

Deathless 206

Chapter 206 (I) Academy [IV]

Hm? Oh, yes. Headmaster, I'm aware that Master-Instructor Heresine is a spy. And a spy of Aviary, no less. One of their so-called Sparrows. Long-term, deep cover. Not meant for active combat.

I commend you for noticing, but the Inquisition has the matter well under control. As such, I recommend you leave it be.

Why, you ask? Because this is simply what is done between rival nations. You understand this. I know why you wish to stamp this out, but it's a little bit like trying to kill all the cockroaches in an infested house using the bottom of your heel alone. It's woefully insufficient, and it doesn't get the job done. Now, for these matters, it's best to prevent or subvert it beforehand, instead of trying to react and deal with it.

As such, the so-called spy you have uncovered is already nullified. Nullified because the Inquisition has existing cells pre-planted within the Academy. They're there for one purpose and one purpose alone: to reach out to new and subversive elements and turn them to steal information from our adversaries while they're trying to compromise our students. There is no space for them to slip in between the cracks, because we have already colonized the cracks, so to speak.

So, again, Headmaster, I thank you for your concern, but lay that heavy burden in your chest to rest. Your duty is to the children, so focus on them. Leave the rest to me and to the ones that dwell in the shadows of our Republic.

We all have a role to play. Just worry about yours.

-Legend-Councilwoman Veronica Chandler to Legend-Headmaster Hades Hymn

Shiv was taken aback by Merriemmel's fervent pleas. There was a desperate gleam in the Enchanter's eyes, and he had the look of a man who was willing to offer an arm and a leg in exchange for the broken gauntlet in Shiv's hands.

"What kind of Heroic equipment?" Shiv asked.

Merriemmel perked up immediately. "Come, let me show you." He reached out and seized Shiv by the wrist, and he tried to pull Shiv along. Unfortunately, Merriemmel was not a Legendary-Tier Pathbearer in terms of physique. He wasn't even a Master. The outcome was like a blade of grass trying to drag an oak. Merriemmel squeaked as he stumbled back into Shiv, unprepared for how heavy and rooted the Deathless was. Shiv caught Merriemmel's face before he could slam nose-first into the chest piece of the Voidmantid armor.

"Oh, oh, terribly sorry," Merriemmel muttered. He coughed awkwardly and released Shiv, who raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, next time, just ask."

"Of course, of course."

Beside them, Concelhaunt gripped his face and tried to hide his second-hand shame. "Gets this way when he's a little too excited."

Merriemmel led Shiv and the others out of the crafting chamber. They cut several corners before they got to another dead end, and this time Shiv found himself staring at a cylindrical crack. It resembled a depressed fracture imprinted upon the stone. He wasn't sure why they all had to be cracked in different ways, but this one leaked Dimensionality mana too. Unbeknownst to Merriemmel, Shiv wasn't alone. There was a certain reserve Avatar in his cape, and gliding behind them just underground was a Hydra that had been playing the role of hidden ace all the while.

The cylindrical crack swirled into a whirlpool of black static, and as they stepped through, Shiv found himself awestruck at the large space that greeted him. Instead of being a narrow chamber, humid and choked with clashing mana types, he stood upon marble tiles and glanced down a massive hall that had hundreds of display cases. It was almost museum-like in terms of the arrangement, but the lights above were a bit too bright, and from them radiated faint pulses of Dimensionality.

Shiv got his answer to why they were infused with Dimensionality as a few of them started ringing upon detecting him. "Ah, sorry, sorry," Merriemmel cried out. He sent a few of his flying drones to crash against the lights. A spark of violet energy filled the air, and the alarms died down in an instant. "It's meant to make sure no one tries to pilfer our finalized products. Our personal products, I must tell you. We make a great many things for the Academy, but for certain things, you know, it's very hard to get permission."

The elf rambled on as Shiv followed behind him. The Deathless was only halfway listening. Merriemmel continued talking about how the administration had no vision, no willingness to fund ambitious projects, forcing him and Concelhaunt to do things themselves. As for the aforementioned things, they resided in the two dozen or so display cases.

The first thing Shiv noticed about the cases was the glass. Instead of it being natural glass, it was reinforced with a sort of crystalline substance, and to his surprise, when his mana hydras brushed over them, he realized it wasn't a synthetic crystal, but an organic compound. It was complex in its biological architecture, and the renditions that manifested over his hydras were composed of so many interconnected microspells that Shiv struggled to process what he was looking at. It was like systems collapsing on systems, and what's more, the glass was still alive. The crystallized compound was not a dead organism. It was chitinous. Bits of it died, and bits of it re-grew.

"Oh, you have a unique Biomancy Skill Evolution," Merriemmel noted, beholding Shiv's mana hydras for the first time. "I was wondering why your Biomancy field was so dense earlier. Hero?"

Shiv considered withholding the information, but something told him he might just get a bit of useful knowledge in exchange if he decided to be open. "Yeah," Shiv said, "Hero. Aegis of Assimilation."

"Aegis of Assimilation?" Merriemmel coughed. "That's very, very unusual. Have you accepted any Blessings from a Hydra god of some sort? Or have you transplanted bits from a Hydra into yourself?" The elf pulled a pair of spectacles out of nowhere and layered them over his eyes. The lenses flashed blood red, and he squinted at Shiv.

The Deathless realized what Merriemmel was doing a moment later. He was trying to scan Shiv's innards. This grew more evident as a sweeping beam of redness washed through Shiv's skin and made it transparent. The Deathless found himself slightly perplexed rather than offended. "Seems pretty useful. What kind of item is that?"

"Oh, it's one of my personal gadgets," Merriemmel explained. He clicked the side of his glasses, and then they flashed with a sudden rush of Pyromancy as well. "Oh, you seem mostly human. Large for a human, but still mostly human. There is a strange glow about you, though." He clicked his glasses twice more, and this time they were infused with a bright vitality. That was when Merriemmel's breath caught in his throat. "What is... this?"

"Something you might not want to dig too far into," Shiv answered. There was a warning under his breath, but Merriemmel missed it entirely.

"No, no, I've never seen anything like this before. Your vitality, it seems to be blended into..."

"My soul," Shiv finished for him. "And if you try to find out why, you're probably going to get a visit from a certain someone. You don't want to meet them. I don't want you to meet them. It won't end well."

Merriemmel let his glasses slide down the bridge of his nose. "Who? Someone unwilling to share the fruits of their labor, that's who..." He frowned and then pouted. There was something deeply childlike about his expression. "I must tell you, any scientist who withholds their intelligence and dedication to this world is not worthy of being called a scientist. All our efforts should be toward furthering society and—"

"You know the name Udraal Thann?" Shiv cut Merriemmel off again.

Merriemmel paused. "I... You... you mean..."

"Okay, so you have heard of him," Shiv continued. He folded his arms and leaned down to stare Merriemmel eye to eye. "My dealings are with Udraal. I don't much like Udraal. And someday, if I get the chance—no, when I get the chance—I'm going to tear Udraal in half and stomp him until there is nothing left but paste and dust. And when I'm done doing that, I'm going to reach into his soul, and I'm going to break every single skill he has." With the last word, Shiv's syllables trailed off with a rageful growl, and he surprised even himself with how angry he felt. But he meant every word. For what Udraal did, for what Udraal might do, he was going to kill the bastard. And he was going to do it slowly.

Merriemmel's mouth fell open, but then he swallowed. He nodded vigorously and spoke no more about the Deathless's Vitae. "Oh, well, come along," Merriemmel chuckled nervously. "There are a great many things you can select from. But please, can I... see it?"

Shiv handed his gauntlet over to the elf, and the Enchanter all but chirped as he accepted it, like it was some kind of priceless gem. Which, to Merriemmel, it might as well have been. He needs this to finish his shifting device, the thing that can make them travel to the Outside, Shiv muttered internally, thinking back to what the Enchanter had said earlier. And that means I need it too. Otherwise, there's no easy way to reach Uva or Blackedge. Still need to figure out their deal—why they want to reach the Outside. And why the Neath is interested in helping them. And then there's the Dragon Brokers. More shit to deal with.

Shiv held back a sigh. Fuck me, the Outside. I hate dealing with the eldritch shit. I hate the Recollector. I hate the Stranger. I hate the Eldest. I... He hesitated when it came to the Dreamtaker. It wasn't like he liked the Dreamtaker, but aside from being a little dubious when it came to not possessing people or talking through their eyes, she was relatively amiable when it came to Shiv or Uva's requests. Still a dream-eating entity, though. Just another felling thing I have to deal with.

"Inertium," Merriemmel breathed. He held the gauntlet high and practically worshiped the broken thing. "I still have no idea where you got this. Must be a grand story, a remarkable story. Have you met one of the Farwalkers? The Mage-Slayers? Oh, they despise the System in all its ways. They loathe magic. I can't imagine what favors you might have to do to gain this gauntlet from them." And then Merriemmel gasped. "Don't tell me you killed one of them. How did it feel? Did you kill one of them?"

"Didn't really get it from one of them," Shiv said, and immediately he saw Merriemmel deflate slightly. "I got it from..." Shiv grimaced at the recollection. "Got it from a friend, I guess."

"You guess?" Merriemmel asked.

"Yeah, I suppose she's a friend, but... honestly, she died before I could get to know her all that well. Wasn't anything she could do. Or I could do either."

"Oh," Merriemmel said, and he sounded properly depressed. "I know how that feels. I have several colleagues who are both scholars and warriors. Many of them don't last very long. It is a treacherous thing, living the life of a Pathbearer, especially a martial Pathbearer. I have pleaded with a great many of them, you know, to commit to the science. It's safer that way. It's where we belong." But Merriemmel coughed as he caught himself rambling. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you."

"Not offended," Shiv said. "Just dealing with being alive in the Integration. Sometimes, I forget. But then it reminds me."

Psycho-Cartography: This one is extremely terrified of practically everything around him. His mind also skips from place to place. Probably very useful if you're someone who has to experiment or test a lot of different possibilities, but in combat, he'd probably be a liability. He'd just get overwhelmed by everything happening and shut down. Him choosing to be a non-martial was likely a wise decision.

Despite recognizing that rationally, another part of him still scorned Merriemmel in a certain way, and he noted that about himself.

Psycho-Cartography: You scorn him because you don't like it when people surrender their agency, when people refuse to fight for themselves, refuse to spit in the face of a cruel world. He is, in a word, pathetic. And you like to tell yourself that you're the opposite. You are the so-called Overman that Valor told you about. It makes you feel powerful.

"I am powerful," he said under his breath.

"What?" Merriemmel said.

"Nothing," Shiv replied, following the enchanter. Merriemmel stared at him from the corner of his eye, and then he nodded, unwilling to confront Shiv, retreating into his own anxiety.

Psycho-Cartography: You are powerful, but power is relative. The dirt is littered with powerful Pathbearers. Sullain was powerful, incredibly so, and yet he perished unceremoniously, used as a test subject to teach you how to break someone's soul. The Recollector was powerful, but if we were to fight that fell thing again, you'd tear it in half in short order. Roland is powerful, and Roland nearly broke himself trying to protect Blackedge. There are limits to power, and there are other monsters in the world. Power is not enough. You have to be more than powerful. You have to make the right choices as well. Decide who you wish to be.

Shiv stopped to consider these ruminations for a moment. Just how free was anyone? Yes, you could choose to be a martial. You could train yourself day and night. You could push yourself beyond your limits and try to climb as high as you can go. But still, there was no guarantee you'd survive the next day. And Shiv had made it this far by not surviving, by being brutal, by being reckless, by never stopping. But who else could be like him? Who else could fight the way he did? Who else could grow the way he did?

Psycho-Cartography: You should be proud of yourself. You should be pleased by your power and everything you've accomplished. The decision, the choice to fight matters. The decisions we made are who we are, because that's how we grow. We use everything we have at our disposal to overcome problems, to step beyond our previous failures. Power or no power, we choose to fight. But remember that not everyone is like us, and not everyone has our gifts. If you can do that, then you can understand them, and you can understand their fears.

Shiv stared at the back of Merriemmel's head and felt some of the subconscious judgment he held toward the elf dissipate. He didn't really know who Merriemmel was. He didn't know what drove the Enchanter to be part of the criminal enterprise, why he allowed drugs to be trafficked across campus, why he found himself performing underground experiments. Shiv didn't know, and so, before he had all the details, he wouldn't judge Merriemmel. He would try to be as detached as possible.

“Merriemmel,” Shiv said after a beat. “Why are you doing this stuff underground? Why are you with Neath and the Outside? What’s the deal with all this?”

The elf stiffened. “It’s... a personal matter.”

Concelhaunt spat on the ground. “His brother went missing in an experiment gone wrong. Blast happened when he was trying to build a Slipgate.”

“STOP, STOP!” Merriemmel suddenly screamed, covering his ears. He never stopped walking, but he hummed to himself, as if trying to self-soothe.

The goblin Smith sighed. “Said too much. Look. Neath has resources; they’re interested in Slipgates—let’s you use the Outside as a medium. Theoretically, could let you get anywhere in the Integration. Practically? No idea. Not sure a bridge like that can work with what we have available. But we’re close to creating an opening to the Outside. The Inertium might just be our final piece for the stabilizer.”

“And you?” Adam asked. “Why are you involved? And why not petition the administration?”

Concelhaunt’s expression turned haunted. “It was my project. I was the one that set the whole thing up. And I’m gonna be the one that sees it finished. But not with the academy. I think... I think we were sabotaged.”

“What?” Adam breathed. “By whom?”

The goblin turned to face him. "Headmaster Hymn. And no, I don't felling know why. I just... caught him the day before. In the lab. Doing something... I don't know why... Don't know..."

"You're lying," Irons said.

"The fuck you say, Irons?" Concelhaunt snarled, taking a step toward the captain.

Irons didn't flinch. He just glared harder. "I served under Hymn. This is not his way. He is not that kind of person. You are lying."

Concelhaunt's expression twisted into a derisive sneer, but before they could get any more heated, the Enchanter gave a shrill whistle.

"Alright, here, here!" Merriemel said, interrupting the others with a loud shout. He gestured to his left and right, and Shiv found himself staring at an assortment of weapons. One looked to be a lightning bolt caged within a length of stone, making it resemble something between a column and a spear. The spear crackled constantly, and the stone itself rumbled, barely able to contain the power it bore within. Despite this, Shiv couldn't feel the mana radiating out of the item. In fact, this entire equipment museum was pristine, devoid of any overlapping mana fields aside from the lights above or Merriemel himself.

"Oh, oh, sorry, I was a little bit too hasty." Merriemel waved his hands, and then the chitinous glass lining the outside of the display case collapsed. Shiv cocked his head as he watched how each section of the glass receded into another, unfurling as if a fan. The bits of the glass were as if ribs of skin or chloroplasts from plants. In seconds, the glass splashed down like a waterfall, hiding in the gaps between the equipment stands and the outside of the display case. Just then, Shiv felt the crushing power radiating from the storm spear.

"This is the Heavenfall Anvil. It allows one to shape the ground by using bolts of lightning. It possesses a range of well over ten kilometers and grants you the power to root yourself to the earth while lashing the world with lightning."

Shiv lifted an eyebrow as he examined the Anvil in greater detail. It was flashy, but... How many people are me? And do I really need another piece of equipment right now? He knew the answer to that question. Shiv looked over his shoulder and shrugged at Adam. "So, what do you think?"

The Gate Lord's mouth fell open slightly. "What?"

"Yeah, what do you think? Useful or shit? You like this thing?"

For a moment, Adam didn't reply. You're... You want me to choose something? For myself?"

"Yes," Shiv said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"But you're trading your gauntlet for it."

"Yeah, I'm trading my gauntlet so that you can have something new." Shiv held up his pan. "Not feeling that greedy. And besides, you can use another edge. Maybe something that'll let you shoot further or get away faster. You deserve it. And if it makes you stronger, it makes all of us better."

"Soft," Mortar scoffed.

"Strategic," Whisper praised.

Adam pressed his lips together, and Shiv read the thankful glint behind his eyes. Shiv adopted a smug grin, but then the Gate Lord just scoffed. "Are you going to use this to guilt-trip me if we disagree in the future?"

"Yeah," Shiv said, admitting it without shame.

"You are an utter bastard."

"That I am," Shiv admitted smoothly, "but I just want the best things in life for my best asshole."

Irons looked between them, and a flicker of suspicion danced across his face. It vanished a second later. The Gate Lord stepped past Shiv and placed a hand on the anvil.

Chapter 206 (II) Academy [IV]

It seemed like a powerful weapon to Shiv, but by this point, he didn't really care that much about destructive power. He was already a sledgehammer. He wanted more options. Frankly, he wanted to develop his technical skills more than anything right now, because that's what he lacked: Multitasking, Practical Metaiology, Memorization, Reading, Writing. All those things mattered, and Shiv was deficient in the basics still.

"No," Adam said, stepping away. "It's powerful, but no. I can feel it trying to root me in place. It uses me as some kind of conduit."

"Yes," Merriemmel chirped, "I've seen this thing fry an entire squadron! A massive storm manifests overhead!"

"And being made still is being made dead," Adam deadpanned. "I don't have the Toughness for this, and with the threats we face, I cannot be static. Do you have something that offers more range and flexibility, or the possibility of rapid repositioning?"

Merriemmel tapped his chin as he considered Adam's question, and then he snapped his fingers. "Come with me!" Merriemmel started sprinting between a few display cases, and as they left, the glass protecting the anvil crashed back together. Shiv narrowed his eyes at the crystalline substance.

As the others followed Merriemmel, Helix leaned in. "Did you feel that?" he whispered.

"Yeah," Shiv replied, "yeah, I did. It was pretty interesting. I didn't expect it to be organic."

"Then did you notice that there is a superorganism living beneath the marble tiles?"

Shiv paused. "There is?"

Helix tutted in disappointment. "We still need to work more on your Awareness. I gave you that armor so that you can use all of your senses, but still you neglect them. It's a Haeguram. A Slumberwurm. If you touch the so-called glass, it would shed them and leave larvae inside you."

"Shit. Really?"

"Yes. So. Pay attention."

Instead of responding with agitation, Shiv grunted and accepted the criticism. "Yeah, I guess I need to keep my eyes open."

"Not just your eyes. The world is not a nail. You are not a hammer, at least not always. If you want to be good at Biomancy, you have to open your mind, Insul. If you want to be good at anything, you'll have to open your mind. The simple die ugly deaths."

"I think everyone dies ugly deaths," Shiv retorted. "Just that some get a lot more done before they die."

"True, true," Helix amended, sighing.

By the time they caught up to Merriemel and the others, they found the Enchanter gesturing animatedly at a set of revolving rings. They glowed with the texture of focus crystal on the outside, and an inner rim that was made from mithril. The gap between the rings glistened with dense motes of static darkness. This was a dimensional item, but from within that sheen of Dimensionality came another field that Shiv could feel: a Chronomantic field. He wasn't the only one that sensed it. Kura had her face scrunched as well, and she regarded the two rings as if they were hiding a nest of snakes within.

"This is the Realmrunner's Keyhole," Merriemel said, licking his dry lips. "I did not make this item, and neither did Concelhaunt, for that matter. We found it, and then restored it."

"Realmrunner," Gone echoed, and suddenly Shiv tasted the stench of fear. It radiated from the goblin, and it was practically palpable. A faint strand twisted and twirled through the air. It ran from Gone, and it extended skyward, but Shiv couldn't tell where it ended. It went through the ceiling, and it kept twisting, undulating, as if it was trying to connect to something he couldn't see.

"You know who that is?" Shiv asked.

When Gone went still, Shiv knew that this Realmrunner was probably a threat. "Don't want to talk about it," Gone muttered, shaking her head.

Psycho-Cartography: Do not push her right now. Listen to her voice. She's not just reluctant. She's traumatized.

Farsight 74 > 75

Adam turned to say something to Gone, but Shiv took a step forward and clapped the Gate Lord on the shoulder. Before Adam could say anything, Shiv shook his head and simply uttered, "No." Adam, to his credit, understood immediately and fell silent. Once more, Irons looked between them, but his gaze lingered on Shiv a while longer. Instead of seeming suspicious this time, he let a faint flash of approval slip through his rigid expression.

"The Realmrunner is an infamous Legendary Pathbearer," Merriemmel muttered in a hushed tone. "A Legendary merchant. A trader. A trader of all things, be it wonders, information, stories, and yes, even beings. Monsters and individuals both." Merriemmel shuddered at that, but his shudder was dramatic.

Comparatively, Gone shivered, and her reaction was a reflex. She scratched at the back of her neck, and just then Shiv noticed a curve poking through the rag she'd grabbed from a crate at some point to wear over her shredded prisoner suit. It was a ridge of scar tissue, and as the fabric of her clothes shifted up and down, he saw more of the scarification appear. It didn't look like a battle scar. Instead, it seemed to be decorative, inflicted upon her by means of a brand, if he had to guess.

The Enchanter clicked his tongue, oblivious to the reaction his words were causing. "Anyhow, the Realmrunner is known for being in multiple places at the same time, or so it is claimed. We suspect that he simply has mastery of Dimensionality on such an advanced level that he can simply coexist in two spaces at once, rather than through means of splitting his soul."

"Coexist?" Adam repeated, incredulous.

"Correct!" Merriemmel cried aloud. The Gate Lord flinched at the sudden excitement exhibited by the elven Enchanter. He gestured for Adam to come closer. "It's just a matter of time—actually, see for yourself! Take hold of the rings," Merriemmel instructed.

The rings lay upon a flat stand, and despite spewing out motes of Dimensionality, they were otherwise dormant. As soon as Adam touched them, however, they both thrummed to life. They rose up into the air, and for the first time, a burst of gravity distorted the space beneath the rings. The display case began to rattle, and soon, as Adam drew the rings back, it glided through the air, weightless.

For a few seconds, Adam was silent, and his eyes darted about. Shiv realized he was reading the notification offered by this new piece of equipment, and as the corner of his lip began to curve, he guessed that Adam might have found something he was interested in.

Equipment Obtained: [The Realmrunner's Keyhole]

Tier: Heroic

Condition: Perfect

Composition: Mithril; Focus Crystal; Dimensionality

Enchantments > Vector Accelerator; Spatial Pulse; Dimensionality Binder; Slipgate; Eldritch Infusion; Size-Adjustable; Binding; Master Self-Repair

Suddenly, Adam gestured upward, and one of the rings snapped away from the other. It hovered above him, and just then, a burst of Dimensionality splashed down. A second later, Adam zoomed upward through the ring on his vector wings before reappearing on the other side. However, the Adam that burst out from the other ring was entirely golden.

A pressure clenched Shiv, and he reflexively halted time. Kura and Gone activated their powers as well, flashing gold, just as a temporal replica of Adam slipped free from the other ring. He rose just above the display case and fired twice through the air, his Veilpiercers tearing open the space before him.

At the same time, the real Adam plunged back down through the ring he'd first passed through and fired two shots in return. Two different sets of Veilpiercers impacted, and bursts of black static opened up in the space above the group. It was like pockets of unstable Dimensionality pockmarking the flesh of existence.

"What just happened?" Helix asked, blinking. That was when Shiv realized: only he, Kura, and Gone had likely perceived the entire process. Adam was hyper-accelerated when he passed through the ring. However, he wasn't hyper-accelerated in speed alone. Instead, his personal chronology caused him to exist a full second ahead in the future. Effectively, he fired two shots ahead of time, and they only appeared when he returned.

Adam grinned up at the ring hovering overhead, and he passed through it once more. This time, when he crashed back down, the other ring remained dormant. It remained that way for a full ten seconds, until suddenly, Adam shot a Veilpiercer into the keyhole. Just then, Shiv felt a sudden temporal pressure squeeze him as he activated his temporal shell again.

This time, when Adam's Chronomantically-constructed self appeared, he tried aiming at his former self before another arrow smashed into the Veilpiercer he was preparing—an arrow that had just been fired a few seconds ago. Adam had effectively disarmed himself across time. It was confusing, even for Shiv.

"Oh, this is... useful," Adam breathed. With a gesture, both of the rings suddenly began shrinking before Shiv's eyes. The Dimensionality made them grow tighter, smaller, until they were the size of bracelets, and they slid along Adam's right arm before they locked themselves in place. They turned counter-clockwise to each other, each snapping over and over as if gears inside a clock. "You got something better than this, Enchanter? Because so far, I think we have a winner."

"Well, as you are walking the Path of an Archer, I think you made a wonderful choice as well," Merrielmel said. "Our other pieces... It's hard to hide some of these creations. A great many are restorations, and Vanguards fall in combat more often than—ah, I ramble. This is good. This is my recommendation!"

Concelhaunt frowned slightly. "Look, if you're going to take that thing... you should know about the risks."

Adam raised an eyebrow. He waved a hand for the goblin to elaborate.

Concelhaunt grimaced. "The risks that Merrielmel decided not to mention."

"Oh, Concelhaunt, what are you trying to do?" Merrielmel asked, his tone aghast.

"I'm trying to make sure that we don't get murdered by the Deathless here, in case his friend bites it."

"Bites it?" Shiv asked, his voice dropping to a dangerous growl, and two sets of fear chains hardened between him and the crafters.

"I mean that the Realmrunner doesn't like it when you steal his shit," Concelhaunt grunted. "He's been known to kill Pathbearers if they steal from him. And even though this thing was broken when we found it, if he ever comes across you..."

"If." Merrielmel stressed. "We don't know if he's still out there or even alive at all."

"But if he comes across you, good odds that this guy might just try to put you in a grave."

"He will, and it doesn't matter," Gone suddenly said. All eyes turned to the goblin. She was staring down at the ground, but she was scratching that scar on the back of her neck. Harder, faster, with blood starting to drip as her claws sank through the tissue. "He will hurt you because you're alive, because you're there, because he can hurt you. He doesn't care about anything but power, wealth, getting more. Take everything from him, take nothing. No difference. It doesn't matter. It doesn't."

Adam looked at Shiv and winced. He tilted his head at Gone and made a hugging gesture. Shiv considered the Gate Lord's request. They didn't know Gone very well, but still, she had been essential in their escape, and so far, he felt like she was among the more moral of the prisoners, especially compared to Kura.

"Maybe just a pat," Shiv whispered quietly. Adam nodded, and he walked over. He made sure to approach Gone from the front, and he awkwardly brushed her shoulder with his index finger. The goblin blinked, and she let out a quiet breath. She shuffled away thereafter, and Shiv didn't know if Adam's action imparted any comfort or simply made things weirder.

"Well, whatever the risk, I'm keeping this," Adam said, gesturing at the rings on his arm. "It's... very useful. I think I can attach one to you, Shiv. It will let me cross over and provide you with cover—or anyone else. Or I can use it for scouting."

Shiv grinned at Adam's growing excitement. "Glad to see you found something fun here. Not worried about the Realmrunner?"

Adam snorted. "No, I'm definitely not terrified that there might be another hyper-powerful Legendary-Tier Pathbearer who's coming to kill me. Truly, this is another good turn for my life."

"It's a bit like getting fucked in the ass by a large object, yeah?" Mortar said. The sudden vulgarness that came from the orc made both Shiv and Adam do a double-take. "You know, it makes sense if you think about it. When somebody shoves a cactus up your ass, it's already agonizing and painful. More importantly, it tears your hole open. Now, if they try to fuck you with a knife afterward, it still hurts, but it's likely too wide for the knife to really hurt you. You understand?"

Shiv didn't have the words for a while.

Adam did. "What?"

Shiv shivered. He really didn't like imagining any of that, especially not happening to himself. "You could have come up with any other analogy."

"He really could have," Whisper muttered under his breath.

Mortar grunted. "Yeah, but it makes less of an impact, huh? Kind of like a cactus."

"Alright!" Adam said loudly, turning away. "We got our reward. I think we should move on now before Mortar here says anything else that will make me side-eye the next plant I see."

Chapter 206 (III) Academy [IV]

With that done, they returned to the crafting chamber to apply the final finishing touches to Shiv's mask. With the Mind Shield enchantment gone and an opportunity to gain five Adept Skills or a single Master Skill, Shiv went for the former. On top of that, however, he requested a Stealth-based enchantment as well.

He had a set of boots right now that didn't fit so well with his Voidmantid armor, especially since he was wearing the boots inside the armor. His boots allowed him to dive into darkness or to blink back to a patch of shade he last resided in. But he wasn't always going to have darkness.

When his Magebreaker still worked, it offered him illusory capabilities, the potential to project a light-forged manifestation of himself as a decoy or to go Chameleon. That was what he was looking for.

"Chameleon, you say?" Concelhaunt grunted. He used his chassis to scratch his chin, and beside him, Merriemmel did the same thing, but with his own hand. As they conferred with each other briefly, communicating primarily through a set of eyebrow wiggles and incoherent grunts, they finally settled upon a specific mana core that radiated with a bright white glow. It gave off the faint hint of Pyromancy from the heat that spilled forth, but there was also something more, something heavy. There was a weight to this enchantment.

"This," Concelhaunt said, "is the Illusory Decoy mana enchantment." He waved at the crystal, and Shiv saw how it resembled a hardened piece of stone. But as he looked at it, he saw something else. The stone began to shift, and it started to look like him, a smaller version of him, but definitely him.

"Why is it doing that?" Shiv asked.

"Because if you manage to find an object you like, you can project a beam of light over it. It will scan it, and it will forge an illusory decoy over you."

"So," Shiv said, "it will let me turn into something else?"

"No, not really. You won't gain the mass or all the other properties. You'll just have a light decoy over you. It's pretty useful, but if you're going to run into someone with some advanced scanning capabilities..." The goblin winced. "The simple problem is that this is probably the best we can do with the little bit of mana capacity the item still has. Perfect Semblance is a real hog. But if you ask me, that's the real stealth, you know? Looking like you belong in a place. That allows you to slip by unnoticed."

He was right, in a word, but Shiv wanted as many options as possible. "Well, got nothing else that's better than that?" he asked.

Concelhaunt sighed. "We could just give you flat invisibility, but it's going to be lesser invisibility. Not enough mana space."

"How bad is lesser?" Shiv asked.

"Well, you'll be invisible, but you're going to be giving off a lot of distortions. It'll be like a small vortex hovering in the air around you."

So not that invisible at all. Shiv considered that and decided against it. He still had his Silhouette skill he could draw on, even though he had advanced his stealth to Creeping Void. Creeping Void wasn't good for being a student in the Academy, especially since it was a Master-Tier Skill, and poor, dead Marcus only had an Adept-Tier Toughness skill. "Alright," Shiv said. "Guess that's the best we can do."

"Wait," a voice interrupted them. Can Hu staggered forward. Its legs were still damaged, but it managed to make its approach all the same. "I would like to assist," Can Hu said. "I have knowledge of this equipment." The Penitent paused, and its optics narrowed to pinpricks. "And I don't trust you."

"Me?" Merrielmel said, pointing at his face with his mouth open.

"Means the both of us," Concelhaunt clarified. "Listen, we're—"

"It takes little mana capacity to infuse a Tracker Enchantment into a piece of equipment," Can Hu continued. "I will make certain that you do not find yourself inspired by such ideas."

The crafters seemed hesitant, but Shiv was touched. He reached out and slapped the penitent over the back, and then dove to catch Can Hu before it could topple over. "Shit. Sorry, Can Hu."

"It is alright, Pathbearer. My legs will be rebuilt shortly. Now, let us bring this restoration to a close."

The mask went back into the pool of mercury once more, as did several mana cores and an ingot of adamantine. The forging took place upon the anvil carried on the back of Concelhaunt's chassis. It glowed with a series of gleaming patterns and formed a column that connected to the ceiling. When they pulled the mask free from the mercury minutes later, it glistened with a new appearance: the texture of adamantine mingled with focus crystal and mithril. As it was placed upon the anvil, it was secured by a heavy weight. It gave a creaking noise, and Shiv worried that it might break in half again.

His worry became utter disbelief as Concelhaunt proceeded to throw blow after blow upon its surface, using his fist-sized hammer. Bursts of mana filled the air, and just beside him, the enchanter wove spell after spell, conducting the twisting patterns that sprouted free from the anvil back into the mask.

Shiv realized what they were doing. They were weaving the enchantments deeper into the structure of the material. After what felt like an hour, the lights faded, and steam rose from the completed mask.

"That's done," Concelhaunt finally declared, letting out a breath. "Heroic equipment really takes it out of you."

Shiv stood over the mask for a moment and looked down. It felt foreign to him. He was more used to seeing his translucent reflection upon a sheen of bronze. Now, he couldn't see himself at all. It wasn't reflective anymore, but it was sturdier, heartier. As he touched it, the notification loaded.

Equipment Obtained: [Mask of the Stolen Path]

Tier: Heroic

Condition: Perfect

Composition: Mithril; Adamantine

Enchantments > Perfect Semblance; Augmented Adept-Skill Thief (0/5); Illusory Decoy; Binding; Self-Mending

"No Tracking enchantment," Can Hu reported.

"Thanks," Shiv replied. "Good job. Thanks for keeping an eye out for me."

"It is what we are supposed to do, Pathbearer."

As Shiv took the mask in both hands, he drew in a breath before trying to put it on. He only got halfway before he lowered the mask again. His eyes fell upon the body of Marcus Unblood, and he let out a sigh.

"Is something wrong?" Tequila asked. He looked between Shiv and the corpse. "You regret not picking the blonde one, the one with the large flaps on her chest?"

"Breasts," Helix chided with annoyance. "They're called breasts."

"I'm gonna call them flaps. I think they're ugly."

Helix clenched his teeth and began muttering prayers to the Challenger so that Tequila might suffer a particularly undignified death during his next reincarnation. Shiv ignored the orcs and their shenanigans as he looked down upon the dead boy.

"Think we should say something," Shiv muttered to himself. After his earlier thoughts about how not everyone was like him, and how not even being a martial Pathbearer could allow one to preserve their own life, he felt a strange sense of sympathy for the dead student-to-be. He was like him: another orphan, first considered a cripple, talented in some ways and utterly worthless in others.

But Marcus had strived, and Marcus had gained a chance at a better life, despite all the odds stacked against him. And it was a life he wouldn't get to live. But in his stead, Shiv would get to experience everything he should have at Phoenix Academy. There was something deeply wrong about that.

The Deathless stood over the corpse and let out a breath. "Alright, so, hi Marcus. I don't know if you can hear me. I don't know if there's anything after. I don't know a lot of things. I don't really even know you either, but this is the best I can do. I wish I'd gotten to know you. I wish you'd gotten to experience the Academy. I wish you could have fixed whatever sickness was bothering you. I wish you could have been the Pathbearer you wanted to be."

"Oh, please, Insul, what are you doing?" Helix complained. He came to a stop just beside Shiv and shook his head. "This... this is meaningless. He's already..." He was silenced by a glare from Shiv.

"It's not meaningless," Shiv said. "It's not meaningless, because I decided it's not. You understand that, right?" Here was Shiv teaching a lesson to Helix, a lesson the orc should have known well: dominance. Now, sentimentality was justified, for to slight it would incur Shiv's wrath, and Shiv was feeling particularly wrathful for this interruption.

Helix coughed. "I, yes, of course. I have overstepped."

"Yeah, you sure as shit fucking did," Shiv said, voice low. "Yeah, where the hell was I? So, uh, fuck. Godsdamn it, Helix." Shiv felt a snarl of anger rising in the back of his throat, and part of him wanted to

rip the orc in half and pound the corpse until it was nothing but bloodied paste. But he controlled himself.

He still needed a Biomancy tutor. More importantly, blind rage was not going to be his way. Now, Shiv was going to be very calculated and very brutal when it came to his rages. Anger was a valuable resource, and he wasn't going to waste it. That being said, he was going to use Dread-Tainted to teach a lesson.

"Alright, here's a reminder." Shiv reached out and gripped Helix by the collar of his silken coat. Immediately, the fear chain between him and the orc intensified and grew exponentially harder as Helix gasped. He started experiencing everything Daughter did as Shiv applied Dread-Tainted to his Leviathan of the Shapeless Tide skill.

"I—uh..." Helix blinked, trying to shake himself free from the terror-drenched stupor Shiv inflicted upon him. He kept pawing at one section of his face. It was the part of Daughter's skull that Shiv had driven his hand through.

"This might not be for Marcus. He might not hear this at all," Shiv said to the rest of the room, especially the orcs. "But it's still for me. I don't want to be like Udrael. I don't want to be like Veronica Chandler or the other Avatars and Ascendants. And I don't want to be like you."

He nearly shouted that final line to impress upon the orcs that he was their Insul, but he wasn't one of them. "I want people to matter. I want life to matter. And I will shed blood for it to matter. My identity will not... eh... Will not..."

"Will not exist on a foundation of softness?" Adam suggested.

"Right, softness," Shiv continued. "It's going to be strong, and it's going to be brutal. And I will fight to see the world I want to be made true. You got an itch? Well, so do I. But it's a different kind of itch. And you respect that. And you respect this boy here. He died for something. Because I said so."

With that, some of the orcs flashed bright. Patches of glass grew along their bodies, and Helix suffered the most of all. His chest was gleaming underneath his silken coat, and Shiv fought the urge to strike him, to cement his point with a death. Instead, however, the orcs bowed their heads, and a few of them chuckled. They were pleased. Orcs didn't just like dominating others; they liked playing the game, and losing brought them pleasure. After all, what was the point of struggle if there was no tension?

Shiv swallowed what remained of his rage. He looked down at Marcus and sighed. "I don't remember where I left off. But yeah, I wish things were better. I wish the world was better. I'm gonna try to make it better. I probably would have cooked for you if we met. I might have liked you too. So, sorry I'm gonna burn your body now."

As he finished, a brief silence followed. Shiv looked at the other people in the room. Kura was utterly uninterested, staring blankly in their general direction. Five looked away when Shiv tried to meet his gaze and started lightly whistling a tune. Candles was still snoring off by the side. Can Hu gave him a slow thumbs-up, and Gone was still scratching at her brand. Adam stepped forward, however, with Irons behind him.

"It's been a while since I offered a eulogy," Adam said. "But let's see if I can remember how it goes." The Gate Lord cleared his throat, closed his eyes, and drew in a breath. "Oh, wick that never got to be flame, I give upon you my lament. Oh, tale unsung and life unlived, I give to you my sorrow, my regret, and my fondest hopes that your next life may rise to greater heights than this one, cut short of the precipice. Though you may have fallen in despair, though you might have only known loneliness and darkness as companions in those final moments, we stand here now. We witness you. We recognize you, a wick that never got to be flame, and in recognition understand that what didn't burn in you will burn in us evermore. Through us may your story continue, and through us may you find that light in the next world to come."

"Praise be the Struggler," Irons finished for Adam.

"Praise be the Struggler," Adam echoed.

Shiv blinked. "That was, uh..."

"That was kind of beautiful," Mortar said. Now it was Shiv's turn to be surprised.

"What?" Mortar replied. "It is beautiful."

"It was," Whisper agreed. "A bit sentimental, but quite poignant."

"I mean, what was that, though? That sounded like you did that before," Shiv said.

"Yes, it's the Eulogy of the Struggler," Adam said, looking to Irons. "Captain Irons taught it to us. It's a prayer some ancients used to offer to the System. But as people's view of the System changed, and they realized it doesn't care, so too did the eulogy change over the years, becoming a set of rites offered between friends and even enemies on the battlefield. For everyone understands another Pathbearer to some extent, for all must struggle in a world unkind, driven only by the rite of might, the rite of blood."

"Rite of might," Shiv said to himself. He looked down at Marcus's face and tried his best to remember it as he saw it now. He told himself that some people never had a chance. With that came an understanding. "Adam, I was pretty lucky, wasn't I, despite everything?"

Philosophy 30 > 32

The Gate Lord blinked and considered Shiv's statement. "Maybe," Adam said. "Maybe we all are. Maybe we still are. We're still alive, and we're still with each other."

"Still alive, still together," Shiv said. There was a lot to be thankful for and a lot to feel burdened by. Despite everything Shiv had learned about his parentage, about his past, about what might loom in the future, he felt lucky. There was a great deal of good alongside the bad. He never regretted becoming a Pathbearer. He loved it. He loved it still.

Even if his immortality was a thing born at Udrael's hands, it was his Path, and he was going to walk it to its end, whatever that may be. He was going to use it to make this world a better place as much as he could. He wanted to cook more for people, and he wanted to hurt less. Fighting, it was still enjoyable. Destruction and power, it was still addicting.

But death...

Shiv had seen so much death. He was sick of seeing people die for the stupidest things. He was tired of murdering the weak and foolish. All those lives lost, for what? Just because some people wanted to maintain their own interests? More often than not, it was because those people were fragile on the inside. They lied to themselves. They were too weak, and so other people had to die for them, for meaningless causes fought by meaningless people.

Shiv didn't want to be meaningless. He didn't want anyone to be meaningless. He despised the System more than ever as he stood here and hardened himself for what he was about to do. He placed his mask on his face then, and he gave Marcus his final farewell. "Goodbye, Marcus. I'm gonna be taking what's left of your life now. Hopefully, you won't be too embarrassed by what I do."

"Hopefully you'll be able to maintain this cover for longer than two hours," Adam added.

"Yeah," Shiv replied. "Hopefully."

As he focused on Marcus, his body began to burn. As the flesh caught on fire, as his soul kindled, it rushed into Shiv's mask as a surging blaze. This time, he felt the full weight of Marcus's soul briefly imprint on him, and there were several skills for him to pick from.

Just then, Marcus's full set of skills loaded before him, and the Deathless took in the finer details of his Perfect Semblance's new soul. He chose everything that Marcus was supposedly good at: Fieldcraft, Survival, Surgery, Practical Metabiology.

Shiv

Name: Tanner "Shiv" Lowe

Age: 18

Race: Human

Path:

Deathless

Feats [4/5]:

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

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

Causal Scargiver (Unique) - Causes the injuries inflicted by the Pathbearer to be scarred upon their enemy across time and causality.

Dread-Tainted (Legendary) - The Pathbearer has left a divine being scared with terror. Gods have fled your presence. You are now a source of absolute fear. Allows the Pathbearer to lace their skills with the divine entity's lingering terror.

Skills:

Marksmanship (Common) > 13

Baking (Common) 9

Barter (Common) > 10

Alchemy (Common) 2

Engineering 1 (Common)

Lance Proficiency (Common) 1

Acting (Common) 16

Riding Proficiency (Common) 1

Leadership (Common) 6

Rhetoric (Common) 1

Memorization (Common) 14

Physics (Common) 2

Dodge (Initiate) 32

Philosophy (Initiate) 30

Deception (Initiate) 37

Multi-Tasking (Initiate) 38

Pyromancy (Initiate) 18

Spear Proficiency (Initiate) 11

Practical Metabiology (Initiate) 43

Psychomancy (Initiate) 28

Hydromancy (Initiate) 15

Whip Proficiency (Initiate) 13

Analyze 1 (Initiate)

Portomancy (Initiate) 6

Frictionless Vector (Adept) 88

Deepest Edge (Adept) 66

Berserk (Adept) 21

Golemancy 1 (Adept) 26

Farsight 51 (Adept) 74

The Chef Unwavering (Master) 64

Strider of the Unbending Path (Master) 160

The Creeping Void (Master) 115

Plaguefueled 58 (Master) 79

Shape of Monstrosity (Master) 139

Psycho-Cartography (Master) 93

Sticks and Stones (Master) 58

Inertial Overdrive (Heroic) 170

Aegis of Assimilation (Heroic) 116

Pillar of Orichalcum (Heroic) 255

Vitality Drain (Legendary) 122

Leviathan of the Shapeless Tides (Legendary) 502

Vitaemancy (Unique) 116

Non-Sequitur (Unique) 104

Blessings:

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

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

Curses:

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

Hands of the Bloodied - Anything you craft and create will be stained with blood and degrade at an increased pace.

Rituals

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

Name: Marcus Unblood

Age: 17

Race: Human

Path: Healer

Skills:

Swimming (Common) 19

Animal Handling (Common) 18

Cooking (Common) 15

Woodcarving (Common) 11

First Aid (Initiate) 40

Stealth (Initiate) 39

Observation (Initiate) 36

Tracking (Initiate) 35

Endurance (Initiate) 32

Skinning (Initiate) 28

Foraging (Initiate) 25

Climbing (Initiate) 21

Survival (Initiate) 49

Fieldcraft (Initiate) 48

Surgery (Initiate) 47

Practical Metabiology (Initiate) 45

Silent Movement (Initiate) 42

Knife Proficiency (Initiate) 41

Trap Making (Initiate) 38

Camouflage (Initiate) 37

Archery Proficiency (Initiate) 33

Toxin Resistance (Initiate) 29

Applied Botany (Initiate) 26

Tanning (Initiate) 22

Ironhide (Adept) 51

Curses:

Mana-Warped - Your connection to mana is fundamentally broken. Your corrupted ambient mana flow has permanently damaged your body.

Fleshwithered - Your cellular regeneration is corrupted. Wounds heal into thick, knotted scar tissue that restricts movement and deadens nerves. Your organs and muscles will constantly wither. Over time,

patches of your skin lose vitality, becoming grey, numb, and brittle. Constant medical intervention is required to prevent creeping necrosis.

It shamed Shiv a bit that Marcus was ahead of him in Practical Metabiology, but he also noted how the unblooded boy's highest skill was Iron Hide, a Toughness skill. That wouldn't be hard for Shiv to fake at all, so he let it go. Just then, Shiv wondered if he had managed to extract one of those skills from Marcus's body, if he could bring him back to life. Part of him wanted to try, but as Marcus settled into his mask and turned to nothing but ash, Shiv let it go as he selected the Adept-Tier Skills he needed. Afterwards, he let Marcus remain at peace.

Adept-Skill Thief (5/5)

Survival (Initiate) 49

Fieldcraft (Initiate) 48

Surgery (Initiate) 47

First Aid (Initiate) 40

Tracking (Initiate) 35

Perhaps that was the one advantage Marcus had over Shiv: peace.

No one would bother him again. He would never struggle, and he would never face any pain, unless another life awaited those who died or an imperfect afterlife existed. Shiv, on the other hand, was probably going to experience a great deal of torment.

He let out a low breath. Then so be it. That was what it meant to be a Pathbearer. That's what it took to exact his revenge on the world itself. Because that's what Shiv ultimately hated: the world, the weakness in people, and the darkness it drove people to, incentivized by the cruel hand of the System.

As the flames settled around Shiv, his outer shell was reforged. He looked down at his arms and hands and found himself wearing... well, nothing. Marcus was dead, covered by a sheet and nothing more. The Deathless grunted as he looked down. "Now this is felling awkward," Shiv muttered to himself. As he looked between his legs, he saw another reason why he felt bad for Marcus. The fucking curse was a nightmare down there. It was withered. Marcus's voice was also hoarse and weak—vocal cords atrophied. He looked to Merrielmel and Concelhaunt. "Got another favor to ask. You guys got any leftover clothes here, student-sized?"

As it turned out, they did have extra uniforms. In fact, they had a few thousand extra uniforms, all packaged in a set of dusty crates. They were old uniforms from decades past, but they were still more than wearable. Shiv found a Phoenix Academy ensemble and dressed himself. All students received a canvas shirt on the inside, silk leggings, and cotton socks. Wrapped over those items was a padded utility vest that was colored black and gold. It had several pouches for potions, elixirs, and other gadgets, along with a belt meant for a few knives on the side, which Shiv approved of. Then there were the leather pants, griffin hide by the feel of it. The boots were likely made from an ogre's flesh, if Helix was correct.

And finally, there was the coat. It was more cape than coat in some ways, with how the back flapped freely. Though the arms and the fabric that cascaded down the sides of Shiv's body were a bright blue, denoting him as a first-year, his back was a stripe of darkness, emblazoned with a golden creature: the symbol of Phoenix Academy.

The blazing bird held a great blade between its beak and clutched a quill between its talons. Around it, there was a faint glow, an illusory enchantment that made the symbol seem as if it were actually on fire. If one focused for long, they could also hear the phoenix screech, but since Shiv had an actual encounter with a genuine phoenix, he knew that was the call of a hawk instead.

To be fair, if a normal person heard a phoenix's screech, their eardrums would likely burst, and their insides would probably combust as well. Phoenixes were not docile creatures, and they very much did not appreciate being disturbed.

"Alright," Shiv said, "how do I look?"

"Well, the uniform looks quite nice," Adam replied, staring him up and down. "A bit old and a bit worn in a few places, but quite nice. The academy has always cared for the quality of its fabrics. But you yourself..." Adam winced slightly. "I don't know how to say this without speaking ill of the dead, but, well, Marcus is a bit deformed around the torso, but not so much the arms. It's very evident even when you're wearing clothes. You're, uh..."

"I'm gonna run into some assholes?" Shiv ventured.

"You might," Adam replied. "More like snide remarks than anything. The rules are that you always have to wear your overcoat when on academy grounds. It's recommended that you keep the pants and vest on as well, but aside from that, you can wear anything you want on the inside: armor, robes, anything. The overcoat is self-repairing, and it usually comes with... Huh... Right. No lapel yet."

"Lapel?" Shiv asked.

"It's how the university sends you notifications. It's a Divination construct," Adam explained. "Usually, the lapel is a small mithril pin. It goes on your overcoat's collar; there, someone can scan it using their Analyze skill to see which year you're in, what classification or program you belong to, and which dorm you reside in."

"And I'm guessing poor Marcus didn't get a lapel because he's dead," Shiv guessed.

"Correct," Irons said. "He would need to be formally registered and scanned before he can get a lapel. It requires a one-to-one connection with his soul, after all." That made Shiv a little nervous. "So, I hope your Perfect Semblance works well," Irons grunted. "Otherwise, there will be questions when we resolve your registration."

"We?" Shiv asked.

"You're going to need an alibi and a justifiable story as to why you're not dead, won't you?" Irons asked.

Shiv grunted. "Got any ideas about how I came back from the dead?"

The Captain paused, and then he smirked slightly. "A few. Head trauma is a funny thing. As are certain toxins." He shot Helix a look. "Orc, can you induce a state of toxicity?"

"Please," the orc Biomancer humphed. "There is little I cannot do to the body. He will be in whatever state I desire."

"Good," Irons said. "Because recovering from a deep poison that stopped the heart is rare, but it has happened before. To make this seem proper, though, we need you to wake up where Marcus was. Which means you're taking those clothes off again soon."

Shiv blinked. "Oh. We're doing a morgue-awakening-thing."

Irons nodded. "Indeed."

"This might be the most demented admissions scheme ever concocted," Adam muttered in disbelief.

Chapter 207 (I) Admission [I]

Phoenix Academy is not the only academy on Integrated Earth. It is also not the greatest academy, despite how often I boast of its great achievements and magnificent alumni.

If you seek the oldest academy on Earth, then you will be heading far east, to Moonwall. You will ascend the Yun Wei Mountain there, and only if you pass a final examination administered by the so-called spirits which guard the place can you enter those grand and hallowed walls. I've seen the grounds, and I can attest that they are not boasting. Those walls are grand, and a part of the academy does reside at the center of our shattered moon. How, you might ask? Well, I cannot say. The secrets lay with Moonwall and Moonwall alone.

If you wish to be honed in the heat of battle, you should go to Dragonrest. There you will learn to be a Pathbearer the iron way, and there your classmates may well be beyond your expectations, for within the bleached bones of Dragonrest, monstrous Pathbearers strive to better themselves on a journey towards higher sapience, while individuals gain Blessings, strike pacts, and find strength beyond what mere mortals can offer.

The Horde Lord of Dragonrest, Nalkanor, might well be among the oldest Pathbearers on our world. Though long she has slumbered, she awoke recently after our newest incursion, and now serves as both governor and guardian to her personal academy and her own continent of Atlantis. I've faced her a few times in battle, and I will not mince words. Atlantis and the Republic have always been at war, but it is important to acknowledge the power of your enemy just as much as the feelings of your kin.

Then far south, there is Sorrowash, School of Sacrifice and Sacrilege, where mysteries and secrets are passed down from master to disciple. Sorrowash is selective, but it is also the place to go if you seek a new future, and your past is far too scarred to bear. For there resides one of the great ways to the Fairwoods, and the instructors and loremasters there are of the Eternal Lines of the Fairest. Who else could defy the rule of the Scarred Ones, and who else could force such an accord of the Feathered Wyrms?

Now, you may well think, why has this headmaster, loyal subject to the Republic, boasted so much of these other schools? Does he doubt his own institution? No. It is because I hold no doubt in my Phoenix Academy that I laud the others. For Phoenix Academy offers you breadth. You can become anyone here, and more importantly, you will not be burdened by worries aside from furthering yourself and deepening your knowledge.

All these other academies and institutions are perilous affairs. They are places of intrigue and treachery as much as they are sources of wealth and good power, and so, you enter them at your own peril. Contrarily, should you fail to enter Phoenix Academy, you are in peril. For here we forge warriors and scholars both.

For here we do not cast you to the wolves, but make you into the hunters who will drive the beasts from the woods.

-Legend-Headmaster Hades Hymn

Shiv's time as a Pathbearer was more than tumultuous. For the past few months, his life could best be characterized as an endless stream of extreme fights punctuated by deaths, other strange and absurd encounters, with only a few moments of tranquility, cooking, and company in between. As such, trying to sneak into a morgue seemed like just another misadventure for him.

On the other hand, sneaking into a morgue was less audacious and more outright sacrilegious in certain ways, especially since he was stealing the very soul essence of another person to see this deception through. In the end, this was the best option he had. He didn't have months to wait for someone else to create a false shell and another semblance for him, not when he already had a mask capable of doing such a thing.

He also couldn't afford the System giving him away every time someone laid eyes on him. It placed a target on his head anywhere he went, and Shiv couldn't afford that. Not if he wanted to operate in the capital and find a way out in time. Not if he wanted to aid Irons in figuring out where his student went or what Daughter had done to the poor girl.

He needed that flexibility while Adam and the others tried to come up with alternative strategies to find a way out of the Ascendants' quarantine.

As such, only a few people accompanied Shiv on this initial expedition. Whisper and Tequila wished to experience school life alongside their Insul after giving oaths that they would not vanish any students, and Helix joined them as well. Mortar, in a moment of genuine honesty, decided to remain because: "they're just too enticingly vulnerable."

Grim, but honest. As much as I can ask for from an orc.

Also within Shiv's Forest of Alloy was Radio, hidden deep and making nary a sound. A good thing too, as Shiv couldn't afford to have the Educator know about its existence.

The Educator, meanwhile, decided to reside in the hidden Coliseum, and that's where most of the prisoners, orcs, Adam, and Can Hu decided to stay. The Forgotten Ascendant wished to interrogate the two crafters about the slipgate they were working on, and Can Hu wanted to assist them. Shiv guessed that the Penitent also had another thing in mind. When Can Hu intervened earlier, it made sure that the crafters weren't infusing any hidden enchantments to subvert Shiv.

Now, it was likely trying to figure out what the crafters were building, perhaps so it could replicate it in time. Can Hu wasn't a Heroic-Tier Pathbearer in terms of crafting without the unique skill offered by Gate Piety, but it was still knowledgeable enough that it might be able to gain some useful insight through this participation.

Adam himself was burdened. He wanted to go along with Shiv, but he also wished to keep an eye on the Educator—not only her, but also Merriemmel and Concelhaunt as well. At the same time, there were things he needed to discuss with Irons. They had a great deal to catch up on, and it was better that Adam tried to procure more of the man's trust than Shiv. Irons pledged to meet Shiv soon after things were underway, and the morgue sent for a representative from the academy. Hence, the Deathless prepared to disembark from the buried coliseum to steal a spot meant for a corpse.

As the dimensional rift opened before him, allowing him to cross over back into the maze, Adam called out to him at the last moment. "Shiv," Adam said, and proceeded to project one of the keyhole rings locked over his arm like a bracelet. It slid over Shiv's arm, and the Deathless looked down in surprise.

"That's me being in two places at once, right?" Adam said. "Just so I can keep an eye on you. If you need to take it off when you get put in the morgue, just place it in your cape."

Shiv nodded. "Probably not a bad idea at all," he mumbled.

Getting dressed while using Perfect Semblance was a bit awkward. It required him to throw on articles of clothing while he was still wearing his Voidmantid armor. But though it proved to be a snug fit, the Perfect Semblance made it seem like Marcus was the one that was dressed. Ultimately, this had the benefit of ensuring Shiv didn't need to be unarmed when he went into the morgue. No, he just needed to remove the school uniform he currently had on and throw Adam's bracelet into his cape later.

"I'll keep an eye on you through the bracelet," Adam added. He promptly commanded the other dimensional ring to hover over his hand, and as it did, a pulse of static erupted from it. At the same time, another pulse wrapped over Shiv's hand, and Adam jabbed a finger through. A chronokinetic jab thudded off the inside of Shiv's forearm.

"Seems kind of voyeuristic," Shiv said, then he caught himself.

"Oh, so nothing's changed for you, huh?" The Gate Lord let out a half-hearted scoff. "I'm taking that back when you no longer need it, and I'm definitely taking it away from you once we find Uva again."

"Well, if you forget, I'm chucking it back at you. None of us wants to do that again. One time was enough."

Adam rolled his eyes. "Yes, but I'm sure you'll find a way to traumatize poor Valor somehow." Shiv clenched his teeth to hide a wince. "You know I'm right," Adam continued.

The Deathless retreated before he had to engage with his friend's argument. Psycho-Cartography told him that his honor could only be defended upon more favorable theses, and exposing Valor to private moments wasn't one.

As he ventured forth out of the maze, he heard footsteps following close behind. He turned, expecting to find Adam, leering at him, trying to take a final shot. "Listen, I didn't really want to..." He trailed off as he found himself staring at the Educator. The woman once known as Maia folded her arms and stared at him with a tense expression. Her face was creased as she licked her lips.

"I suppose you do not trust me enough to let me embark alongside you."

Shiv didn't see the point in lying. "No, not really, Educator."

She frowned. "Not taunting me with Maia anymore?"

"Look, I don't like you, but I don't see a point in being a dick. We're going to be like adults, right? That's our agreement."

Something almost akin to a scoff and a chuckle escaped from her. "Fine. The Neath has its ways. The Dragon Brokers have operated under the Ascendants' noses for years. They have their relics and powers as well. More importantly, the Ascendants like to use them against each other. They will be able to get you to the morgue. I understand that you are still responsible for yourself first and foremost, and I cannot stress enough how perilous having your identity compromised will be."

"You don't need to," Shiv said. He thought back to his previous stints as a spy, and it demoralized him a bit. At least now he had some experience. More importantly, he was operating on far more favorable conditions. Marcus Unblood was not particularly known in the capital, and more importantly, he was a nobody, not particularly cared for, with little attention directed at him. At most, Shiv expected some surprise from the other survivors in Marcus's expedition, but that was all. Shiv could deal with surprise; he had been dealing with constant surprises all this time.

"Do not allow yourself to be compromised," the Educator stressed again. "We cannot afford your recapture, and that bitch Chandler will not make the same mistake twice."

Oh, if only you knew she was half the reason I got out. The Deathless looked past her shoulder and gazed upon the temporal echo he had left within the crafting chamber. "If things go wrong, I'll be sure to dip out. I already have a time anchor set up for a retreat."

"So if you suspect anything, if you feel even a slight bit of suspicion, it's best to cut your losses," the Educator said. "That mask of yours can steal multiple identities. Don't be afraid to burn one."

"I'm not," Shiv replied, suddenly aware of how worried she was. A beat of silence followed. "How important am I to Udraal's plan?" he asked on a gamble.

She fell quiet then, and the silence that clung to her was oppressive and hesitant. It was immediately evident that though she was an Ascendant, she didn't hold the power in the relationship. After all, she was performing the labor, operating for her own interest but also for Udraal's as well.

"He's always watching," she said, not directly answering his question. He caught her reaching for her tome reflexively before she pulled her hand back. "Understand that everything you do will be known to him in time, and he will be scheming. He's always scheming, so mind how you step."

"Yeah," Shiv said, "you too. We're just things to him, you and I, just like we're things to each other. But I think we can treat each other better than he treats us." That word left him on a gamble. Shiv wasn't sure how much loyalty she had to Udraal, but when she tightened her jaw slightly, his intuition bloomed. He had taken a shot in the dark, and it might just have landed.

"For me to be free, I need him. I need what he knows. I need to be reborn, whole this time, unchained from my mistake." She sounded ashamed of that admission, ashamed that he knew this much about her at all.

Instead of mocking her weakness, Shiv just nodded. "Yeah, and I can abide by that. What I can't abide by is if you or Udraal hurt anyone I care about, or if you end up hurting a lot of innocent people. That's my line, anyway."

The Educator looked away from him then, but with the way her gaze fell, Shiv thought he gleaned another emotion from her, and it was one of reminiscence and shame. "It doesn't last, you know."

"What?" Shiv asked, trying to figure out the meaning behind her words.

"The morality, the urge to care, the will to fight for those weaker than you. It doesn't last. You lose it. The lucky ones never had it to begin with, but in time, your heart will be less of itself." The way she spoke sounded less like a portended promise and more like a lamenting confession.

Everything hardened inside Shiv, and he decided to take another swing. "You lost a lot of people, didn't you?"

The Educator swallowed then, and a part of her cheek turned to glass. She turned, unwilling to engage with him anymore, and as she made her retreat back into the crafting chamber, Shiv realized he was developing an unhealthy sense of empathy toward the Educator.

He still didn't much like her. He didn't much understand her, either. But he thought about who he might be if Adam died, if Uva died, if Valor died, if everyone he cared about right now was taken. He wouldn't break, at least not for long—his mind would not allow for it—but he would probably come out of it less in a great many ways.

It was hard to be kind when you were raw with sorrow.

Shiv shook those thoughts away as he left the maze. As soon as he slipped out into the arena proper, he found the liaison from earlier waiting for him. There the man stood, rubbing at his luxurious doublet with a piece of cloth. He noticed Shiv approaching and aimed his most refined smile at the Deathless.

"Well, I see our crafters are as efficient as always. An item with Perfect Semblance. That's a rare reward indeed."

Shiv grunted. He didn't much want to speak with the liaison. The less the Dragon Brokers knew about him, the less they could use against him. "So, are we going?" Shiv said. "Using the sewers again or something?"

"The waterways, yes," the liaison said. "But before that, I would like to introduce you to one of my colleagues."

"Yeah, look, whatever you have to sell..."

The liaison held out a hand, bidding Shiv to stop speaking. "It's not a thing of commerce. It's more like a binding arrangement. Think of him as your personal liaison, for we all need to ensure our interests are fulfilled, don't we?"

Shiv frowned underneath his mask; his perfect semblance replicated the expression. "So are you sending one of you guys to shadow me, to follow me around?"

"No, it's more like I'm shackling them to you." The Liaison looked up, and his features turned vicious. "Cullyweir!" his voice echoed, and it traveled further than Shiv expected. The air around him reverberated, and it sounded like the call was traveling down a distant tunnel, but the maze wasn't nearly long enough for that, and the echo just kept on going.

All of a sudden, something appeared right next to the liaison.

Chapter 207 (II) Admission [I]

Shiv moved. He exploded toward the threat in a blur of violence. The bladed rim of his legendary frying pan came an inch away from beheading the intruder.

"Stop!" the liaison called aloud.

Shiv barely caught himself in time, and he scowled at the man. "Listen, if you're gonna summon... whatever the hells this is, you need to give me a warning. Okay, now what in the Broken Moon am I looking at?"

The creature the liaison had summoned was unlike anything Shiv had ever seen. For one, they were tall, taller than Shiv by two heads, yet they were also far too thin. So thin, in fact, that Shiv had no idea where their organs would go in their reed-thin body. They were practically a walking stick figure. A cloak of flowers and leaves swayed behind them, and wonderful fragrances slid into Shiv's nostrils. The delightful flavor of roses crawled down the Deathless's throat, and for a moment, he wondered if he was being poisoned. When nothing happened, his paranoia lessened, but his frying pan remained in line with the newcomer's neck.

The first thing that Shiv noted about the strange entity's head was how long its ears were, pointed a near-meter into the air. Something about that made Shiv think of the elves, but the rigidity and sharpness of the creature's auditory organs seemed to be on another level of extreme. Its nose was fair, its skin was smooth and pristine, without any imperfections. Its eyes were also too wide and devoid of any irises; they were like two pools of white upon a face of soft pink. The entity's skin color also changed as it gazed at Shiv. Instead of betraying any hint of fear or anger in its body language, it seemed tired, exhausted, almost, and faintly Shiv heard a song ringing forth from the creature. It sounded like bells jingling over the horizon, like a rush of leaves tumbling through a grand forest.

"I am Cullyweir," the entity said, its soft, slightly masculine voice sounding without any hint of enthusiasm. In fact, it seemed sapped of all will and on the verge of utter listlessness. "Exile of the Fairwoods. I have given my name. I have been called. I must answer—and all that other drivel..."

Each statement hit Shiv like there was actual weight behind them. Why that was, Shiv didn't know, but an unsettling feeling sheathed itself in his gut, and instinctively he knew. He knew this creature shouldn't be like this. It also shouldn't be here. It felt dimmed by this world, dimmed by this reality, and the melody spilling out of it was muted as well, oppressed by a realm that wasn't meant to stomach such songs.

"Cullyweir," the liaison repeated. "Say his name, and he will come to you, carried by wind and fragrance. He will come to you, and he will be able to service you for whatever your needs may be." And Shiv really didn't like the smile on the liaison's face.

"What the fuck do you mean, 'my needs'?" Shiv asked. A bit of aggression leaked into his words, and the smile faded from the liaison.

"You must understand that you are in a perilous position. As such, the Neath wishes to offer its services. After all, it is not easy to defy the gods of the Republic, and everyone needs help."

"I already have enough help," Shiv said flatly.

"And more will be required in time," the liaison insisted. "But even if you don't, we are in business together, and we wish to ensure that our arrangement with you is well taken care of. After all, you are due a meeting with the Dragon Brokers, and we wouldn't want anything unfortunate to befall you before that point, would we?"

It sounded almost like a threat. Almost. Shiv glared at the liaison. "I will make sure nothing unfortunate happens to me. I can't say the same for everyone else, though. People around me, especially people who piss me off, things don't usually turn out well for them."

A faint trace of something formed between him and the liaison. It was barely there, but Shiv hid a smile as he felt a trickle of fear wash over from the man. Yeah, that's right, the Deathless thought to himself, you flap those fuckin' peacock feathers as hard as you want, but you remember who you're godsdamn talking to.

"Regardless, if you need anything at all, or if you wish to communicate with us," he gestured toward Cullyweir, "you can speak through your personal aid, and he will carry our words between us."

Shiv looked Cullyweir up and down, noting how the strange being couldn't meet his eyes. Shiv had seen that look on others before, on the slaves back in Gate Piety, and he realized why he wanted to rip the liaison's head off.

"Is this one a slave?" Shiv asked flatly. Depending on the liaison's answer, Shiv might come out of this with new enemies.

"He was," the liaison said casually. "Now, he is an employee of the Neath, favor-bound to the Dragon Brokers." He wiggled his nose as he let out a performative sigh. "It is a dark thing for a pattern-based being to own one of the Fairest."

"Pattern-based?" Shiv asked.

"Like us, or the goblins, or the automata. The things that follow incremental logic and exist in a steady reality with a stable level of mana. Cullyweir is Fae. In fact, he is Fairest, eldest of the Fairwoods. Explaining all that he is would take too long, but it's best that you think of him as some kind of magical, wish-granting sea fish that is now being forced to live in a river."

"Why is he forced to live in a river?" Shiv asked. He wanted to hear Cullyweir explain why, but the Fairest didn't respond. Instead, he simply kept his gaze pointed at the ground.

The liaison puckered his lips. "Because if he were to ever return home to the Fairwoods, then he would experience a final fate: death."

"And what the hells did he do to deserve that?" Shiv asked.

The liaison shook his head. "A truly foul sin for the Fairest. You see, he fell in love with a human woman, and he bred with her, and from their union came an elf."

Shiv's jaw fell open slightly. "That's it?"

The liaison winked at the Deathless, but it was not a friendly wink, more like a taunting gesture. "There are some bloods that simply shouldn't mix. Such is the opinion of the Fairest, or those of the border courts, at least. Now say his name, for if you do not, he will wilt and suffer and die, because," the liaison drew in a breath, "I bequeath authority over this melody unto you."

Another weight struck Shiv. This one actually came down upon him like a falling mountain. The floor beneath Shiv fractured and fissured. The Deathless grunted. "What the hells did you—" Before him, Cullyweir began to come apart in flaking bits of gray. He gasped and groaned as his flesh dissolved, and Shiv gritted his teeth. "You motherf—Cullyweir!" he called out, and just then, something came into existence between him and the Fae before him: a connection, a bond. But it was a bond that weighed heavily on his end and light on the Fae's. It was like a chain he could pull at any time, and boiling rage nearly detonated inside Shiv.

Pact Gained: [True Name — Cullyweir]

Suddenly, his pan was pressed against the liaison's neck, and the man's back struck the far wall of the arena as Shiv's Shapeless Tides surged forward in a roar of kinetic energy. The liaison let out a surprised cry and clenched his teeth as he felt the skin around his neck split open. He reached up, trying to grasp his blade, but Shiv got there first and closed his hand around his wrist. A burst of Chronomancy detonated outward but remained within Shiv's clenched hand, unable to break through his cycling vectors.

"Alright," Shiv said, barely able to keep a snarl out of his voice. "You said he wasn't a slave. Well, why do I feel like I got a chain inside me?"

"Because that's how a Fae soul-pact works," the liaison said, sounding surprisingly calm. But he really wasn't. Shiv could feel an active river of fear rushing into him now. "If you kill me, it won't matter. I'm merely a servant, a disposable pawn of the Neath. I'd like to keep my life, but if you slay me, another will take my place. And now that Cullyweir is bound to you, why, the Dragon Brokers and the major interests will speak to you directly. We will never meet again."

The liaison drew in a harsh and ragged breath, and Shiv pulled his frying pan away. Part of him still wanted to cave the liaison's skull in, but the real people Shiv wanted to hurt were the so-called Dragon Brokers. Before that, he also wanted to figure out more of this Cullyweir's deal. As he turned to see where the Fairest went, he realized that Cullyweir was utterly gone. In his place were a few leaves and petals scattering in a wind that wasn't truly there, and a fading fragrance.

"Oh, he's still there. He's just in the wind, flowing around you. He stands apart from the world most of the time." The liaison swallowed. "It's quite an uncanny thing when he reappears. All you need to do is say his name, and he'll be invoked."

"And he has to come?" Shiv clarified.

"He has to." The liaison smiled. "But is that not true for all of us? We're all owned in one way or another."

"Not me," Shiv said.

"Perhaps not yet," the liaison replied. "But in time, everyone is bound. Chains make for gorgeous necklaces." Despite the man's hidden fear, something told Shiv that killing him would be a kind of mercy, a kind of freedom.

"And what's your chain?" Shiv asked. "What did you give? Soul, skill, or family?"

The liaison stopped talking for once, and he turned away. Shiv caught that look on his face, the same look he'd seen on the Educator earlier: shame.

"All three, then," Shiv said, taking a blind guess. The liaison turned brittle, his body becoming as if a sculpture of glass. Shiv laughed bitterly under his breath and left the liaison there, turning on his heel and making his way back down the stairs.

As he got to the bottom of the steps, he retraced his path back to where he'd first arrived, back to that ruined restroom, to the toilet he had exploded out of. The Deathless sighed as he stared down into the fetid, swirling pool that had spawned him. Just then, he looked up, and he invoked the name that was now connected to his soul. "Cullyweir," Shiv said softly, unwilling to bark it like a command. Still it echoed out, and still the fairy was forced to come.

"I am here. I heed your words, O Pact-Bearer." Cullyweir yawned as he manifested, and he seemed distant. Indifferent to the point of depression.

"Don't call me that," Shiv said, and he looked the Fairest up and down. "Call me Shiv. Listen, you, uh, you don't have to do this. If this is some kind of slave contract, I swear I'll set you free, or something. Whatever the words are." When nothing happened, Shiv frowned. "Do I need to reach into the skill or pact and break it apart somehow? How does this thing work?"

"I cannot be free," Cullyweir said emotionlessly. "I cannot be free so long as my blood still lives, and so long as I remain unforgiven by my own kind." For the first time, a sad, distant smile crawled over Cullyweir's face. "And I will never shed my own blood, so I will not be free."

Shiv didn't know what to say to that, but in his silence, Cullyweir decided to continue on. "I see that you wish to proceed toward your destination, to the Royal Morgue of Archmortalis in East Highvine, yes?"

Shiv stared at Cullyweir, and just then, he felt his body start turning into droplets of fluid. He began to spill into the swirling pool within the toilet bowl, and he realized it was Cullyweir casting the spell, the Fae blending with him, wrapping around him. Cullyweir had been with them this entire time.

That was how they had moved from place to place. The Dragon Brokers and the Neath had a Fae using his magic to serve them. Cullyweir's mana was unlike anything Shiv had ever felt. It was softer, more flexible, less defined. Just like that, Shiv was gliding through the pipes again, and Cullyweir flowed with him. And that had him thinking: If the Neath had a Fae on their metaphorical payroll, what else did they have hiding up their sleeves? What other surprises?

It didn't take long for him to arrive at the morgue. He was moving far faster now, with no stops in between. It seemed like Harlock was distracted. Previously, they had halted several times while in transit to the Coliseum. Shiv wondered how the prison break was going and if anyone innocent had suffered. All actions had consequences, even the ones that were ultimately necessary, even the ones that had good intentions behind them.

After what felt like half an hour, Shiv mercifully emerged from the faucet of a sink, stumbling out into a private restroom. A crystal decanter lay upon a tray placed over a bathtub. In it, a rather corpulent man lay with his throat slit, dyeing the water red. His eyes were bulging and wide as he stared at the soft-white ceiling, and Shiv wondered just what the hells he'd stumbled in on.

As soon as Shiv finished solidifying, the door next to him swung open, and Shiv nearly took someone's head off using his frying pan. Across from him stood a young woman. She was dressed in pitch-black robes, and on her shoulder was a ribbon that portrayed a singing woman with dark hair and predatory eyes. Shiv shuddered as he remembered those eyes. Kathereine the Songbringer. Had he been discovered by one of her faithful? Was he going to have to...

"Oh, good, you're here." She looked him up and down and sniffled. "You're the Deathless in disguise, I take it? Morgue's next block over. I'll get you there. The other team just handed me the cloak. Just give me a second."

Shiv blinked. He hadn't told anyone he was coming. Cullyweir, he realized. Now he had a snitch accompanying him. That wouldn't do, that wouldn't do at all. He needed to fix this problem.

"You are the Deathless, right?" she asked again. "Please say yes. Otherwise, I might have to clean up two bodies."

"I am," Shiv said, doubtful about this one's abilities. "And I recommend against doing that."

"Doing what?"

"Threats. They only work if you can pull off the murder."

A silence passed between them. Then, she turned away with a huff. "Take those off."

Shiv blinked. He looked down and realized she was gesturing at the uniform he wore.

"Do it quickly. Harlock won't be distracted for long." From behind her, she pulled out a massive veil of static blackness. The Dimensionality radiating from the large blanket made Shiv wary.

"What's that?" he said.

"Mass Swapper," she replied. "You're going to strip down, and you're going to fall into it. As you do that, the decoy body we left in the morgue will be swapped out with you. Your presence will displace it. After that, I will disable the cloak, and you will be left in the morgue. Then, I will be gone, and we will forget we ever saw each other."

Shiv was practically speechless. The operatives of the Neath might be questionable and criminal, but they most definitely were prepared, and they were quick about setting things up too. As he stripped away his school uniform, his Perfect Semblance was left nude while he himself remained clad in his armor. He pulled the bracelet Adam gave him off and threw it into his cape. "Alright. Got it. So. Just fall in?"

"Is my understanding that you have the means to induce a specific type of venom upon yourself?" she said.

Ah, right. Irons's suggestion—shit, the crafters are informants too.

"Yeah, I got it," Shiv said, not wanting to explain too much about what he and Helix intended to do. "Don't need that service from you."

The young woman hesitated a while longer and stepped aside. She gestured for him to descend into the dimensional sheet, and Shiv fell face-first into the blanket without any other words exchanged.

As soon as he did, he felt something slide past him. Another weight, another presence, another body. Before he could turn and catch sight of it slipping through him, he slammed hard against a steel surface and dented it. Shiv grunted as he felt himself jammed tight in a space too small for him. Just then, he found himself lying upon a tray. The air was cold, and it glided upon his flesh in unceasing waves.

Shiv looked over his shoulder and saw another such blanket residing beneath him, but a second later, it flashed a final time as its static dissipated, and it finally went dormant. Everything unfolded just as the young woman had said.

And so, in the span of a half-hour, he went from being in a coliseum to being a reawakened corpse in a morgue.

Shiv let out a disbelieving laugh. Well, I've done a lot of weird godsdamn shit, but this was something special. He gave himself a moment and laughed.

"Hey, Helix," he called out.

"Insul." The orc's voice was thin and nasally, ridged with annoyance. "Am I finally needed now?"

"Yeah, hit me with that toxic thing Irons told you to do."

"That 'toxic thing' 'Irons told me to do'?" Helix said, his voice scornful. "Do you not remember the affliction I'm supposed to inflict upon you at all?"

"Can't quite think about it, can't quite remember right now, no," Shiv said flatly. "Just dose me up so that we have a bullshit excuse for why we're just waking up. I got some poor attendant to scare shitless."

Chapter 208 (I) Admission [II]

To be a recruiter for Phoenix Academy is to dedicate oneself to hunting for golden needles in a grand haystack. The students are remarkable individuals. Though young of age, many of them have already demonstrated their virtues and potential. After all, though life is harsh, and the consequences are dire, there are always those who rise to the occasion and make a name by slaying beasts that threaten their community, by proposing theorems and building the walls of their home, be it residences to house the needy or fortresses to keep the beasts at bay.

But it's not power we search for. No, everyone's power is different, and power is a relative thing. For though Vanguard might be able to smash through stone and hold a breach, our true prize may be a Pathless who defies the odds to slay a den of feral ratkin, or in one very abnormal case from my recollections, an ogre.

"For the ones that strive beyond themselves," that is the unofficial motto that guides the recruiting department of Phoenix Academy. Because that is what it means to be a Pathbearer. Above all else, it is not power; it is the demonstration of ambition cemented by a feat of unmatched resolve.

The resolve to stand, fight, and prevail even in the face of fated death or defeat.

-Master-Recruiter Harvey Lynwin of Phoenix Academy

Helix's poison slipped into Shiv's body with the subtlety of a passing breeze. The Deathless had survived and resurrected from a myriad of poisons and diseases ever since his encounter with the First Blood's Court Leviathan. Plagues and maladies had gone from afflictions of pain to fuel for his hypercharged immune system, dissolving internally like alcohol and taking root within his body. He should have expected Helix's spell to affect him the same way—to make him bigger, stronger, to flood his brain with that happy buzz.

But that didn't turn out to be the case.

At some point, he fell asleep. His heart stopped—and then he woke with a sudden gasp as the organ in his chest pulsed twice. The second pulse felt like a violent explosion going off against his sternum, and a rattling sensation of pain crept through his veins and crawled down into his bones. The seams of his flesh felt like vibrating cords, and the radiating pain took only a minute to resolve.

A plague-fueled haze had been triggered, and even so, Shiv wheezed and coughed. He was afflicted with something special, something unique, as his immune system tried to corner and consume the disease. But it was always a second behind, always trying to catch up to the maladaptive changes happening within his very cells.

"Insul, are you awake again?" Helix asked.

Plaguefueled 79 > 81

Shiv's vision was bleary and doubled. The freezer was a cramped space to begin with, and now, with his Plaguefueled state active, he was on the verge of getting lodged tight in the narrow crevice. A faint glow of Biomancy mana fanned out around his body, and as it did, Shiv watched as the mana of the spell faded around him like fingers vanishing into the dark. There were so many smaller shapes that made up the working that Shiv felt his mind reel as he tried to remember as much of it as he could. It was like a collage of constellations, of strings connecting micro-spell to micro-spell, each representing a fine aspect of human biology—or perhaps not human biology, but the pathology of the disease itself.

Shiv wrapped his mana hydras tight around his core, and as they delved deep, he realized the sheer complexity imbued within the poison striking at his heart. The first thing he noticed was how it constantly changed. Every second, the micro-spells rendering its structure shifted, swapping places or colliding.

Then they bred; as two micro-spells clashed, they shattered and became four, and then four became sixteen. While this happened, other micro-spells dissolved and simply died, but the organism itself was constantly evolving, changing, adapting to his Plaguefueled faster than the Skill could swallow it.

Shiv shook his head and tried to turn. He ended up bashing his elbow against the stainless steel wall to his right. As the metal dented and then tore, Shiv winced and stopped himself from rotating any further. Through the slight gap, he could see the body beside him. He recognized it. It was that blond-haired girl that Helix had tried to convince him to steal the identity of. Her eyes were open, and her chest was covered, but he knew it was really a decoy body, not the original.

"Are you feeling well, Insul?" Whisper called from within Shiv's cape.

Shiv tried to hold back a cough. "What in the Broken Moon did you hit me with, Helix?"

"Simply light venom meant to stop one's heart."

"Yeah, 'light venom'," Shiv replied. "My Plaguefueled can't even keep up with it."

"Such is the purpose," Helix retorted with a scoff. "If you were capable of resisting it, you wouldn't have perished long enough to create this situation. If we're going to follow through with this ridiculous scheme, we might as well do it properly. Regardless, the effect should fade soon, and you will be able to signal one of the attendants to let you out."

Shiv reached out to the rip he left in the steel wall and pulled hard. His Shapeless Tides splashed against the matter, and then he inverted their direction. He used them as an anchor to draw on the wall, and with a deafening groan, he deformed the metal further and squeezed the rupture shut.

As he did that, he heard a voice call out to him from just outside. "Whoa, what was that? What was that?" There was an electronic warble in the voice.

Shiv swept the space around him using a mana hydra. Though he couldn't detect any organic substances beyond the other bodies, he did see a glowing vitality signature from a few feet away above him, telling him he was dealing with an automaton. He cleared his throat and knocked weakly on the steel surface just above him.

"Help," he croaked, trying to sell the scene of a barely-Adept Pathbearer recovering from a state of near-fatal torpor. "Please, I just woke up. I don't know where I am. Help..."

He stopped knocking. A period of tense silence followed, and then suddenly there was movement. Someone pulled at his morgue freezer, and the wheels under him screeched under his weight, but still managed to hold. A mechanical grunt came as a sliver of light fell upon him, and then he found himself staring up at a set of bright lights glowing from focused crystals that swayed from the ceiling.

A three-eyed automaton leaned over him. Slowly, the Deathless turned and croaked, trying to sell his state of supposed weakness. "Please, I don't know where I am. I'm supposed to be a student of Phoenix Academy. I was on an expedition from..." Shiv trailed off, trying to make it seem like he was about to pass out again, but his acting left something to be desired.

Mostly, it seemed like he was nervous and stuttering, because, well, that was what he was. Nervous and stuttering, trying not to let this identity slip through his fingers as well.

The automaton attendant stared at him for a few seconds longer, and its three eyes shifted, spinning on its flat, featureless face. "I... I see. I must get someone to... eh... someone who isn't me..." The automaton didn't finish speaking as it flailed out of the room. Shiv turned slowly, following its awkward, stumbling body. He realized it had wheels instead of legs, and it clipped a wall as it blasted through the grand oak doors leading out of this section of the morgue.

Silence returned.

Shiv was alone, aside from the orcs and Radio within his cape—discounting all the corpses too. The walls to his side were painted with classical illustrations, portraits of martyrs and heroes of the republic who fell in glorious battles. A great deal of color and detail had gone into illustrating them, and all the to-be-slain Pathbearers portrayed were unusually clean and joyous. People didn't look very pretty before they died. They didn't look all that attractive in the heat of battle either, but ugliness didn't make for a good story, did it?

"The stories we tell ourselves," he muttered.

The automaton custodian returned a few minutes later with a small group of priests—or so Shiv assumed. The first thing they did wasn't to ask questions, check on him, or even cover him up. Instead, they cast a spell, unleashing a panel of Divination over his body. Violet mana caressed him as several sets of eyes flashed bright with the activation of the Analyze Skill. Shiv only figured out what they were trying to do when one made the sign of the Ascendants.

"Not a thrall! Not a risen! Praise be the Auroral Council and the Grand Protectors! A miracle has transpired! The boy is truly alive and unblighted by the fell touch of Necromancy!"

Shiv released a breath as the gathered mob took him into their care. They dressed him in a set of black robes and slippers while guiding him out of the room into one of the private consultation quarters in the Royal Morgue. The building was vast. From all the vitalities Shiv could sense, there had to be thousands of people in here, spread across approximately twenty or so stories. It seemed to be built like a clump of light as well, with Shiv currently being on the twelfth level down.

The Royal Morgue had been built like an inverted tower embedded into the earth, rather than a risen structure. Judging by the filigrees of mithril and gold, a substantial amount of wealth had been spent during its construction.

The murals he saw within the room continued on. They sprawled across the ceiling and decorated every column and wall he came across. There seemed to be no shortage of fallen heroes who perished in service to the Republic. On the way to his temporary quarters, he noticed how there were painters hard at work, adding new martyrs to the sprawling tapestry. Art and propaganda had a habit of blending into each other. Both of them preyed upon stories and idealism, and one was so easily compelled to serve the other.

Shiv didn't know why he was so drawn to the paintings. It could be because he'd seen far too much death in far too intense a time. It had scarred him, even if he didn't notice it overtly. It had imprinted on him. He didn't have an issue killing, but with all the savagery and bloodshed he participated in, he could still see the faces and the wounds of those he'd killed. He remembered the abrupt brutality that

accompanied each of their ends. For the Republic and the bards who cared for the fate of the fallen, death was a full stop or a final poignant line in a story.

For Shiv, death was less than punctuation; it was functionally a blessing for him to indulge in over and over again.

There's something wrong with these images, Shiv thought, his eyes jumping from mural to mural. Just as he looked upon them, he felt them looking back, and a growing weight of paranoia crept through him as he couldn't shake the feeling that he was being watched. Better treat them like surveillance. Who knows what kind of bullshit powers the Ascendants have? Painting and Awareness. Yeah...

As they sat him down in the consultation room, they brought him a warm glass of water accompanied by some bread, beans, and broccoli. He made sure to eat the food like a ravenous wolf, spouting generalities about who he was and what he remembered between every bite. The gathered priests listened on intently, as if he were a new prophet given unto them by the Ascendants themselves.

"A miracle!" an elven woman clad in dark blue robes exclaimed. A flowing cape swayed from her right shoulder, and emblazoned upon it was the face of Halsur, bearing his voltage shield in one hand and his bolt-shaped spear in the other. "Notify the university immediately!"

An old goblin wheezed, so aged that he had to walk with magical aids. A weight-bracing set of straps held the goblin upright, while crystals embedded upon his backside rippled with weak pulses of Dynamancy. "The Phoenix must send one of their own to verify this information," he declared, and that was exactly what Shiv wanted.

"Patience, Master Edelbert," a younger man among the priests chided. This man was human, but he was not dressed in any robes. In fact, aside from a pair of torn and worn slacks, he wore nothing, standing bare-chested and barefoot, showing his horrifically scarred flesh. Considering how his left arm seemed

ritualistically severed, the cut being too clean and neat to be a wound inflicted during combat, Shiv knew this one was one of Cripple's fervent apostles. "He has been through an ordeal. If the dark hand of death has been repelled by this boy's soul, then surely he is Ascendant-favored."

"That is not in doubt," the goblin agreed, shaking his head. "It is not matters of the spirit I am wary of, but questions of the mind. Favored though he may be, I've seen such things before." The elderly goblin coughed. "Tell me, boy. You have no wounds on you. So, what do you remember? How do you remember returning? Please, tell us, if you may."

Shiv adopted a stressed expression and tried to sell them on his story, delving into his fabricated memories. The follower of Cripple chided his fellow priest once more, but Shiv spoke. "It was like nothing for a while. Like I was deeper than the deepest sleep I've ever taken. But then I woke up, and there was this pain in my chest. My heart... It was like my heart woke up with me. Like it was about to burst open inside me..."

"Ah, poison, then," the goblin huffed. "As I expected. There have been many cases where foul poisons have caused the circulation of blood within a Pathbearer to congeal or slow. Yet, thanks to their enduring Toughness, they managed to pull themselves back from the brink. Tremendous. Truly tremendous." The goblin sighed. "Yet, a lack of oxygen inflicts other maladies upon the body as well. After all, the mind is connected to the blood, and seeing as it choked, I fear that many Pathbearers find their cognition permanently reduced, even after such a miraculous recovery. Tell me, boy, how is your memory?"

"Hazy," Shiv muttered, trying to play along. The gathered priests asked him a few more questions about what he could recall, but soon retreated and left him to his peace. Within the consultation room, Shiv sat and waited. Soon, Phoenix Academy would be sending a representative to come and claim him. After that, he just needed to get behind the walls and finish the admissions process.

Then, he would be a whole new person. At least for a while.

Chapter 208 (II) Admission [II]

"Have the grovelers left?" Tequila whispered from inside Shiv's cape.

"Yeah," Shiv replied, but he narrowed his eyes at a representation of the thirteen Ascendants detailing the ceiling above him. He saw each of them in their exaggerated glory: the Starhawk with his resplendent wings and bow soaring above; Enoch, represented by a faint, shrouded figure wreathed by the sun, standing on the apex of a tremendous tower; Kathereine, singing and wreathed by the magic of her own musical notes; and Halsur not far away, bearing a shield and spear for her protection.

Cripple and the others were present as well, all of them looking glorious in diminished ways. Might not be a room specifically dedicated to them. Even Daughter wasn't a nightmarish being of psychopathy and horror, but more a shadowy protector, embracing a sobbing, lost girl.

Yeah. That's Daughter, alright. Not some kind of psycho-killer who wears little girls. Definitely not.

A sigh escaped from Shiv as he considered the faith of his Republic, the faith that consumed his fellow citizens. He'd gotten lucky in a way; his alienation from his own society prevented him from developing the faith skill. In turn, he'd accepted the fact that his gods were ultimately either weak-willed fools or cold, monstrous bastards far easier than it would be for most. Shiv still felt a swell of bitterness when it came to his own past, but now, it seemed things weren't so simple. Sometimes, enduring one wound can help you avoid another.

There came a sudden knock at the door, and Shiv flinched. He nearly summoned his Last Morsel to his hand before he caught himself. I am just a physically crippled, but medically gifted, Low Adept, Shiv reminded himself. Physical violence can't be my solution in public. Not if I want to keep this identity longer than a few minutes.

That didn't mean he couldn't use his magical skills. He pointed a mana hydra through the door, and his Biomancy wrapped around a robust physique. The magical outline of the person was rendered, and Shiv felt a hefty weight press down upon his Biomancy field. The one he was sensing was mentally strong. Their bones were like metal rods, and their tendons were like cords of steel. Shiv guessed they were a Master in Physicality at the least, and after a second longer, he managed to decipher their sex as well.

The micro-spells representing the person's genitalia and other minor details told him a woman was waiting behind the doorway, and around her were the priests from earlier. Shiv had no idea who to expect—perhaps someone else from the morgue who wanted to talk with him.

Practical Metabiology 44 > 45

"Come in," Shiv said. He cringed at how hoarse and soft Marcus's voice was. It sounded far too much like a whimper for Shiv's comfort. Stick to the cover. Deal with it.

The door opened, and a battle-hardened woman stepped in. She wore a thick alloy vest, and carved into the front of her sleeveless cuirass were two wolves chasing each other's tails. One of them radiated waves of Pyromancy, and judging from the design of the other, Shiv suspected it was infused with Cryomancy, portraying a kind of elemental balance. The next thing of note about the woman was the two axes hanging from her hips. They seemed to be one-handed weapons, and their edges sparked with faint arcs of electricity. The flat sides of the blades were also decorated with glistening spell-symbols.

And then there was her face. Her hair was done up in a dense braid of green, with thin bones threaded in between the fibres, running all the way down to her lower back. Three scars ran along her lower lip, and painted trails just underneath her right cheek looked like she'd taken a claw to the face, and it never healed properly. While he was observing her, she looked back at him, but she wasn't studying him. No, she had a very obvious glare in her eyes—the type of glare one reserved for someone you scorned, or an enemy you intended to slay.

The hell is her deal? Shiv thought to himself. Wait, don't tell me she felling knows Marcus. Ah, hell, System. Barely had this identity for longer than a few minutes. Don't do this shit to me right now.

Slowly, she marched into the room as the priests chattered away behind her. They muttered things like "a miracle" and "Ascendant-blessed." Through it all, she said nothing. The intense animosity in her eyes never faded, however, and Shiv grew increasingly sure that her uncoiling hatred was directed toward Marcus for some reason.

"Yes," she said, her voice coarse as if made so from a lifetime of yelling. "Truly a miracle. But, holy ones, if I may, can I be granted a moment of privacy?" She made the gesture of the Ascendants, tracing a cross into the air with her right hand before splitting it down the middle. "We have suffered a great deal during the expedition, and it warms my heart to see another of my kinfolk survive, even if it is in such... miraculous circumstances. But the expedition, the losses we took, were truly sorrowful, and I wish to know how he feels in private."

"Certainly, Magnolia of Lutherbrook," the goblin wheezed. "We understand how this may be an emotional moment for you, to find another Pathbearer under your charge lost but returned. In their light, we flourish."

"In their light, we flourish," the other priests echoed. One after another, they shuffled out from the room, and as the door closed, Shiv found himself left alone with a woman whose body language trembled on the verge of violence.

Psycho-Cartography: Look at her face. Look at how tight her shoulders are. Look at the glare in her eyes. It's taking everything she has not to bury one of her axes in your skull. Whatever Marcus did, she hates him. Hates him a lot. But there is something else. She knows she's not justified in killing him. Otherwise, she likely would have acted already.

A tense silence unfolded, and Shiv watched Magnolia's lip curl, revealing a mouthful of clenched teeth. "Of course it was you, Unblood. You bastard. Of course you were the one who came back, not my Opal."

Shiv blinked. He had no idea who the hells this woman was talking about, but Marcus probably did. That being said, he could probably piece a few things together. Her Opal. This woman was likely speaking of a child, judging from the seraphic warmth in her tone. Furthermore, it seemed like she blamed him for Opal's death.

"Have you nothing to say, you curse-spawn cur? You vile vermin?" As she hissed her hatred at him, Shiv felt his own anger begin to reflexively rise, but he caught himself before he could return a threat and bite back at a woman who seemed desperate to start a fight.

Shiv might be strong enough to crush this woman like an insect, but Marcus was just an Adept. A crippled one at that, lacking any proper martial skills. So, in the absence of having anything to say and not wanting to give himself away, Shiv decided to keep silent. He remained impassive, and the blank look on his face drove the woman to a new height of rage.

She started to tremble.

"Nothing? Nothing! You say nothing to me now? After a lifetime of defiance, after never knowing when to control your pride and tongue, now you think it proper to be ashamed? To be quiet? Now?!" She slammed the bottom of her fist atop the table between them, and it shattered into splinters of wood. The tray Shiv had eaten from tumbled through the air and ricocheted off his forehead. He didn't even blink.

"No," the woman hissed again, and he tasted a faint whiff of alcohol on her breath. The point of her finger came close to his eye, and he saw the faintest sparks of electricity building there. "I will not accept this. I will not accept that you are the one that came back. You of all people. Motherless, fatherless,

ruined, crippled thing that should have died before leaving the womb. You mistake of a child. You take my Battle Sister away from me in childbirth," a hysterical laugh bowled free from the woman, "and then you have the audacity to spill your seed into my daughter! To impregnate her?"

This time, Shiv flinched slightly. Okay, he thought to himself, that shit came out of nowhere. The hells were you doing, Marcus?

"Mine!" Magnolia repeated for a third time as her lip quivered. "Mine! And you let your bastard seed fill her with bastard offspring! And instead of being righteous for once in your life, instead of letting me solve your problem, you turn her against me! You twist the mind of the recruiter! You make them force me to take you on, to bring you on this expedition to the capital! You steal a spot meant for someone better so you can go to the academy! You! YOU!"

Shiv's instincts screamed out to him to strike first—to rip her apart before she struck. She was on the verge of going for one of her axes. He could feel it. He couldn't stay silent much longer unless he wanted this to end in a fight. He doubted she could harm him, even if he didn't focus on strengthening his core. The mana powering her axes had little hope of overcoming his Shapeless Tides, and the material of the axe itself would chip and shatter upon greeting his Orichalcum-hard skin. After that, though, his cover would be effectively blown, preservable only if he eliminated this woman.

But that led to a chain of other issues. Killing her wouldn't be hard. Shiv could stop time right now, stand up, and simply pull her head free from her torso, and there would be nothing she could do to stop him. But what would he do with the body after that?

He could completely mangle it into a ball using his Biomancy and hide it within his cape, but that wouldn't solve the problem of her disappearance. What the hells was he going to tell the priests when they came in and found her missing? He would be the prime suspect, considering that he was the last person to be in her presence. And that would leave a trail for the Inquisition to follow.

The miraculous resurrection of some kid in a morgue was bad enough. A kid in a morgue making a Master-Tier Pathbearer disappear during a one-on-one conversation? Yeah. This cover wasn't going to last beyond that.

Godsfuckingdammit, System,

Shiv thought to himself. He knew the peace couldn't last. He knew the System was going to try to pull him back into that cycle of bloodshed. But Shiv had more options than just violence now. At the very least, he could be verbally and psychologically violent. And so, without any better options, Shiv decided to go on the offensive, as his instincts demanded.

The social offensive.

If I can get her to lose control and get the priests back in or stall until someone gets here, that might give me an out.

"Yeah," Shiv said, leaning back into his chair and adopting an utterly indifferent expression. He even rolled his eyes for good measure. "Cut my head off. Drive those blades into my corpse over and over again until I stop twitching. That'll make your daughter happy."

Magnolia's mouth fell open and slammed back together so hard Shiv heard one of her teeth crack. "You... you..."

"Yeah, me, me," he replied, not bothering with the whole confused child act anymore. He wasn't sure where he was going with this yet, but if he could be provoked into making a loud enough ruckus, maybe the priests would return and spare this poor, unfortunate woman from getting turned into a ball of flesh.

"How dare you?" she whispered. A tear dropped from her left eye—a tear of pure rage. She bit down on her anger as Shiv kept going with his lashing words.

"What do you mean, 'how dare'? I dared because I'm a Pathbearer. I dared because I could. I did. And that's the way it is. You know, you talk a lot about me, me, me, everything I did. How about everything you did, huh? If you were such a good mother, if I were such a terrible person, why'd you let me beat you at every turn? I mean, my Physicality's crippled. I'm a literal crippled orphan. How are you going to let someone like that outdo you, impregnate your daughter, and then end up coming to see them with a straight face?" Shiv held out his hands in utter disbelief. "It's pathetic. And now you're here, whimpering to me instead of handling it like a proper Pathbearer."

Something in her face broke. "You... you... you don't know anything!"

"I seem to know plenty," Shiv shot back, folding his arms. "Seem to know your daughter well enough to make you a grandma."

"She was poisoned by your words! By your act of feeble, tragic determination!"

"I don't know, it seems I knew her pretty well. And she knew me too." Shiv wiggled his eyebrows. "Sticks and Stones, right? Call me a cripple, and I'll call you mom. How about that?"

Her entire body tensed. Her flesh turned brittle and glass-like. The woman shook with rage. One of her axes found its way into her right hand, but she was caught between the urge to let it fly and strike him down or to hold herself at bay. "You didn't know my daughter. You don't know me."

"I'd beg to differ," Shiv said. "Hells, I probably knew her better than you did." A choked snarl escaped from the woman, and Shiv, riding a high of audacity and verbal bullshit, kept going. "After all, I was the one who got her pregnant. Not you. I guess that means it's just 1-0 for me, am I right?"

Magnolia's face went blank for a moment. His audacity and strange line of thinking had rendered her mind befuddled. And then he had made the mistake of grinning at her, and that sent her over the edge. Her hand shot out. Quick—but only for Marcus's standards. Shiv had to force himself to sit still and wait as she pulled at his collar and tore his loaned clothes.

Low Master Reflexes. Yeah. Not the guy you should be fighting, Magnolia. Not smart. And then he watched her commit to her mistake; she lifted her axe high and let out a feral snarl. Not smart at all.

Chapter 209 Admission [III]

The most important thing when it comes to duels of words and rhetoric is control. If you can control someone's emotions or the flow of the topic, you can win. For ultimately, it's not about a debate of truth, but more often, who can make the other betray themselves, make them debase themselves in public?

Who cedes more power to their adversary?

This is why there is a base wisdom in children. They see the world for what it is on the surface, and from there, they glean our deepest fears and our overpowering insecurities. After all, how many proud and wise intellectuals have we seen laid low by countless insults? Comments about their appearance and their failures. Comments about the ones they lost, the ones they couldn't protect.

Control, my sweet fellows. Control yourself, and control the one who stands before you. That's what makes you beautiful in a clash of words.

And if you can provoke someone to bitter rage or sorrowful tears, you can also just as easily guide them to love you, to adore you. Because once you have a measure of control, they are driven to engage with you, and from there, you can sculpt the experience, gradually feeding them positive emotions rather than negative and conceding on points you don't care about—perhaps never cared about—until finally, in their eyes, you are redeemed.

You are their friend or lover, and all is well until you decide to crush their heart once more. And the dance goes on.

Because, as always, to not seek control is to surrender yourself. And though there is something sweet and relaxing about giving away the keys to your heart, understand that the life of a fool is a passive one, and you will be as if a dog, waiting to be euthanized.

-How to Make Fools and Break People by Kathereine of Chandliere

Before Magnolia could bring down her axe and deliver a final invalidation of Marcus's supposed resurrection, the door behind her burst open, and in walked a Pathbearer clad in heavy plates of adamantite. For a moment, Shiv failed to recognize Captain Irons. In Shiv's defense, Irons was dressed differently last time and had his face exposed.

Now, he was encased in heavy, magic-resistant armor with a frog helm that sprouted wings from the sides, masking his face. He kept his halberd and shield combo but swapped out the exact weapons he used. It was only when he spoke that Shiv felt a trickle of tension slip away.

"What is the meaning of this?" Irons said. There was no heat in his voice, no fear or anger. It was simply a flat question imbued with the authority of a veteran Pathbearer. Behind the captain were the priests, and they stared at Magnolia with wide eyes and muttered to each other in hushed exchanges.

Magnolia froze. Her mouth fell open as her eyes flicked between Captain Irons and the holy ones who'd allowed her entry into this morgue. She was like an antelope that had spotted a hunter at that moment, and she couldn't make up her mind. Her body language still screamed of violence. She wanted to swing her axe down.

She wanted to kill Marcus once and for all and reap what pleasure she could from his death. But there was something else emanating from her: a weight of fear. Not exactly of Irons, but of defying the Republic's laws and becoming a fugitive for the sin of slaying someone she barely regarded as a person.

Psycho-Cartography: And that tells us that her hate is not as strong as her desire to self-preserve. We can use that too. Take advantage of it. Break this conflict before it can spiral. Breaking her composure was our means, not our ends.

Heeding his skill, Shiv went on the offensive once more. But this time, he did so on Magnolia's behalf. Because if he actually condemned her, everything would be put into question.

So, he was going to save her instead. But that didn't mean he had to be nice about it.

"Oh, it's all right," Shiv said, standing from where he was seated. He added a stammer as a flourish to sell his guise as a nervous student. "Master Magnolia was simply speaking with me about..." He clenched his teeth and tried to hide a look of pain. "When we were ambushed by the Jotun, there were many of

them. The others fought. I tried to..." Shiv swallowed. "We wouldn't have made it here without Master Magnolia. But she blames herself. She came here to apologize to me."

Suddenly, her eyes were on him again. Her nostrils flared. The look of utter disbelief and near-explosive outrage made Magnolia spasm as if lightning was surging through her body. Shiv couldn't help it. It seemed like his new skill veered toward the offensive, and he'd been using it to attack people more than to praise. He couldn't help but get a few more jabs in, even when he was protecting her ass from legal prosecution.

"She thought it was pathetic that she couldn't protect most of us," Shiv said and shook his head. Audaciously, he reached across the table and audaciously seized Magnolia's half-risen axe. Slowly, he begged her to lower it, and though she resisted for a moment, eventually she capitulated. Her arm was like a rusted lever as it fell, her every movement twitching with barely withheld anger.

"It's not your fault," Shiv said, somehow keeping a straight face. "You are the only reason any of us made it here. You are the only reason why I

made it here. And I forgive you."

Her face was changing colors now, going from a stricken paleness to a furious red.

"I forgive you," Shiv said again, and this time she glowered as if a crystal cup kissed by a vicious sunrise.

Irons's frog helm turned to look between Shiv and Magnolia. He clearly tasted the tension between them, but he said nothing.

"If you need a moment," Shiv said, "I think you should take it. And if you want to talk again, maybe we should do it under proper circumstances. This is a lot to take in for both of us." Then he leaned in a little closer and let his voice drop. "But I just want you to know that I won't forget this. That everything you did for me, I will someday do for you. And just as you've come to seek me in my moment of need, I will come looking for you. And probably someday soon, I suspect."

With that subtle threat delivered, Magnolia blinked. Her mouth opened and closed several times, and she bit back a snarl. Her fingers curled and straightened, the motion reminding him of a dying spider. Then, in a rush of movement, she tore out of the room, pushing past Irons, barreling through the priests, and fleeing. Shiv followed her using his mana hydra for as long as he could, and then pulled away as she departed the building.

A faint snort sounded from behind Shiv, and the Deathless clenched his teeth. He directed his Psychomancy into his cape. "Hey guys, uh, will you shut the fuck up? Do not blow my cover. I didn't do all those mental acrobatics just for you to screw me over."

Tequila's mind somehow produced the sound of sarcastic clapping, and then Shiv brushed Whisper's consciousness as well, tasting a wry amusement from the orc. "I don't think I've ever seen a dangerous situation handled like that before. I am going to remember this one. Insult the target of your loathing, and use the laws and social taboos to both protect and provoke them. Very, very amusing."

Helix, meanwhile, just let out a huff. "Well, I, for one, think it was pointlessly risky, and frankly, you could have disabled her by giving her a disease. Oh, wait, no, you couldn't have, because you're not nearly versed enough in terms of Biomancy or Practical Metabiology. A shame. Those options are lost to you."

Shiv tried not to roll his eyes. Helix could be such a one-trick pony sometimes. As the priests and Irons looked down the hall where Magnolia had fled, Shiv sighed loudly. "Don't worry about her," he said. "It's a very emotional thing. She probably needs a few moments to herself. Her daughter lost her life in the ambush as well, and I feel for her."

At that, the postures of the priests turned fragile. They all made signs of the Republic, slicing crosses through the air before parting the initial symbol down the middle.

Irons studied Shiv through his visor for a few seconds before he approached. "Marcus Unblood," Irons said. "I am Master Irons of Phoenix Academy. I was dispatched alongside Master Magnolia. I represent the administration and the will of the Headmaster in this matter. Your survival is an auspicious sign for both your legend and the Republic."

"In their light we flourish," the priests spoke in unison.

"In their light we flourish," Irons echoed with vastly diminished enthusiasm. Once more, the priests backed away from the door, but the elderly goblin held Shiv in his gaze for a few seconds longer. Shiv could taste the slight suspicion there and knew he'd left an impression.

Impressions aren't good when you're trying to lay low. I need to rein in how casually offensive I can get, Shiv thought to himself. Kind of bullshitted my way out this time, but that's not always going to work.

When the goblin finally closed the door behind him, Irons removed his helmet and looked down at the splinters that remained of the table. He let out a quiet breath that almost approached the territory of a sigh. "So, how did this mess happen?"

The man was to the point, and Shiv gave him the details straight back, the details Shiv could piece together, anyway. As Irons listened, Shiv tried to read the man's expressions but got nothing. Without an extreme incident provoking him, Irons was practically a wall, and in some ways, he reminded Shiv of

Uva. Both of them had formidable barriers when it came to guessing at how they felt or what they thought.

"Unfortunate," Irons said, "but also sloppy. This is information that should have been provided to us by the liaison."

"Probably," Shiv replied, "but it's also a rough job. Frankly, I'm surprised they managed to get me in place so fast. How is everyone else?"

"I'm not sure," Irons admitted openly. "I don't know most of them well enough to judge. I have no desire to get to know the orcs. Your fugitive fellows keep away from me out of distrust, and Adam..." For the first time, Shiv saw something on the captain's face, a hint of uncertainty. "I don't truly know the Young Lord anymore. He has changed greatly in a short time. Battle does that to a Pathbearer."

"How'd Magnolia get to me before you did, anyway?" Shiv asked.

"She was the senior Pathbearer in charge of the expedition running from Old Brunswick to the capital. She was likely informed by notification. I just so happened to be near the administrative building at the time and volunteered."

"Unforeseen circumstances," Shiv muttered. "Well, at least that mess is handled."

Irons pressed his lips together and almost frowned. "You were being sarcastic?"

Shiv shrugged powerfully. "She didn't hit me with her axe, so I'd call that a win."

"I'm uncertain if you should be proud of that. Without my intervention, what was your plan?" Irons didn't say the next part, but Shiv could guess what the man wanted to know. Were you going to kill her? Were you going to murder someone to get your way?

"Don't know. I was kind of hoping that she'd have a loud enough outburst to draw the priests over or to drag things out long enough for you to show up. You showed up, and the priests came over. So yeah, I guess things did turn out. And if you didn't, well, I guess I'd just do something messy then."

"Something messy," Irons repeated. Shiv was getting a feeling that this man disapproved of blind improvisation.

"Not like immediately killing her, just like choking her out and leaving her stuffed somewhere or something. I don't know."

For a beat, Irons just squinted harder at Shiv. "Just... choke her out and leave her somewhere. That was your plan?"

"Yeah, you know, wouldn't be hard. I'd do it quickly. Pinch her blood vessels and make her go out in seconds. When she wakes up, she could accuse me of doing that. But you know, if I'm going to choke her out, I'll just stop time and do it, so she won't have the memories to implicate me. And if she accuses me, I'll just deny it and say she's suffering from battle stress or something. You know, who'd believe her anyway? I'm just an Adept right now."

Shiv chuckled. Irons stared.

A few more seconds dragged on. Irons let out a grunt and didn't say anything else. He turned and made for the door. As soon as he walked out, Shiv realized he was meant to follow. The Deathless stepped over the broken pieces of the table and trailed behind the captain. Something tumbled inside him as he tried to decipher whether Irons was fine with what he just did, or if the Tac-Strat instructor disapproved.

As he continued through the well-painted halls, Irons said nothing. He never looked back, and Shiv wondered if the man was doing that deliberately as well.

I can't tell if he's socially indifferent or has some kind of social resistance skill, Shiv thought to himself. Maybe both. Maybe you have to be socially indifferent or really good at masking your feelings to hide them. Psycho-Cartography's barely giving me anything about this one.

Psycho-Cartography: Because he offers little. He might be a Master, but he is a veteran also. You've come into power in a short period of time, Shiv, but this man has taken the long path. And if he fights like how he talks, then he wastes no energy. There is no half-hearted swing, no blind, thoughtless attack. He is an instructor of tactics and strategy. Nothing he does is without consideration.

So, deliberate, Shiv concluded. He could appreciate that about Irons; it gave him someone to grind his awareness and Psycho-Cartography on.

They encountered the priests once more on the way down, and Irons offered them his thanks for their summary communication and praised the Ascendants thereafter. The priests repeated their prayers, and each of them reached out to brush Shiv's body. They grabbed at what they saw and felt to be Marcus's shoulders and back, but functionally, they were slamming their hands into Shiv's low abdomen and pelvis. Kind of weird, but he put up with it to keep the masquerade.

"Remember you are blessed, boy," the goblin priest wheezed. "You have been returned from that final rest to do something great. I can feel it upon you, the touch of the Ascendants. As such, strive, strike, and be true to yourself in our Republic. This is a reward few will ever receive."

"This is a wound few heal from," Cripple's priest continued.

"And this is a chance to repay the divine for all that you have been gifted," the elven priestess proclaimed. "Do not doubt yourself and give yourself entirely to the faith. I hope that with this miracle, your connection to the Ascendants can be strengthened. I would like to invite you to the Endbreaker's communion at—."

"Prophetess Sheega." The goblin sighed. "Must I remind you again of the rules?"

"Ah." The elven priestess bit back a wince. "I apologize. I was a missionary before, and the duty to proselytize has never left me. I did not mean to offend or steal a potential follower from you, my kindred in faith. I merely wish for Halsur's glory to be known."

"As do we all," Cripple's acolyte said. "But deepening one's tie to the Ascendants, or any individual Ascendant, is a private matter, and we should not pressure our young friend here unduly."

All of them bowed their heads and prayed a final time. After that, they let Shiv and Irons descend the steps to finally depart the Royal Morgue. After reaching the lowest level, they had to take a winding staircase that went straight up back to the lobby.

Why the architecture of the morgue was so convoluted, Shiv couldn't tell, but it seemed like it gave the lobby access to every single level and kept the morgues further separated from chambers of faith and rooms where blessings and last rites are administered.

There'd been places of faith back in Blackedge. Shiv had been bloodied and wounded on the bottom steps of a temple by a War Priest. As such, he always harbored a lingering animosity toward the faithful.

But simply by being here, by walking through these halls, and then stepping through the front doors to see the sheer amount of gold, mithril, and iconography that decorated the Royal Morgue left him briefly stunned. Faith mattered to the people of the Republic. Faith, art, and propaganda were all fused. He saw it in the frescoes, in each of the Ascendants depicted along thirteen panels of painted glass lighting the top section of the morgue.

He saw it demonstrated by the many acolytes who walked down the streets, with armored Pathbearers proclaiming the glory of Halsur, with singing maidens composing odes to Kathereine, with scarred and maimed worshippers who dressed like paupers yet held their heads high, as if members of the highest nobility. And then there were those who were veiled in shadows, with cloaks of darkness gliding along their bodies.

Everything around seemed to have something to do with the Ascendants, and the people were parted into cliques or bore multiple artifacts on their bodies, symbolizing their Ascendant of chosen worship.

"The faith is new to you?" Irons asked.

It was only then that Shiv realized the captain had stopped and was watching him. Shiv looked around and drank in the sights, listened to the revelry, breathed in the air, and relished the fact that the System didn't betray him. For everything Shiv had on Marcus Unblood, the latter wasn't hunted. The latter was a free man, and once more, Shiv could move in public without someone coming for him.

"Yeah," Shiv admitted. "Didn't really realize how big of a deal it was."

Irons nodded. The craning of his neck was so subtle Shiv almost missed it. "Whatever you think, it's grander than you know."

With that ominous statement, he led Shiv to one of the Jump Towers. A massive spire of mithril speared high up into the air, and the Deathless looked up to see a chain of mana connected to it. Flowing spellstuff gushed into the Mithril Tower, and Shiv followed it back to Flamecrown Castle, back to the wards and spells woven tight over the Yellowstone Supervolcano.

Every few seconds, there would come a blast or a ripple of mana, telling Shiv that the fight was still ongoing, that the prisoners were trying to break free, flinging their collective might against the defenders, and that the Poly-Magi were there to rebuff them alongside the Ascendants.

But here and now, mere kilometers away from the battleground, life continued on. There was no hint of fear or worry in the air. The worshipers didn't seem to mind that there might have been a mass breakout of prisoners occurring. They simply believed that their Prismatic Guards would protect them, that their Ascendants would guard them.

Faith was a strong thing. But faith was also control. And for the first time, Shiv wondered how it would feel if he held the collective faith of a people himself, what he could make them do.

Psycho-Cartography: Or what it might do to you. Remember what Georges said about being deprived of consequence. What makes you a good chef?

Trying until something isn't shit, Shiv remembered. Godhood is powerful, but it also insulates you. It protects you from what's supposed to hurt.

Within the mithril spire, Shiv found himself waiting in line. A trail of worshippers glided ahead, and they marched through a checkpoint of magical wards to stand before a massive sphere of Dimensionality. There were guards here as well—Jump Mages interfacing with the sphere on floating platforms and calling out to the incoming Pathbearers; keeping them organized.

Shiv watched a towering automaton at the very front of the line stomp forward and arrive beneath the dimensional sphere. The sphere was the size of a small building, and every few seconds it grew larger, swelling with greater intensity, until it detonated outward. It swallowed the automaton, and then in its place appeared eight goblins. They slipped past an interior checkpoint and departed the spire in an instant.

Soon, Shiv and Irons's turn to pass through the wards came. Though he didn't have much worry about the Divination mana lining the spell, he wondered how the wards would react with his Shapeless Tides and other Magical Skills.

"Time to keep myself loose," Shiv whispered. His vectors went still for a beat, and he let his Biomancy and other fields go slack. He prepared himself for anything, however. He was used to things going wrong, and he knew the System was out there waiting, biding its chance to drag him into another pointless battle. Pointless, Shiv thought to himself. Maybe pointless to me, but I've been feeding the System plenty, so much so that it specifically listed me as an item on its all-you-can-eat buffet.

Holding his breath, he stepped through the wards and felt one glide hard against him. It was as if air resistance was pulling at his body, and he tried not to flinch. It flashed briefly, and a net tightened around Shiv. Irons stopped, and his eyes widened slightly. He watched as a weave of dimensional mana crisscrossed Shiv's body for a moment.

A notification appeared in the Deathless's perception.

Please hold. Skill status analysis incomplete.

A bright flare of Divination blossomed over him. Shiv gritted his teeth and forced himself to relax. There was nothing for it. Either all his efforts were in vain, and he couldn't avoid violence, or this was a temporary issue. The notification updated in his eyes, and he was released from the weighty pressure of Dimensionality a moment later. He stumbled forward, and an exhale snaked out from him.

"That's new to me too," Shiv commented. Irons offered no response. Instead, they walked forward, waved ahead by an automaton guard.

"We got five Pathbearers coming from another tower," it declared. "Five, step up. Prepare for transit."

Shiv, Irons, and three more behind them were directed to stand upon the platform. As Shiv stared up at the expanding sphere, another notification appeared in his eyes, but then it expanded into a wide network. It was then that Shiv realized what he was looking at. This was a map of all the Jump Towers in the capital. And there were many. It was like looking up at the night sky and realizing it was full of stars.

"Think 'Phoenix Station'," Irons instructed him.

And Shiv did just that. From among the countless options Shiv had to choose from, one burned brightly, and a thread of silver descended from the dimensional sphere and connected to him.

Teleporting: Now bound for Phoenix Station

It was then that the sphere expanded, swallowing Shiv. A tunnel of pressure gripped him and pulled him across time and space. As he was dragged off his feet, he felt himself pass through a dimensional blanket, just like earlier when he had to plunge through one to slip into the morgue freezer. The same spell was at play here, but on a far grander level. Everything around Shiv thinned. It was like a rain of static needles was being dragged past him.

One second followed, then five, then ten, and after a full minute of transition, Shiv finally felt himself released back into the world. It wasn't nearly as rough as most teleportations he'd experienced. There was a softening of pressure at the end, and he was deposited out of the other sphere. A draft of Dynamancy met him briefly with the weight of a feather, and he landed gracefully on the ground instead of hammering down like a descending boulder.

He found himself in another Jump Tower, much like the one he'd just departed, and he left without any difficulty. Now he was in the inverse line, without wards to go through, without guards waving specific numbers of Pathbearers onto a platform. Shiv followed Irons out of the light and found a stream of drifting darkness just outside. Shiv tensed.

This was Harlock's darkness. He was searching for any prisoner that managed to break quarantine, and as the blackness curled around Shiv, he waited to be discovered once more, only for it to wash through him from within his cape.

He felt a presence, a faint incandescent glow that curled through his body, a single tendril that slipped free from his chest, and he knew that Cripple was doing its best to keep him hidden. Veronica likely was as well, and that wasn't even mentioning whatever Udraal and the Educator were doing.

Sure do got a lot of important assholes fighting over me, Shiv thought to himself with a sliver of wry amusement.

"Alright," he said, "now which way to the—" His words trailed off as he found Phoenix Academy almost immediately. The four massive towers that climbed beyond the sea of clouds above were hard to miss. Each of them was grand and truly colossal, monuments of mithril and focus crystal that likely cost an indescribable fortune to create, and between the pillars were layered rings of magic. A blend of complicated mana types swirled above the grounds of the academy as if a storm in motion. There were so many patterns and shapes, Shiv couldn't keep track of them all, but through the chaos, he caught sight of what looked like floating buildings hovering in the air. No, not just hovering. They were flying. Some rose, and some descended. It was a remarkable display of magical dominance to orchestrate a series of floating structures on this scale.

"First time seeing the academy as well, huh?" There was a smile on Irons's face. It was slight and small, but of Phoenix Academy, he was genuinely proud. Not even the revelations he'd discovered about his own Ascendant or his fellow instructors could shake that.

"First time," Shiv muttered.

"Come, then," Irons said. "Let's give you a closer look. Behold Phoenix Academy, Marcus Unblood. Whatever you are expecting—expect more. It will still be greater than that yet."

Chapter 210 (I) Campus [I]

I will never forget the first moment I walked past those walls. Those walls that climbed higher than the sky itself. Those walls that cast shadows so long they could drown mountains. Those walls grander than any fortress and greater than anything I could have dreamed of...

To know that they were things built by the hands of man was both humbling and inspiring. And those walls were only the beginning of wonder, not the end, for past them lay the heart of the future, the heart of who I would eventually become.

Some claim that all Pathbearers are forged in battle, watered by fire. If so, then before the bloodshed, before the flame, there needed to be a seed, and Phoenix Academy was that seed for me.

I would have been nothing without this. Nothing.

-Master Vera Lowe, Phoenix Academy Alumna

Even after arriving at the Jump Tower, it still took a while for Irons and Shiv to reach the university. Along the way, the Deathless noted some very interesting features in the surrounding communities.

They were much further away from Flame Crown Castle and the Yellowstone Supervolcano now. A dense net of mana keeping the prisoners suppressed could be barely seen over the horizon, shimmering like a distant conflagration in the night. The people here were also unburdened by fear. Much like the worshipers at the morgue, they continued on with their lives and laughed and lived with such lightness that it took Shiv by surprise.

Most buildings in this district were flatter and wider here. They were mostly residential, and Shiv counted one mini-mansion after another. That was already enough to convince him that he was in a place festering with nobility, but that wasn't all. There were also charging stations on the street, large electric slabs with two jutting prongs meant to provide any passing automata with all the sustenance they needed, free of charge. The pavement was clean, the grass even greener, the flowers ever brighter, their fragrance practically euphoric. Even the air tasted crisper, to the point where one could get addicted to breathing it in.

Between the mansions were larger complexes. Some of them were malls, places where countless shops were clustered together. These complexes were multi-story, with bridges running in between and people, so many people, clustered within. In fact, there were more people out and about around here than there were in Blackedge.

Aside from the malls, there were also playgrounds where children wrestled and play-fought without any hint of worry. Beside the obstacle courses, there were junior marksman ranges where anyone was free to demonstrate their skills in daily competitions or monthly tournaments, as denoted by signs, open-air wrestling rings for casual sparring, and racetracks running in long paths behind the mansions.

Then there were cafés of all sorts on the ground floor. Tables and chairs lined the outsides of these establishments, with Pathbearers debating each other about the news or current events between exchanges about popular philosophies or other esoteric ideals.

As Shiv looked to his left, he saw a child wrestling with a brutally built automaton, trying to push it beyond the limits of the ring. To his right, the rich aroma of coffee and tea mingled as the ceaseless clamor of clicking tongues and echoing speakers filled the air. On the second level of these cafés were study halls.

Shiv saw Pathbearers seated before wide windows, looking outside with a mug to their right and a mess of documents sprawled before them. They worked, they read, and they incubated their life of physical and emotional leisure, leveraging this cushion for intellectual rigor.

And then, something else struck him. There were so many children here, and so many new mothers. Diminutive bots and toddlers chased each other without care, giggling as their families looked on. The adults here gave off an air of privilege and authority. More than a few of the Pathbearers were Masters, and they made it known through the breadth and density of their mana fields. Some were clad in heavy armor, their regalia expensive, their weapons decorated with crusted gems or delicate relics. Such was the show of will, wealth, and skill.

But it was also a level of opulence he found off-putting. He had known wealthy Pathbearers in Blackedge, and they'd left a sour taste in his mouth with their habits, the way they felt entitled to everything they wanted, and how demented their appetites had become.

He despised them for their softness, because just as a Pathbearer could adapt to extreme violence and struggle, without it, they grew weaker, they grew fragile.

And the very idea of weakness filled Shiv with dread.

Such was what he learned working at the Swan-Eating Toad. There had been Master-Tier warriors there too. They came in demanding every meal possible, complaining about the smallest details, throwing their thorny, impassive exploits around as if a hammer to wield against the servers. Georges hated them, and because of that, Shiv inherited the same loathing. He hated them for the way they acted, for how fat they got after years of supposedly being specimens sculpted for performance in war.

But there was a difference between the wealthy and privileged at Blackedge and in the Capitol. Here, few were so decayed. Arrogant, yes; the stench of entitlement remained. But they all clung to that aesthetic of the battle-ready Pathbearer, of the wise and all-knowing scholar, of the faithful acolyte.

"This is the reward for many people," Irons said. Shiv looked at the Captain and noticed how the man spoke without looking at him. Instead, Irons had his eye on the same things he did: the people, the children, the houses. Shiv felt like the man also saw them, but perhaps in a different way, perhaps for different reasons.

"You don't like this much either, huh?" Shiv asked. It was a question meant to provoke a response so that he could drag out more of the man's personality.

The Captain didn't answer for a while, and then he simply sighed. "No, I have no issue with them. I simply think they're wrong."

"About what?" Shiv asked.

"They think they've earned a final reward. They think it's over."

"That what's over?" Shiv continued, probing.

"They think they've won." Irons finally turned to look at him. "But I know there is no victory. There is no 'done.' You have to keep going. If you don't—"

"Eventually, the world eats you." Shiv finished his thought. "It's because they have too much."

Iron frowned. "Too much of what? Wealth? Leisure?"

"No, peace. Nothing's attacking them. Nothing's tearing into them. The System isn't forcing them into another ugly brawl." Shiv sighed, but it was a half-hearted one. Despite feeling envy for what these people had, all the leisure they got to experience, he had the weight of arrogance and privilege of his own. He couldn't be struck down, and he enjoyed the battle. He enjoyed struggling; he enjoyed

hardship. And if these people fought the war to flee from effort, then he would enjoy telling himself that they were weak.

Psycho-Cartography:

All egos want to be fed. Yours is no different. But we might have the superior claim compared to these people.

They continued on through the academy district. More houses, more bazaars and malls, more schools, more clubs, more cafés, more smiling faces, the shoulders below them loose, devoid of tension, empty of stress. The people here were living in a different world.

It was not long until they arrived at the front gates of Phoenix Academy. To call it vast was a woeful understatement. The shadows crawled over Shiv long before the fullness of the walls even came into sight. It was like standing at the foot of a mountain that rose at a 90-degree angle.

There were turrets sticking out from the wall in a regular pattern, as well as non-human observers gliding along its length, scouring the land for any unseen threats. But among the Divination dimensionals, there were students, automatons, and Prismatic Guards.

He was close enough to also feel the overwhelming mana flooding out from the layered spells coiling around the academy. A storm of crashing hail bombarded the academy grounds, and large chunks of ice fell in a brutal downpour. There were still students that dared to take flight through the air, dodging and weaving between the projectiles.

The heavy front gates to the Phoenix Academy loomed open, the gateway running twenty meters wide and twice again as tall. Right above, there was a vast face carved of stone carved into the wall, with eyes made from gliding focus crystals that channeled floodlight beams of Divination onto the ground, sweeping through every path that flowed beneath. The traffic flowing in and out of the academy was

crippled right now, with barely more than a few students coming out and a singular convoy of what seemed to be hungover students currently staggering back in.

The sound of heavy bells ringing let out a trailing jingle that began at an extreme pitch, squealing high before it skated down to a drumming low.

"Evening approaches," the stone face carved into the canopy walls rumbled, its voice that of a collapsing landslide. "Do not be late for your classes, and do not be fools either. For if you slip away from your classes, you deprive yourself of growth, of becoming the Pathbearers you were destined to be."

"You tell 'em, Scowl!" one of the drunken students called out. Shiv looked at her as she threw her head back and laughed. A series of hiccups escaped from her, and she stumbled, nearly tripping on her own trailing robe, before two of her friends caught her, almost falling over themselves as they did.

She wore an updated uniform compared to the one Shiv had on earlier. Her boots were more polished, fitted with a set of slacks, and she had a long and flowing skirt pinned with clattering badges, buttons, and glistening elixirs. Then there was her coat. It flowed in three parts, with blue streams of fabric trailing off her side, and then black and gold. A wide, vertical line that lined her back was decorated with the representation of a woman holding a vial high while aiming a strange implement that seemed to be a tuning fork. Shiv recalled seeing her among the Ascedants in the Rubix Well. Maidenthe Genius.

Shiv reactively shifted his position, placing Irons between him and the drunken idiot, seeing that the cult of Maiden ran deep even in the academy.

"Oh, Captain Irons!" the large stone face said cheerily, its demeanor shifting in an instant. "You've returned, and with a new face in tow. Who is that, I must ask? An acolyte of the Genius?"

"New student," Irons said without raising his voice, and suddenly the scowling being carved above the massive gate let out a booming laugh.

"Another one! Good, good! The more nested behind these walls, the better! I welcome you, sproutling, to Phoenix Academy. Your journey has likely been long, and your struggles must have been grave. I congratulate you. Though know that they were only the beginning, so steel yourself."

"Yeah, uh, sure," Shiv said, not sure how he was supposed to respond to the stone-faced entity. He leaned in closer to Irons. "What is that thing, anyway?"

"This 'thing' here?" the stone face asked, interjecting without any hint of offense. "I am simply the awakened spirit that guards this great place's exterior. I am what happens when a masterful craftsman erects glorious structures, and when those structures are imbued with enough investiture and mana over the course of use. Like a cauldron brewing a medicinal concoction, I dreamed, then I thought, and thus I became."

"Huh. Wait, so walls can awaken just like weapons do?"

"Of course," the stone face replied. "Walls can also be excellent at hearing and possess high levels of awareness. You must be very new here, at the heart of our civilization, to lack this knowledge."

Shiv had no idea what the wall was getting at, and reading the confusion on his face, the strange being that wasn't entirely a wall elaborated. "Before Phoenix Academy was an academy..."

"Oh, here we go again: the illustrious military history rehash," a heavily armed and only moderately drunk student drawled, making a show of stifling a yawn. Between his flapping coat, Shiv saw the glint of reinforced steel armor and a partially rusted broadsword swinging from his hip. "Love hearing it every other day, Scowl."

The stone face's violet gaze fell on the student, its expression flinty. "In that case, you might also like it when I tell your beloved Clarice about the other girl I saw you wanderin' around with, Vincent."

The armored student choked and straightened his back. "...Doesn't mean I can't listen to it every other day!" he finally managed.

"Then I will be glad to remind you once more," the stone face continued. "Before Phoenix Academy was an academy, it was a fortress, the first of its kind, meant to protect the outskirts of the then-nascent Yellowstone City. It was a harsh age then, with threats coming from all sides. Mutants from the north, the scarred ones from the south, monsters from all corners, from the skies, from the seas. We were besieged constantly. And so, the Ascendants, only recently made gods, were in need of instruments—natural, unnatural, or in-between—to support their efforts. And I was one such wonder."

Shiv noted that the stone face spoke with no small hint of pride, and he was interested in hearing what it had to say.

"Between Enoch's brawn and Maiden's genius, I was constructed to serve as not only an all-seeing set of walls to guard any Pathbearer that passes by from invisible threats, hidden foes, and circumspect circumstances, for in dire circumstances, I was also meant to serve as a mighty shield, wielded by Halsur's blunt blows that could flatten the entirety of the horizon."

Then the stone-faced thing laughed. "Against the Storm King's minions, I endured. Against the Phoenix of the inner flame, I prevailed. Though my stone melted, and though I gained many scars, I grew until finally I grew thoughts. And thus I was, and I remain still."

As the stone-faced guardian finished his boast, Shiv focused his Farsight on a crack in the wall and saw something that caught his attention: chains of divine spellstuff slipping through. Their shapes were minute, like breadcrumbs dotting the space within the stone of the academy walls, but they were there. The power of the Ascendants lurked here as well. No getting away from the bastards, he thought to himself. Then he jolted as he remembered he was supposed to be a new student who came from a far-flung place with lesser wonders.

"Whoa!" Shiv said, exaggerating the awe he felt.

"Indeed, student. Whoa." The stone guardian let out another booming laugh just as Shiv and Irons passed underneath the gate. "Anyhow, welcome to Phoenix Academy. I will get to know you in time, young one, and perhaps you will learn to understand me as well. But that depends on whether you wish to have a conversation with this old protector." The stone face sighed. "Quite a lonesome existence being bound here."

"Ignore him," Irons said flatly. Despite this, the corner of the man's lip twitched, and there was almost a smile on his face. "If you humor him as I did, you will eventually learn he can manipulate you into doing his bidding."

"Slander! Slander and lies!" the stonewall grumbled.

"He has a taste for opals, onyxes, and other precious gems. He will offer to tell you secrets if you feed him, but his secrets are mostly meaningless pieces of trivia and gossip."

An exaggeratedly offended gasp came from behind them. "Foul! Disingenuousness! You offend me, Captain Irons! Do not listen to him, student. He simply seeks to keep my favor bound only to him."

The Captain shook his head as they came out on the other side of the gate. Just then, a large piece of ice slammed down on the ground. It impacted with the force of a falling boulder, and a wave of explosive shrapnel tore through the air.

A few pieces bounced off Shiv's body. Irons didn't react at all, and neither did most of the other students. Some of them were flung off their feet, but rather than being injured, their bodies came aglow with mana, and ripples of Dynamancy bled out from them. They whooped in glee as they spun weightlessly through the air.

That was when Shiv felt the collective chain of spells lining the sky above him like a mess of interlocking constellations, imposing its will upon the earth and the students. The massive chunks of hail weren't falling without control. They were imbued with it, and every single person struck went flying to an exaggerated extent.

A notification appeared before Shiv's eyes.

You are now within Phoenix Academy.

You are currently listed as an unknown guest.

Limited voting privileges and on-campus options assigned: Options unavailable

Chapter 210 (II) Campus [I]

Shiv wasn't sure what that was about, but his attention was divided by another matter, namely, how the students were cheering and laughing as more of them were launched into the air. It was a surprising scene, witnessing dozens of Pathbearers cheering as they were flung every which way. Those struck dead-on by the massive hulks of falling ice were unharmed as well.

Chunks of frozen substance burst against them, and rather than inflicting harm, it encased them in additional layers of protection. Soon they were colliding with each other in midair. Puffs of white swelled wide, and flakes of snow began to fall.

As Shiv looked up, he saw a midair snowball fight taking place, and joyous laughter rained down in an incessant chorus. Teams were forming in the air, separated based on the color and insignia of the coats and capes flowing behind their backs. Shiv saw capes of purple and green, black and gold, red and yellow, and all of them were pelting each other with chunks of ice, having a merry time, even as other students below simply walked on, utterly indifferent to the mock combat taking shape overhead.

Beyond the aerial snowball fight, observers flew to and fro, as did members of the Prismatic Guard. They scoured the Academy grounds, patrolling with lances pointed high and clawing at the ground with their mana fields. As the students played, there were others on guard, others prepared to do violence on their behalf. And so it suddenly felt like this Academy was a refuge, a place that was made to delay the point where one had to face all the strife and death beyond these walls.

Shiv came to a halt just a few steps away from the gate. He watched as a girl curled into a ball in the air, taking snowballs from all sides. She laughed, and though she was a young woman, the way she expressed her mirth was that of a child. Shiv tried to remember when he ever laughed like that, if he ever did. And he couldn't. He had never been this carefree. He had never been this loose, this untroubled. His entire life, there was the hint of violence, the hint of starvation, the hint of struggle.

These weren't Pathbearers. These were still children, even if they were the same age as he.

He caught up with Irons a second later, no longer interested in the snowball fight. The novelty faded. A feeling of alienation returned to him, and Shiv was himself again. The wonder didn't last. For a moment, he thought he could have acclimated to this place, that he could have considered himself one member among the other students. He was wrong. Even if he hadn't been the Deathless, there was too much separation between him and the unscarred ones who lived here.

Another block of ice fell, but Irons swatted it aside as if it were a pebble rather than a person-sized chunk of matter. It crashed into a few more students, and they let out surprised yelps before tumbling off into the air. The two of them strode on, walking down a red brick path, flanked by verdant lawns ripe with blooming flowers, and cleaved down the middle with something loosely approximating a trench line. Within the trenches were nice wooden panels and a set of doorways leading to a subterranean structure of some kind. Shiv was interested in what lay down there, as he could sense a great deal of students coming in and out.

He guessed there was a teleportation station down there, since some of the students suddenly manifested. That begged the question: if they had a circuit of jump stations here, why couldn't they have directly teleported within the university? Security, probably, he thought to himself. Too much risk. It's a closed-loop system. Private transportation network for the academy and the academy alone.

"Don't judge them too harshly," Irons said. There was a softness to his voice, and he tilted his head to give Shiv a brief look. Irons was a hard man to read, but in that moment, Shiv realized he had more in common with the captain than he imagined. There was a sense of alienation that came with Irons as well.

He didn't belong here any more than Shiv did.

"They're not Pathbearers," Shiv said. It was more observation than accusation.

"No," Irons agreed. "But in time they might be."

"Might," Shiv said. "Seems all this is a playground of some kind. Not so different from all the ones we've passed by getting here."

"It is. All individuals are made for games," Irons said. "We play games to simulate the circumstances of strife without tasting the full bitterness of its consequences."

"Seems to me that just leaves you ignorant and unprepared," Shiv shot back.

"Or it leaves you un-traumatized and fresh." Irons turned to him once more. "If you had a child, would you want them to live your life?"

That made Shiv's mind grind to a halt. The answer, quite immediately, was no. Though Shiv thought his experiences made him resilient, imagined himself to be unbreakable and implacable; the thought of having someone he cared about suffer everything he did made his stomach twist. He was fine with his own experiences. This was his life. It made him stronger. But not everyone was him. He knew that. And not everyone was meant to endure that much violence.

"So you do understand," Irons said. "Good. It took me a little too long to learn that lesson. And there were consequences that came with that."

"What lesson?" Shiv asked. "That not everyone can live up to your namesake?"

Irons almost grunted a laugh. "That not everyone should. And that sometimes what makes you a formidable Pathbearer leaves you a ghost of a person."

"Yeah," Shiv replied, slightly haunted by those words. Ghost of a person.

They simply walked for a few moments, leaving Shiv's thoughts to drift. Finally, Irons sighed. "I am worried about you. I am uncertain if I can stop you if you intend to harm my students."

This came out of nowhere, but Shiv took it as a sign of comfort as well. Irons didn't trust him, but he wanted certainty. And that gave Shiv a chance to oblige him. "I'll try not to start anything here. Don't wanna hurt any of these ki—uh, students, either. But I won't bullshit you, the System has it out for me something bad, and it will probably have it out for you soon too. You best be prepared for that."

Irons grunted in acknowledgement. He knew. With his encounter with Daughter, he knew. "You are blooded. They are not. Remember this."

"I'll do what I can to keep them safe," Shiv reassured him, understanding what Irons was trying to stress.

"And exercise more diplomacy and subtlety," Irons added.

“Magnolia started shit. Wasn’t the other way around. I was soft enough with her. The easy thing would be to twist her head backward and paste her body.”

“Mhm. But we have a duty to be responsible—even against those who mean us harm. You don’t need to be soft. But consider what kind of resolution you wish to reach. There is always consequence. We might be able to pay, but other people will not.”

“Then they should be a bit wiser too, shouldn’t they?” Shiv said, scoffing slightly. “She was there looking for a bruising. Hell, I would have been justified to put her down. She was planning to murder a crippled Adept.”

“Yes,” Irons said. “But this is not about her. Magnolia of Lutherbrook does not matter. This is about us. What kind of Pathbearer do you want to be? The academy may not be able to give you greater power, but perhaps it can give you something to desire in peace, young man.”

The Deathless thought about that for a beat. “I love cooking. I already have something.”

“That’s good. But you will likely have more. Sometimes, virtue is its own reward.”

Philosophy 32 > 33

Shiv breathed in and looked up. Spell patterns arced and twisted above them. They clashed together as waves of mana unleashed new waves of cascading ice. While the massive tsunamis of frost fell, people carried on to their classes and chattered away around Shiv and Irons. Even while they did that, they focused on dodging and avoiding the falling chunks of ice. And Shiv understood why. Irons spoke of play. Getting hit was fun, but it also levied a slight consequence of weightlessness rather than the usual pain.

If one could dodge a rain of heavy hail, then one could increase their Reflexes skill. It wouldn't be like actual combat, but Shiv had to admit, it wasn't a bad substitute either.

"You might be right. I guess we are made for games," he muttered to himself, smiling slightly. Instead of dodging the ice, Shiv used his feeble Hydromancy to try to push the spraying shrapnel and falling chunks aside. He didn't have that much power, so the chunks usually still hit his face. But as they did, he forced himself to remain grounded, using his Shapeless Tides to parry the Dynamancy set to sever him from the floor.

A few hundred meters away, a tower-sized building began to descend. As it approached the soft grass, he watched in surprise as the vegetation retreated, leaving a 400-meter-wide patch of soil for the descending edifice to impale itself upon. As it finally landed, Shiv heard a loud ping echo from atop and saw that there was a ring jutting out from the apex of the building. A quivering haze of unattuned mana bled from within the ring, and just then a shriek tore through the air as an automaton student blasted through the center of the ring with flames trailing from its hands and feet.

"And Dynamo is in the lead!" the building declared. Passing through the ring gave the automaton a boost of speed, and folds of air resistance wrapped around it. A second later, a second and third Pathbearer passed through the ring as well, and the chase was on. Shiv realized it was part of a racing circuit. The place truly was a larger playground, but that wasn't so bad. Not so bad at all.

As they walked further inside the academy, Shiv saw the tip of a massive archway peeking over another set of buildings. From it came great pulses of mana. Mana that fueled the spells constantly shifting above. Mana connected to the four mithril spires that lined each corner of the academy. Mana that flowed forth from a gate beneath that arch, where the preserved remains of a fallen coliseum lurked. And there, Adam and the others lingered. It was strange to be so close, to know a secret about the university that none of the students and most of the faculty didn't.

As that thought weighed on Shiv's mind, he watched as more people filtered into nearby buildings. The interior of the academy was comprised of semi-circular buildings. They were pointed inward toward the gate, and their curves seemed like a defensive bulwark. Trench lines trailed into them as well,

connecting to their sides, and Shiv guessed that the subterranean jump points connected to each of the buildings as well.

"We're going there," Irons said, pointing to the first arching structure before them. It seemed to be a thing made from glossy marble. It had two large panes of glass dotting the outer edges of the building, but the rest was cold and repulsive. A few colonnades stuck out from its top, rusted and cracked. It stood apart from the rest of the campus and seemed to belong more on a battlefield.

"Miriam Hall," Irons said. "The administrative quarters. It's also where the faculty conduct their sessions."

"Why's it look like hammered shit?" Shiv asked.

"Tradition and history, mostly. It was one of the few remaining hard points left over from the time this place was a fortress and not an academy. The Avatars at the time made their stand here with what remained of the prismatic guard. It was held at a brutal price. The other structures were flattened, but though Miriam Hall sustained brutal damage and most of the Pathbearers assigned to its defense were slain, it didn't collapse, not even after a mana bomb of great power was detonated within its depths."

But as Irons finished speaking, the Deathless felt a force build within himself. It rattled through his body and tore out from his mind, and he gritted his teeth. "Shit. Great. This again. Been a while."

He stumbled. Iron caught Shiv's arm.

"What's wrong?" the captain asked.

Shiv didn't reply. Couldn't. This close to Miriam Hall, he felt an overwhelming wave of causality rip into him, and the vulgar hand of the System laid a finger upon him as it triggered a long-dormant aspect of his Non-Sequitur Skill and inflicted a vision upon his mind...