her eyes. "You know this moment is fleeting, don't you? You can hide for now. I can mask you for now. But treachery and bloodshed are inevitable for you. Inescapable."

"It's inescapable for everyone in this room," Shiv replied. "Probably inescapable for the school as well."



Irons narrowed his eyes, and Shiv offered the captain an explanation. "You know what a System-favored is, don't you?"

"Of course," Captain Irons said. "And you? You're favored?"

"Oh yeah." Shiv laughed. "So is Adam. So is everyone who's around me for more than a day or so. Well, if they survive. I'm glad I'm in good company anyway. I'm gonna tell you this right now, Irons. We'll help each other, but maybe you don't want to be that close to me. You might want to keep your distance. Because right now, these few hours of peace, they're getting rarer and rarer in my life. Blood and death practically cling to my ass like fleas, and there's really no way out."

"And you decided to come to the Academy, regardless?" Irons asked. Shiv understood his point of contention, but ultimately, it was probably a bit too late for that.

"Yeah," he replied, "because it doesn't matter no more. Everything's already over the edge. The Ascendants are going insane, there's a big ugly game being played, and an avalanche is heading for the Yellowstone Republic, regardless of whether I'm here or not. The gods are degenerating, there's an unkillable Tarrasque on the loose, and, apparently, hostile nations are mustering their forces north and south." Shiv sighed. "I'd stay away if I thought it would do you any good, but it probably won't. There's no avoiding a lot of this. You're a soldier. The System's gonna do what the System's gonna do."

"And you're already in it as well," Adam said, backing Shiv up. "Captain. You're looking for Melissa, aren't you? Well, there are good odds that she's already dead. We encountered Daughter several times in the prison. Her vessels are almost always children, young ones. I don't know if there is a specific age limit for the Avatars she can use, if she needs their consent, or whatever the rules are. But I can tell you this: more than a few of the children wailed and screamed as Daughter used them." The Gate Lord grimaced. "I've seen terrible things. Things that show the Republic isn't what I thought it was. It's not just now lying to me; it's always been lying to me!"

Adam glared down at the ground as his Shattered Dawn flickered. Irons stared at the face of his former student, then up at his Unique Skill.

"What did it take for you to get that?" Irons asked.

Adam drew in a long breath before he exhaled. "More than I thought I had. More than I wanted to give. But it's not done. Unless we get better, we get stronger, and we get ahead of all our foes, it's not done. If I want to live, I have to war. I have to be more than I was."

"Such is the price," Irons grunted.

"Such is the price," Adam agreed quietly.

"And this is why we pity you," Mortar said. The large orc looked between all of the Republic's so-called citizens among them. "You all lie to yourselves too much. You all torture yourselves for nothing. You humans, you goblins, you children of the earth. You're capable of such wondrous things, but you're also determined to live so pointlessly. It's all about power, but you don't want to admit that. And when someone else shows their greed and gluttony, you're hurt as if there was any other way to be."

Shiv gave a derisive snort. "There are plenty of other ways to be. Irons is right here. He's trying to do the right thing. He had a mark on him because he tried to do the right thing. Cripple is wavering as well. Starhawk—"

The Educator laughed out loud at that, her bitterness singing the air. "Matthew is a fool. That's all he is. He thinks there's a way to deliver justice. He thinks that by somehow spreading divine power among the people, by connecting all of them to the Great One and giving them the gift of our so-called divinity, that we would all be better, that this Republic would truly flourish. Absurd."

"You don't believe that?" Shiv asked.

"I know it's untrue," she replied. "I know it's untrue because they would just become like us." She shuffled closer, staring Shiv dead in the eye. "Do you know what being a god means? It means magnification. It means everything you are good at, all your talents, but also all your flaws, are amplified so many times over that you become a parody of yourself. A public given that power will not be noble and democratic; it will be an anarchy. And all anarchies are fated to become tyrannies."

"You don't know that," Adam said. "You make excuses."

"Oh, but I do," Maia muttered quietly. "I wish it weren't so. I wish... I wish..." Her expression softened. "I wish people were who they claimed to be. I wish that the Starhawk could be right. But he isn't. How many are like you, Deathless? Or you, Young Lord? How many keep throwing themselves into the jaws of hell over and over again—for other people, no less? Not many. But I was like this. Most of the Ascendants were as well."

"Favored?" Shiv asked.

"No. Change-seekers. Deciders."

“Overmen?” Shiv ventured, remembering something Valor had mentioned to him during their first-ever conversation.

Maia looked surprised. “Yes. How did you know about that philosophy?”

“Valor.”

“Ah. Of course. But yes. The ones who choose. We will do these things because, by nature and nurture, we seek to be more. And we hate the world for what it is. But most people?” She shook her head, her grayish hair bouncing from side to side. “They are animals with intelligence. They will react and eat and then die. That’s all they will do. They wait to have their throats slit. Or they deform and become monsters. Evil is banal, boy. And there is nothing more evil than the common man.”

Shiv considered that before shrugging. “Maybe. But the same guy who could be a bastard can be something more too. Just gotta give them a reason. Feed them right.”

Maia chuckled bitterly, and her gaze became distant. “I said those things once. A long time ago, as well. And now here I am, struggling not to spit spite at a child. To hold on to a paltry peace.”

“Ahem!” a loud voice interrupted them. Merrimel stood just a few steps away, and in his hands glistened a mask. But it wasn’t the mask Shiv remembered. Instead of being a thing of dark metal, it was now glowing with the colors of mithril and stone. “We... needed to make some additional improvements to preserve the mask. But we think the primary enchantment has been stabilized.”

The bot-wearing goblin stepped out from behind the elf and held up a hammer. “Got a few questions for you. A few choices as well. The Mind-Shield’s done and busted. We’re gonna need to swap something in

for that. And we're gonna need to remold the mask's exterior in a new material. Also, got a notification from our liaison. They're outside with a few corpses."

"Corpses?" Shiv asked.

"Yeah." The goblin sniffled. He looked uncomfortable then. "Something about dead students from some morgue." In the corner of his right eye, Shiv could see Irons struggle to keep his face from twitching in rage. "So. Besides the enchantment, got a question about what new skin suit you want as well."

Chapter 205 (I) Academy [III]

Students of the Phoenix, my job here, as headmaster, is not to get you to Adept by the time you graduate. It is not to ensure that you become Masters in ten years, five years, or whatever ridiculous sum of time you imagine. It is not to make sure you eventually become Heroes. It is not to make sure that you become Legends after a century and become icons of the Republic. My job is none of those things, for none of those things can be guaranteed.

Look at me, and look upon each other. Know that, once upon a time, I was like you. I stood amongst my peers, people of my age, dreaming of a future, staring at another man giving the same speech, except there was one difference: My grandmaster lied to me. He promised us power. He promised us prestige. He promised us glory and victory and more.

I promise you nothing, for the System will promise you nothing. So you should expect nothing. You should expect nothing, but you should yearn. You should always strive. You should perform to the best of your ability, to overcome every challenge you face, but to be shaken by all the failures you encounter. And when that is done, accept where you are, wherever that may be. Because the great lie that most hear is that they will be glorious, that their futures will be grand, that they will be the victors. I assure you, to the north and the south, there is a man like me—a man, an elf, a goblin, an automaton, a Jotun, a demon—and they tell their youngers and lessers the same lies that my former Grandmaster told me. And when two absolute lies collide, when two Pathbearers believe they will prevail, only one outcome can reign as truth, and there is no guarantee it will be yours.

Steel yourselves today. Hold your heads up high with pride. You are disciples of Phoenix Academy. It takes great effort and great potential for you to arrive here. Understand that you shine brighter than most Pathbearers already, but to shine is to invite harm. And with harm, death looms. Disaster looms. I will fashion you into the finest Pathbearers you can be, but I promise you no more than that, and you should expect no more than that.

For hope is both elixir and poison for the soul. Be mindful of how you drink.

-Legend-Headmaster Hades Hymn, Phoenix Academy Commencement Speech

There was something deeply impressive and also disturbing in how fast the Neath liaison managed to steal eight bodies from a morgue. The fact that this feat was managed while Harlock was active, no less, made Shiv all the more wary of who he was dealing with.

When the liaison stepped in, he was accompanied by a small group of dimensionals; humanoid stone dimensionals, shaped from crumbling rocks and jutting crystals. There were ten of them: two orc-sized ones that seemed to serve as the liaison's personal bodyguards, while the others were closer to a human in size.

They neatly placed the stolen bodies four by four within the hidden crafting chamber, and Shiv saw that the deceased still had tags attached to their feet. But his gaze didn't linger on them for long. Instead, he found himself taking in the liaison. The man stood tall, and there was something faintly elven in his features.

There was a point to his ears and a near-white gleam to his irises. He wore a polished leather doublet with long formal slacks and expensive-looking leather boots. A short sword hung at his waist, and a gem was embedded in the hilt, giving off a golden glow. The time magic radiating from the sword was

Master-Tier, but the Pyromancy possessed by the liaison himself was his true edge. If Shiv had to guess, he was a Heroic Pyromancer. Powerful, but still no more than a bushfire before Candles's raging inferno—even if the Legendary Pyromancer of their group was currently snoring in the corner of the room.

"The bodies, as you requested," the liaison said. His voice was smooth and quick, with little accent Shiv couldn't place. As the man spoke, Shiv noticed how his skin didn't move quite right. There was an uncanny aspect to his features, like he was more rubber than flesh. Adam also noticed, from the narrowing of his eyes.

Merriemmel barely held back a squeak as he looked away from the corpses. A gagging sound followed, and the elven Enchanter tried to keep himself composed. He almost doubled over, regardless.

Concelhaunt scoffed and stepped in front of his colleague. In his hands was a gleaming mask, reforged of new alloys and infused with a brilliant glow. Its repairs hadn't been finalized yet, and Shiv still needed to pick a replacement enchantment to make up for the Mind Shield, but first, something compelled him to see the bodies. Something compelled him to look upon the face of a child whose life he was about to steal. Child, he thought to himself. Like Adam said earlier, I'm practically their age. But I still feel different. Still feels like they shouldn't be here. They shouldn't be dead. But since when did the System ever give a shit about sparing children?

"How did you manage to do this?" Irons asked. The instructor came to a halt just beside Shiv, and he felt that the man's body language screamed with barely-restrained violence.

"Favors and dexterity, mostly," the liaison replied. "The crisis unfolding made things easier, especially with the city's greatest powers all focused on controlling the breakout at the volcano. A most fortuitous circumstance." The man smiled, offering a cruel grin to Shiv, and the Deathless realized he wasn't going to like this man very much. He sighed and strode toward the bodies.

"I want to see their faces," he said. As soon as he did, the earth dimensionals responded. Despite possessing paws meant to rip and rend, they peeled the sheets covering the deceased with considerable grace. An involuntary grunt escaped Shiv afterward. Whether it was a noise uttered in respect or discomfort, he couldn't fully say himself, but Irons was right. These children went down fighting. Several of them had deep wounds lining their skulls and faces. Shiv was still a novice when it came to the finer aspects of biology, but he had been wounded and had inflicted wounds in return. He knew what axe blows looked like. He knew what a thumb would do when it was forced into an eye socket. He knew which teeth broke first when one tried to wrench a jaw free. He knew what crushed windpipes resembled.

The Jotun were brutal fighters. Shiv could tell that immediately. He could also tell they weren't nearly as methodical or precise as the orcs. Too many cuts were off. Slices running from necks and splitting clavicles. Spears holes through cheeks rather than necks or the brain. Sloppy. Close enough to be lethal attempts, so they weren't trying to torture these kids, but sloppy.

Practical Metabiology 43 > 44

Three of the dead were female, and Shiv discounted them immediately. Helix, however, did not. "I think you should pick that one." The orc Biomancer pointed at a blonde-haired girl who stared blankly toward the ceiling. Her nose was practically driven into the back of her head, the result of taking a hammer blow head-on. The disturbing part was how soft and nice the rest of her skin was. It seemed to glow like a pearl, even in the dim ambience of the crafting chamber.

She was an elf, and there was such sadness in her eyes that Shiv felt his chest tighten. No terror, just the final despair before the end.

"I'm serious," Helix kept going. "It could be to your advantage. It will give you insight into being something you're not, and, potentially, you might be able to lure some other students to you, especially the males. You humans have such a strange way of breeding and imprinting on one another. Imagine gaining a Seduction Skill! What a ridiculous boon that might be for you."



Adam audibly gagged. "Stop talking. You're going to make me sick."

He wasn't the only one. Shiv's stomach revolted at the suggestion. It was too close to what Udraal did, and the Deathless wouldn't make a very good girl. He didn't make a very good spy in general. A feeling of déjà vu came over him, and then he pushed past it when he realized it wasn't déjà vu, but a memory. Some time back, early on when he, Uva, and Adam first became a team, they did something like this: scouring a pit of corpses to find someone he could pretend to be.

"Have you no decency?" Irons spat at Helix. The other orcs laughed, and the captain directed his fiercest scowl at them. But where Irons would have been incredibly intimidating for a student or even most individuals, orcs were connoisseurs of savagery and brutality. They nursed themselves upon foul deeds and depraved acts of domination.

Psycho-Cartography: Put a stop to this. One of the orcs is going to provoke Irons, and he's going to oblige them. It's inevitable. They want a fight. They want an excuse to bleed someone, and he likely wants to partake as well, if only to regain some control over his spiraling life. Irons is a good man, but he's a warrior, and he's caught up in a black conspiracy that tears at the heart of everything he believes. It won't take much of a push.

"I told you guys before," Shiv said, cutting everyone off. "If anyone starts a fight, I'm going to end it. Orcs, stop bothering him. You guys want to hurt someone or torture something? I'm available in a while. And Helix. It's going to be time for us to resume our classes. While we got time, right?"

"Ah, so you remembered," Helix said. His voice rose a slight pitch, and he nodded along, pleased. "Good. There is hope for you to become a practitioner yet." Just like that, the atmosphere changed. The orcs were no longer preparing to tease and taunt the angry Captain. Now, all their gazes fell on their Insul, and they laughed and cheered among themselves, as if old friends at a banquet.

"What are you talking about?" Irons muttered under his breath. He was utterly confused about why Shiv would just give himself to the orcs, and then Adam slipped by, leaning in to explain a few things to his former mentor.

Shiv patrolled the rest of the bodies. "None of the girls," he said. At once, the earth dimensionals drew the sheets back over them.

"I have a few suggestions," the liaison said. "These two." He gestured. Shiv followed the liaison's index finger and found himself comparing two options. The first was a narrow-faced boy with a brand over his left eye and a deep chasm lining his throat. His trachea was missing.

Judging from his wiry frame, Shiv suspected that he was looking at someone who walked the Path of the Scout or Shadow, maybe even Thief. The other boy was larger. He wasn't nearly as tall and overwhelming as Shiv, but there was some muscle on his body, and more importantly, there was a certain robustness to his skin. It glistened as if sun-kissed metal, and he exhibited no obvious wounds. In fact, Shiv wasn't sure how that one had died at all.

"This here is Sven Sealark," the liaison explained, introducing the narrow-faced boy first. "He is the youngest son of House Sealark, a minor noble family in the Old Brunswick region. Though not major players in the capital, he still holds considerable pull due to being selected for Phoenix Academy under circumstances of Martial Meritas."

"And what does that mean?" Shiv asked directly.

"Martial Meritas means that the student has earned his place at Phoenix Academy through a remarkable feat of arms or magic performed in combat," Adam explained. The Young Lord rounded his shoulders slightly and stood a little taller. "It was how I was selected as well."

"No shit?" Shiv said. "Did you shoot the head off of a monster or something from halfway across town?"

"Not quite, but not that far off, actually. I put an arrow through the eye of a Ruin Wasp while we were nest-clearing somewhere in Old Santabar." The Gate Lord tried not to sound too proud, but he was, and it was clearly a good memory for him. "My father, I, and some of our retainers went out. The nest, it was getting a bit too close to the town, and they had also attacked several villages. Caravans too. My father didn't want to bring me along initially, but I raised such a fit that I—what?" Adam was cut off by Shiv chuckling. "What?"

Shiv tried to contain his amusement. "No, just... It's you. It's very you, you know, to throw a tantrum because you weren't invited to fight something."

Adam blinked, and he seemed caught between a shrug of indifference and a scowl. "I just felt responsible. I'm the Young Lord of Blackedge, you know."

Shiv snorted. "Yeah, you are. To the bone."

"We have duties," Adam said.

"I know, and you take them pretty seriously, Adam." Shiv folded his arms. "And I suppose that being Martial Meritas gives you some special benefits?"

"Yes, it puts you in the Advanced Tiers."

"Advanced Tiers?" Shiv asked. "What's that? Some kind of special course?"

"It means Advancement Tiers," Irons said, carrying on where Adam left off. "The Advancement Tiers give students more opportunities to select coursework beyond what is typically deemed acceptable for their current skill range and academic year. It also allows them to choose specific mentors, to grant them additional opportunities for practical experience and training."

"It also lets you live in Atlas Hall," Adam said. The Gate Lord sighed as his eyes closed. "The facilities there, Shiv... It was something to dream of. The company, the courtyard, the fountains..."

Now Shiv's attention was fully piqued. "The facilities were that good, huh? Well, I think they're leaving just the right kind of bait for me, Adam." But then he considered something else, something that left him feeling burdened if he were to steal this child's identity. "You said he was from a house? Does he have any living family in the capital, or back at home?"

"He does," the liaison replied. "A mother and a younger sister. They are far away, not directly in the capital, but they should be on their way down. They have been notified of his unfortunate demise, and as such, we will need to make arrangements to justify your miraculous resurrection, so to speak."

The liaison grinned. Shiv didn't. The liaison stopped grinning.

As much as Martial Meritas appealed to Shiv, he really didn't want to steal the corpse of someone who still had loved ones. With his track record as a spy, it was likely that this body would be burned within a span of days. If that happened, he really didn't want the surviving family of this poor kid to be caught in the crossfire.

"And the other one?" Shiv asked. "How'd he get into the academy?"

The liaison's gaze settled on the larger corpse. "Ah, Marcus Unblood."

"Unblood? Strange name. He part of some noble house too?"

"No. Unbloods are simply what the people in that region call bastards. They are unblooded, so to speak. He may well be of direct descent from noble houses, just not recognized or wanted."

Shiv looked down at the hard-faced boy with a frown. Already, he felt a sense of kinship growing between them. "You and I both, huh?" Shiv said under his breath. Then, he paused and shook his head. "Well, up until recently. Now everyone wants a piece of me, and I can't believe I'm saying this, but I kind of miss being a social pariah."

Marcus didn't say anything because Marcus was a corpse. But if he could, Shiv imagined the boy would agree. He was a complainer. He had that face. He had that vibe. Shiv could tell.

"He did not enter on the basis of Martial Meritas. Instead, he got in due to the Wild Card Program that has been recently instituted." The liaison cocked his head. "Unfortunately, he will not get to experience that."

Chapter 205 (II) Academy [III]

Shiv walked over to Marcus and looked down at the boy again. He knelt over the body and peeled the sheets away some more. Shiv winced slightly. Though the boy looked robust, and there was a metallic

gleam that hinted at Adept Toughness, his musculature had deceived him earlier. His arms were rigid with bulging veins, but his torso was far softer. In fact, Shiv would say this one was a little bit plump.

"Skipping out on the conditioning a bit, are we, Marcus?" he said under his breath. Then, his snark died as he examined the corpse's musculature once more. There was such a lack of definition and softness along Marcus's chest and shoulders that he looked deflated and deformed in places. The substance around his stomach also didn't seem to react like fat when Shiv shifted the body slightly. It flopped around rather than jiggled. "The hells..."

He wrapped a mana hydra around the body and let out a gasp of surprise. Marcus's muscles felt like they were shriveled. His organs were also lined with horrific scarring. "The felling—what did the Jotuns do to this guy?"

"Not the giants; soul condition, unfortunately," the liaison said, "and a mana condition as well. His Physicality is crippled, bottlenecked before it could fully develop. As such, his Toughness is excessive due to... negative and painful experiences while growing up, while his strength remains at the level of a Pathless."

"Just another thing you and I share, huh?" Shiv said. "Well, at least you had your Toughness at Adept. So, wild card... I'm guessing that he basically got in on pity."

Irons cleared his throat. "It's not so much pity as a golden opportunity offered to junior Pathbearers who otherwise wouldn't be selected due to circumstances that limit them. Not everyone will be a warrior. Not everyone has the capacity to be a great mage, an intellectual, an engineer. But some can still provide great benefit to the Republic, and this was one such person."

"Indeed. For you see, Marcus was enrolled under the College of the Lifegiver—medicine."

And that captured Shiv's interest entirely. "Medical College? He was a Biomancer?"

"A minor one," the liaison said, "with his main talents in Practical Metabiology, combined with Fieldcraft, Survival, and Surgery. He was slated to see his Biomancy skill developed further, to see if he had an aptitude for the art. But, alas, some roses are snipped before they can bloom." The liaison gave a moment of silence, but Shiv knew he was playing to the crowd. As soon as the liaison mentioned the college Marcus was bound for, Shiv's choice was already made.

"Yeah," Shiv said, "orphan, non-combatant, studying human biology. What's not to love?"

"So, I take it you have made your choice?" the liaison asked. Shiv drew in a breath and turned away for a moment. He walked back toward Irons and faced the instructor. "Listen, when my Perfect Semblance activates, it's going to burn his body. There's gonna be nothing left of him other than ashes."

"Why are you telling me this?" Irons asked.

"Because it's going to bother you. It's going to bother you like it's going to bother me. But there's a reason why I'm picking him. Hells, there are several reasons. You're a straight-up guy, and so am I. You got a problem with me doing this, or if you got a better idea, you tell me now. Otherwise, I'm going to go through with this thing, regardless if it makes me feel bad. And then we move on. We start dealing with other shit. We don't linger on this."

Irons fell quiet. Then he offered Shiv a brief nod. They both understood where the other was coming from. "I don't like it," Irons began, but then he swallowed. "I don't like it, but since I've already done so many things I dislike, I think I can stomach one more. But after this..."

"Yeah, after this, I'll be able to move around in the open and help you with your problems too," Shiv said. "Melissa, was it?" Irons nodded again. "Alright, we're going to be going after her, going after whatever the hells Daughter's doing in this city. There's no way in hell I'm going to let that crazy godsdamned monster keep snatching children if I can do something about it."

"But, before we can really even get to that..." Shiv hesitated as he looked to the two professors. Through the entire discussion, both Concelhaunt and Merriemmel had looked on at the bodies. The goblin took in the macabre display with far more grace, offering little more than winces and a frown at times. Merriemmel, meanwhile, was leaning against the wall, violently heaving air in and out of a strange rectangular device that flashed every time he exhaled. "Got some other stuff to deal with there as well," Shiv said. "Alright. You can take the other bodies. Leave Marcus."

The liaison nodded. "It will be done." He gave a slight whistle, and the stone dimensionals began pulling the other corpses out.

"Wait," Adam called out. "But if you're going to put them back, what about this one? There's going to be one corpse missing, won't that bring about problems?"

The liaison simply shook his head. "Of course, we arranged for duplicates to be made beforehand."

"Duplicates?" Adam asked.

Helix cocked his head, and Shiv immediately developed a guess.



"Yes, we cloned the bodies. We inflicted the same wounds upon them, and we left them within the morgue in advance of this operation. We are not going to be placing the bodies back there. Instead, they will be going to other people."

"What other people?" Irons almost growled.

"Bidders, most likely," the liaison said. "Organs sell for a good deal, especially an organ from a young and healthy body, one that has not been tainted by too much Skill History." Then he considered something else. "Well, on top of the organs, there are others who have need of youthful vessels. Necromancy is an expensive art to practice."

Though Irons said nothing, Shiv could practically feel the murder radiating off the captain's body. Necromancy was still considered an ugly thing in the Republic, with practitioners often being put to death from what Shiv remembered hearing from Slayers and reading in newspapers.

"I understand you disapprove," the liaison said, without a hint of worry at all. With his words, Shiv felt a tug of affection building—an emotion that was crushed when Psycho-Cartography noticed it. "I disapprove of certain things as well, but the market always has demands, and we need to meet those demands to make sure that someone more cruel or more base than we does not fill it."

"Is that what you always tell yourself?" Irons growled. "That you are being noble in an ugly situation?"

"No, just that I am a part of an order. A sunken order, but an order nonetheless." The liaison sighed. "You need not approve. My superiors don't care for it. You have already bound yourself to us, and should you find yourself thinking about doing something deeply unwise..." The liaison shook his head very, very dramatically. "...I strongly recommend you do not, because a certain set of documents might find its way into Flamecrown Castle, and everything you are, everything you want to do, can turn to dust."

"Is it common practice for the Neath to blackmail the people it works with?" Shiv asked sardonically.

"Only if they threaten to impede other profit margins in play." The liaison smiled again and bowed. "I leave this one with you, then, Legend Shiv. Oh, and lest I forget..." He reached into his leather doublet's inner pocket and pulled out a glistening letter. Its material seemed to be made of some kind of crystalline substance, and as Shiv accepted it, he realized it was mithril. He could feel his magic thrumming around the letter, and on one end, a seal held it in place. It wasn't a wax seal, though. Instead, it was a thing of Dimensionality, and it called to him. There was a trace of his Vitae there.

Shiv's mouth fell open. How the hells did someone—

His mind went to a grinding halt just then. Who had his Vitae? Who could have prepared this so far in advance? Only one.

"This was said to be delivered to you once your powers and Path fully activated," the liaison said. "It has been primed in advance and sent by your Creator. On top of that, the Dragon Brokers wish to have a personal audience with you, at your nearest convenience." The liaison's expression went from warm to utterly dead. "I strongly advise that you do not keep them waiting. They are patient, but they are not to be insulted."

Shiv wanted to say something cutting, but decided to hold back. Psycho-Cartography warned him against playing the petulant child. Everything I say or do from this point on can be used against me, Shiv reminded himself. "Tell them I'll let them know when I'm available," he said, keeping his tone even.

No sense in avoiding this. Time to see who runs the underbelly of the capital. See what they can give me—and what bullshit they bring my way.

The liaison bowed once more, and his smile returned to his face. "A wise decision. You seem like a wise man, Deathless, a wise man in desperate circumstances. You could do with many, many reliable friends in these trying times." With that, he retreated with his stone dimensionals, leaving only Marcus's corpse behind.

"I still think you should have picked the blonde girl," Helix said with a lamenting sigh. "She would have given you so many opportunities to..."

"Helix," Shiv said. "Shut up."

"Of course, Insul."

Giving Marcus a final look, the Deathless hardened himself for what he was going to do to the body and returned to the two crafters. "Alright. So now that that's settled, let's talk about enchantments. What's the damage?"

"Well, as we said earlier, the Mind Shield enchantment has been completely worn away." Merriemel gestured at the center of the mask, and Shiv noticed that there was a slight crack there. The crack also seeped droplets of translucent mana. A lot of lost Psychomancy. Shame, but not necessary now that I got Shapeless Tides.

"Additionally, the Adept Skill Thief and Initiate Skill Thief Enchantments have also sustained substantial damage. That being said, they still function. We managed to repair them." Merriemel's face turned into a bright smile as he gestured at a certain part of the mask. Shiv squinted and saw patches of shifting patterns gliding just underneath the material. It came alight and faded intermittently.

"Okay," Shiv said. "So I'm going to have to find new skills to replace the ones I lost."

"Yes, but I have another suggestion." The goblin chuckled under his breath. "These two enchantments were like add-ons, you know? Just side-bits of mana connected to the core. The main thing is that this whole mask, it's built around that Perfect Semblance skill. It's a good thing, too, because if it was only the Perfect Semblance skill, it would be practically useless right now from all the mana it leaks."

"So, what does that mean?" Shiv asked.

"That means we can probably do quite a bit of tweaking around it. Instead of just leaving it at the Adept Skill Thief ceiling, we have something that could bring it to new heights. Reforge the enchantment entirely." And then Concelhaunt sprinted toward the many mana cores slotted upon the stand lining the far wall, and he returned with a glistening shard that radiated with vapors of black and gray. "We can give you a few choices here. If you want to increase the Adept Skill Thief enchantment to having five slots—ones that can be filled immediately—we could definitely do that. But we can also give you a single Master-Tier enchantment as well. Depends on how we rebuild things. But..."

"What's the problem?" Shiv said, waiting to hear the trade-off.

"Well, if we're going to put in a Master-Tier Skill Thief, it's likely going to eat up what's left of the mana capacity for this mask. It was already stretched tight before." Shiv remembered that. Tran had barely managed to add Self-Mending to the mask, just before the fight Shiv had with the Jealousy.

"So, if I just expand the Adept Skill Thief into five slots, could I get still another enchantment?" Shiv asked. He hummed with interest. "And it's just one other Master-Tier Skill instead of five Adept ones?"

“Correct,” Merrielmel said in a singsong voice. “Flexibility or power is always—”

“I have enough power,” Shiv grunted decisively. “I want more subtlety. I need... You got anything for Invisibility? Or Chameleon? Actually—” He reached into his cape and pulled out his broken gauntlet. “You think you can move a few enchantments from this?”

“Ineritum,” Concelhaunt breathed. He leaned in close, and his eyes flashed with mana. “How in the fuck did you get that? Why did you just show us that earlier—ahem.” He caught Shiv’s flat stare and nodded. “Merri. Let’s... let’s see what we can do here.”

“No,” Merrielmel muttered.

Both Shiv and Concelhaunt stared at him. “The hells you mean, no?” the goblin Smith spat.

“I mean, this shouldn’t be for the mask,” Merrielmel continued. “We need it for Project Trespasser.” He swallowed. “For getting to the Outside! This—this is what we have been missing for the stabilizer!” He reached out and gripped Shiv by the arms in a burst of excitement. “If—if you will let us have this, I—there are many other things, I will... Trade! I offer another trade!”

Shiv blinked. “Trade?”

“Heroic Equipment,” Merrielmel squeaked. “Please...”

