

Path of the Deathless (Book 2 Completed)

21 (I) Intercept

Should you encounter someone who bears the visage of an avian-themed helmet, you should know a few things. The first is that you are likely dead, for they are the elite assassins of Aviary, New Albion Secret Service. These killers have no past, no future, and exist in the present only to slay and break, vanishing back into the dark thereafter.

Most of them are selected from orphanages, stolen from hostile families as a final insult, or, according to certain rumors, even created as magically-enhanced homunculi in labs. Whatever the case, even a limited agent with their face exposed cannot be traced back to any history or background, for they never truly existed. In the end, they have only one purpose: to be used for assassinations and subjugation until they finally fail and are cast aside.

Yet there are those who survive—who manage to remain alive even after their former masters abandon them. But their fates are no better, and their eyes are no kinder. An assassin who has lived as a weapon their entire life rarely learns how to be anything else. And so they go from state-sanctioned killers to those who slay for the promise of mithril.

-Aviary: The Blades of New Albion

21 (I)

Intercept

“...Shiv!” Adam shouted. Shiv blinked and found the Young Lord holding him by the shoulders. The Umbral woman seemed to have left already. “Are you alright? Is it that book you got earlier? Did it reach into your mind? Or were you thinking about how to seduce that elf you just bumped into? Please say no. Please.”

“No,” Shiv breathed. “I just got another Quest.”

“What? *No! No!* Tell me you were going to seduce another one of these elves instead!”

“Adam,” Shiv said. The Young Lord quieted at Shiv’s sudden shift in demeanor. “We need to follow that Umbral. I think someone’s blackmailing her. They want her to bomb Passage. And if we fail, I think our way back up will get sealed.”

“Wait? Foreshadowing? When did you get Foreshadowing? I didn't know you had Foreshadowing!”

Shiv was straining his paltry Stealth Skill as much as he could as they left the library, but a few factors were working against him. The first was the aforementioned detail that his Stealth was barely in the Initiate threshold of things—just over twenty-one. The second was that he was one of the two extremely noticeable surfacers in a place mostly populated by Umbrals and spiderfolk. The last was the only other noticeable surfer was an idiot who didn't understand the meaning of avoiding attention, and who focused on actively interrogating Shiv rather than following the Umbral in silence.

After the Foreshadowing hit Shiv, he quickly explained to Adam what he glimpsed through the skill and what was at stake. They then followed the Umbral—who left the bookstore—but not before paying for and then asking the worker to hold all their purchased books.

Now, the twosome were pretending they were on a leisurely stroll. That just happened to take the same path as the Umbral woman with the acid burn on her face. The Umbral woman Shiv suspected to be a terrorist. Everywhere they walked, eyes swung to gaze upon them, fingers were pointed in their direction, and Adam only made it worse.

“Adam,” Shiv said through clenched teeth. “Can we at least *try* at Stealth.”

“No, because I *don't have a Stealth Skill*. Just like I don't have Foreshadowing.” Adam was practically raving now. “How? Tell me how? Why do *you* have Foreshadowing?”

“Because the world hates me, but the System wants me to have a fighting chance, it seems,” Shiv muttered. And that seemed to be the long and short of it. With all the ugly events Shiv ran into, developing Foreshadowing was like... *Fate Resistance*. Not quite a direct form of resistance, but something to buffer him from the dangers of life.

I can't tell if my luck is really bad, or really good, Shiv thought. Depends on the perspective, maybe.

Shiv picked up his brooch as Adam continued to talk at him. Valor now took on Shiv's role in trying to get Adam to quiet down. “Uh, operator. Person running this communications thing. I might have an emergency to report.”

A brief pulse of magical interference sounded from the brooch. “*And what emergency might that be, Honored Shiv?*”

The use of “honored” made Shiv cringe. He wasn't used to that. He wanted to tell the operator what he told Adam, but he paused. Right now, they were only going on his feelings. It might be better if someone with authority and influence tried to do this. More effective than just an outsider accusing an Umbral local of terrorism. One that likely

works at Passage, no less. “Actually, can you patch me through to Sister Uva? She’s a Psychomancer—”

“Esteemed Sister. Intel-0122. Uva Mettabon. Patching you through now.”

Shiv blinked. Mettabon was her last name? And was Esteemed Sister a rank? Intel-0122 would be her identification. Uva’s voice came out from Shiv’s brooch before he could think too much about this. *“Shiv. I pray to the Composer that you’re just yearning to hear my voice, and not about to tell me that trouble has found you.”*

He sighed. “Sort of. But not exactly my trouble. You’re probably not going to like this...” He kept a close eye on the Umbral as he narrated events to Uva. Meanwhile, Valor and Adam were exchanging threats in the background, ruining even the *concept* of Stealth. Thankfully, despite most of the city seemingly being aware of Shiv, the Umbral he was following was lost in her own world, wandering toward a prismatic crystal—the ones used to call demons to serve as public transport.

As he finished, there was a brief pause before Uva replied. *“You are right. I don’t like this... In fact, I hate it.”*

“I’m not lying to you. Foreshadowing—”

“I know of the skill. Some of the Weaveresses are Diviners by Path... Here: Cherished Sister. Tech-0002... Yunni Havata... Oh, Composer... She’s the Spatio-Dynamancy Director for all teleportation anchors in the restricted sections.”

“And she has one son, right?”

“How did you know—oh. Oh. Yes.” Uva bit back a frustrated growl. *“Shiv. I pray that you are wrong. I pray that this is a false alarm and your skill has confused you somehow. I pray for all these things, but I am going to bring this to my Weaveress—and ask her to assemble a few Shadow Cells in response.”* She sighed. *“I cannot tell if you’re blessed by luck or cursed with misfortune with all the problems you’re encountering.”*

Shiv chuckled. “I was thinking the same thing earlier. I’ll make you dessert later as an apology.”

“Better make it good, surfer. I’m also getting you and the other one’s items ready. You’re lucky I haven’t left on patrol yet—we might be able to get both of you armed... Well, we might be able to get the Young Lord armed if things go poorly. And you said you saw another raven in your vision?”

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“Crows too.”

“Then, I’ll need to inform the Weaveresses of Trapdoor as well—counterintelligence needs to know that we might have a New Albion problem on our hands.”

“I should have expected it to be them,” Valor spat. *“The Stolen Throne has eyes and blades everywhere. And I suspect that might even have something to do with your arrival.”*

“Mine?” Shiv.

“And the idiot’s,” Valor added. Adam’s face contorted in offense. *“The Young Fool came in with one of the ravens. You were attacked by them. Funding Vicar Sullain’s attempt at another war is exactly the type of thing New Albion might do.”*

Great. Spies. Deception. More ravens. “Hope this doesn’t end with me being thrown even deeper into the Abyss,” Shiv muttered. “At least I can probably survive the fall now.”

Yunni Havata summoned a demon and climbed aboard. A few Umbrals went with her. Shiv winced as he considered his options. If he and Adam got aboard, that just might spook her—she might seem oblivious right now, but she couldn’t miss two surfacers sitting near her.

“Well, we’re not getting on that. She’ll see us.” Adam studied the scene, his expression turning focused.

“Yeah,” Shiv replied. “Or maybe if we do spook her, it might end the operation. And then Uva and the others can detain her.”

“Curb your optimism,” Valor said with a note of severity. *“New Albion always has plans within plans. It’s more likely if you cut this string, another will be pulled and the same outcome will play out. No. If we want to stop this, we must target and eliminate this cell at its roots. Which means uncovering exactly what she means to do, and how she seeks to do it.”*

“I guess we’re not getting on that demon, then,” Shiv muttered. “We need another way of following her.”

“I got a way,” Adam said.

“You do?” Shiv asked, surprised.

“Yeah.” And the Young Lord displayed his idea by manifesting the fiery wings of a hawk on his back. Shiv blinked. Adam grinned. “What? You don’t have this skill? It’s very convenient. It lets me dash around—and even fly if I use it right.”

Shiv tried not to let his envy show. “How did you even get that?”

“Reflexes. Level that enough, and you’ll be surprised about what you’ll be able to achieve. I can follow her from a distance—pretend I’m sightseeing and all that. You should go to Passage first and try to get ahead. Intercept her there if something goes wrong. It’ll give us multiple chances to stop this if I lose her or for me to pin her down if something goes wrong on your end too.”

For a moment, Shiv said nothing. He just stared at Adam.

“What?”

“I didn’t realize you were capable of that,” Shiv said, blinking.

“Capable of what?” Adam asked, narrowing his eyes.

“Thinking things through.”

The Young Lord sneered. “You’re a bastard, Shiv.”

“No, I’m not mocking you. It’s... It’s a good idea. We can even stay in contact through the brooches.”

“Yes,” Adam muttered to himself. “I came up with a good plan. It’s almost like I was at an academy for this sort of thing, and was chosen as Team, Lance, Company, and Force Leader for each year of the annual War Games while I was at Phoenix.” The link to the origin of this information rests in

Shiv blinked. “Sounds impressive. I wish I was there to see that.”

The Young Lord opened his mouth to give a retort, but realized Shiv was being genuine. “Well... You might still see me in action yet. And not taken by surprise this time. If there are more of those tainted raven-faced bastards, then I want my pound of flesh as well.”

“Right,” Shiv said. He started looking around for another prismatic crystal—and realized he never summoned a demon before. It might take a bit too long fiddling around to learn how. Yunni’s demon was already carrying her into the air... Time to do something *creative*. “Hey, Adam. How high is your Physicality?”

“Why?” Adam asked, more curious than suspicious.

“Because I’m going to ask how far you think you can throw me next. The demons are still constrained by traffic rules and stuff. Maybe you can give a lift and vent some of that anger you got about me in the same moment.”

Silver Tongue > 3

The Young Lord quirked an eyebrow.

“You sure you can throw me that far?” Shiv said, clutching Valor tight. He didn’t want to drop his friend down somewhere onto the many streets, bridges, and alleys below. The problem with a big city was that there were a lot of places to get lost in. “Because... that’s over a kilometer away. I think.”

“Two and a half.” Adam smirked. The Young Lord’s wings were trailing fire through the air, and the locals were pointing and gawking at them everywhere. They took a parallel route to Yunni’s demon, pretending they were sightseeing. And they were, in a sense. It was just going to end with one of them throwing the other. It felt a bit weird letting Adam hold him like he was a newborn kitten, but Shiv put up with it. *I just hope there aren’t any people with a high Painting or Illustration Skill. It would kill my heart to see this moment immortalized.*

“Alright, I think we’re close enough now,” Adam said, eyeing a large demon-summoning platform that overlooked the lower levels of Passage. The plan was to chuck Shiv over there first—and for him to jump down thereafter. It was going to hurt a bit, but overall, it seemed like a pretty good deal. “Hey, Shiv.”

“Yeah?”

A burst of fire flashed out from the Young Lord’s wings as both acceleration and elevation began to climb.

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Yeah? Why? Are you doubting your throwing arm? Cramping up now?”

The Young Lord scoffed. “Well, you’re no coward.”

“You’re getting dangerously close to a compliment, Adam. Just chuck me. I’ll be fine.”

Adam drew in a breath. “My mother had that skill too. Foreshadowing.”

Shiv looked up at the other surfer. That was why Adam was so bothered. “Ah. I’m sorry. Can’t feel good seeing something she had manifest in someone like me.”

“No. I—you’re not like *them*. You were right.” Adam’s begrudging admission hit Shiv like a punch to the jaw.

He wasn’t expecting this from the Young Lord. And judging from the pained expression on Adam’s face, he wasn’t expecting himself to say it either.

“Alright. Put us both out of our miseries,” Shiv said. “Throw me before you actually start feeling affectionate.”

Adam barked a disbelieving laugh. “Yeah. Like that’ll ever happen.” And then, as he drew his arm back, he flapped his wings a final time, and a blast of speed accompanied his throw. A sudden surge of velocity pulled at Shiv’s insides as the world blurred around him. Demons, halted in traffic, zipped by below Shiv while people pointed up to note his passing. The wind felt nice against his body, whistling his approach to the target destination with wailing notes.

As Shiv sailed through the air, he wondered how far he could throw Adam. Shiv was pretty strong now too. Relative to before, at least. He didn’t think the Young Master’s Physicality was truly past the Adept Threshold yet, but between his wings and the height... *and his accuracy*. Shiv was dead-on approach for the platform. In fact, he was going to strike the center at a spiking angle.

He tucked in and braced, holding Valor close. He crashed into the platform like a round of artillery. The ground burst into fragments of stone, and several Umbrals making a slow approach jumped back in fright. Shiv felt his right arm and shoulder bruise, but beyond that, he felt perfectly fine. *System, thank you for Diamond Shell*. Without that skill, his insides would have suffered some serious damage. At the least.

“*We’ve landed?*” Valor asked.

Shiv waved at the surprised Umbrals, still recovering from his sudden appearance. And then, he was running toward the edge, preparing to jump again. “Only on the first platform. Adam’s got a damn good throw.” Not a surprise considering who his father was. Legend had it that Roland Arrow never missed a shot. Shiv could believe those legends, and Adam was, for most purposes, a lesser version of his father.

As Shiv leaped over the edge, he heard one of the Umbrals behind him call out—telling him to think things through. He just laughed. They thought he was doing something drastic—and that death could contain him. Wrong on both accounts. Once more, Shiv was falling, and he was surprised to discover how used to falling he was by now. Comfortable enough to have a conversation with Valor. “Hey, Valor, what do you know about New Albion? Why do you think them doing this now has something to do with me? Foreshadowing showed me her planning this for months in advance.”

“Because New Albion has plans within plans and connections everywhere. Her preparations were made in advance, but the orders could have come just days before. You learn that most major events usually have the groundwork laid years in advance. When the actual moment comes, it is not truly spontaneous, but the collision of many variables long since set into motion—and spurred to a final burst of acceleration.”

The ground was fast approaching. Shiv aimed for a patch of grass and soil by the side. He missed and made a crater in the stones beside it. “Adam Arrow I am not,” he coughed, crawling out from the small depression he left. Several Umbrals and spiderfolk reacted to his presence with alarm. A few of them were talking into their brooches. Good. Shiv was looking for them. “You,” he said, pointing at a Weaveress.

She jolted with fear and pointed at herself. “Me?”

“Bring me to security. They should be expecting my arrival.” He looked around at all the people entering and leaving Passage and winced. “And maybe set up a quarantine too. You’re about to have a serious problem.”

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

21 (II) Intercept

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Intercept

“How did you tear up your clothes so quickly? Why did I even get them for you?” Uva looked at Shiv with exasperation as he offered her only a casual smile. “And what’s this about you jumping off a nearby building? What’s wrong with taking a demon like the rest of us?”

“Was just trying to see the sights of your stunning city...” Shiv said, looking Uva up and down. She was wearing a heavier set of armor. Also nightglass in composition, to his surprise. He didn’t like that as much as the leather armor she was wearing for *certain* reasons, but he had to admit that he liked the general aesthetic. “...before saying hi to its more *stunning citizens*.”

Uva closed her eyes as she tried not to let her embarrassment show. Behind her, the other Umbrals looked on in disbelief. Some of their jaws dropped at Shiv’s audacity—and the young Umbral from earlier openly started laughing at Uva. The Weaveresses that accompanied them were decidedly more stoic.

There were three of them, and they each wore cloaks of invisibility, leaving only their mandibled heads exposed for now. Valor explained to him that this was *Trapdoor*, serving as the Composer’s personal bodyguard and counter-intelligence. The way they presented themselves was formidable as well. Their movements were so quick and smooth that it made Shiv shiver. It was just like trying to track the movements of an actual spider back when he was but a boy.

I think one of them might be able to stab me over a hundred times before I even react, Shiv thought. He wondered if he could survive that. Thinking back to his brawl with the raven made him believe so, but nightglass could still cut him. It wouldn’t take much for them to go for his eyes or neck.

They were assembled right along the main staff entrance for Passage. Apparently, staff worked on the higher levels, and where Shiv left through the other day was an exit specifically meant for essential personnel. When he asked why they hadn't started procedures to lock the place down, Uva simply shook her head and elaborated.

"Weave is a personal dimension. But though the Composer expands the realm, and we work toward self-sufficiency every day, there are still many materials we need from the outside world to function—trade we do with the other Faiths and sisters that need to come to and fro after their missions. Choking Passage might choke the city—activating and deactivating the teleportation anchors cannot be done in an instant. More importantly, though, new orders came down from the Composer: She wants the people behind this plot captured preferably, and slain to a man if there is no other choice."

So, they were going to do things the hard way.

Shiv's brooch crackled again, and Adam's voice came through. *"Alright. She's landed—I'm watching her make her way inside. Shiv? How are things on your end?"*

"We're ready for her," Shiv said. He nodded at the Weaveresses and all three pulled their cloaks over their faces. They vanished in an instant. The unease inside him grew. *Invisible... giant spiderfolk... that have Paths of their own... I can only imagine the amount of spider-related nightmares that would sweep through the Republic if they knew about Weave.*

"Alright. I'm touching down." There was a spike of interference on Adam's end before the words picked back up.

"You're cleared for the building," Uva said, speaking to Adam through Shiv's brooch. "Just keep trailing behind her. A few Weaveresses will be with you shortly. They will detain her and take things from there."

"Yeah, just make sure you have my armor and bow," Adam complained. "I came all this way flying through wearing the clown outfit you gave me. Meanwhile, your wingless boyfriend's jumping around the city, looking like some kind of pulp hero on a book cover. It's insulting—"

But Uva wasn't listening to Adam anymore. As Shiv met her eyes, she let out a worried breath. "Again. I really, really hope you're wrong."

"Yeah, I wasn't planning on getting involved with a conspiracy to bomb Passage. I didn't even manage to get my books yet—and my trip to the Cradle got delayed again." Shiv sighed. "But fate calls. One can only answer."

"Fate seems to call you a lot," Uva said, her eyes narrow.

"Would you rather it call someone else?" he replied.

She rolled her eyes. “No. But I would rather it gave you a bit more time to breathe in between. You’ve done quite a bit for the city.”

“That’s very jealous of you, Sister Uva. Want me all for yourself?”

The young Umbral of the group started giggling louder. The others averted their eyes out of respect for Uva—but he knew she was going to catch hell from them after this was over. He just couldn’t help it.

“Dinner and dessert best be exceptional,” Uva said, her threat veiled but clear.

Too bad for her, Shiv loved a challenge. “I promise to make your eyes roll.”

Valor whistled. The young Umbral mimed fanning herself. Uva spun and turned to glare at her. She froze.

“Sister,” Uva said. “Is your hand having a cramp?”

“No, but my heart might be.” She grinned. Uva didn’t. The young Umbral stopped grinning.

“Sisters. Honored Shiv. Great Valor Thann,” a mechanical voice intoned.

Shiv turned to see a tall, thin automaton approaching them. It bore a staff with a focus crystal and wore a long, silk cloak of midnight black. Their face seemed to be made of some manner of translucent plastic rather than metal, and Shiv could see a complex array of circuits inside them—along with the glow of their *power core*. “The target has been secured. Your presences have been requested, however. They wish to see if Honored Shiv might be able to experience another Foreshadowing episode to help us trace the true assailants during interrogation.”

Shiv looked at Uva and noted her surprise. “I... yes, of course, Cherished Metven,” she said. “As you say.” Uva looked to Shiv, and he received a thought from her. *“I didn’t expect them to be so fast.”*

Me neither, Shiv thought back. The Weaveresses left a few seconds ago. Them finding her and containing her that fast in this large of a building is... terrifying.

Sister Uva’s face became a look of vicarious pride. *“May we all become as efficient as they someday.”*

Oh, I’m definitely going to. You think they’ll teach a surfer their ways?

She considered his question. *“If you asked me a day ago, I would have said never. If you asked me after your audience with the Composer, still probably not. If what you said is true, and you just averted a major terrorist attack on Passage... we’ll see.”*

And that was practically a yes to Shiv. Life sure was good when you were a big, damn hero.

They followed Metven through a series of secret passageways. Apparently, the Arachnae Order had their own spatial tunnels to move quickly inside Passage. Shiv was impressed. The scale of this operation made Blackedge look like a backward hovel—and increasingly, Shiv thought that was accurate. But this led into another question: Why was Blackedge so diminished when a great hero such as Roland Arrow was leading it? The man was known even by the Abyssal Nations. Surely, that meant he was worthy of being a full City Lord, and not just the ruler of a town.

“Cherished Metven, is it?” Valor asked.

“Correct, Great Valor Thann.”

“None of that. I’ll keep using your title if you stop invoking mine. I just wanted to mention that I am impressed. There aren’t many automata that manage to become Cherished under the Composer—nor become full Dynamancers.”

The automaton stopped mid-step in astonishment. “You can tell?”

Shiv was impressed too. “How?” Shiv could see the automaton, and even he couldn’t tell what kind of mage he was dealing with.

“The Skill Fusion of Pyromancy, Cryomancy, Geomancy, Hydromancy, and Aeromancy is a rare feat for any mage—but automata need to especially exhibit focus and control with Aeromancy due to the dangers of ungrounded electricity. And I can hear the bottom of your staff crackling in a way that is unique to true Dynamancy.”

Shiv, Uva, the other Umbrals, and the automaton shared a unified look of awe.

“I’m beginning to wonder which of us is actually sealed in a dagger and blind to the world,” Shiv muttered.

“Ah, it’s nothing, boy. You just need to learn to listen and observe. Seeing is one thing, but interpreting details with all your senses and using logical reasoning to process the information is the mark of a learned man.”

“You know, Valor? I agree with them. You’re pretty great.”

And at that, the man in the dagger laughed proudly.

“You achieved Dynamancy?” Uva said, blinking at Metven. “Remarkable... You were struggling for so long. I remember your frustration and efforts. It is well deserved, Cherished Metven. But... why didn’t you tell us?”

The automaton let out a very human laugh. “Because I am still processing it, too. I wanted to declare my triumph only when I was truly ready and possessed true control over my new abilities.”

Uva nodded. “My congratulations. Again. You do the Composer proud.”

“Thank you, Sister Uva,” Metven said, gesturing for them to pass through a final set of doors. Shiv arched an eyebrow as he noted the doors to be of dense metal and lined with spellwork. *Doors leading into a teleportation anchor.* He wondered if the order conducted their interrogations in some place hidden. Maybe out in the Abyssal Wilderness. Or in another hidden spot. He wasn’t sure how much he liked this cloak and dagger business, but he supposed that when your enemy operated in the shadows, it helped to walk the same darkness as well.

As the Umbrals filtered into the room. Shiv turned to examine the automaton’s staff. He still couldn’t hear anything. “Nice job.”

Metven chuckled. “Thank you, Honored Guest. Effort, lubricant, and oil gets you a long way.”

“Imagine how far you could get if death wasn’t an obstacle,” Shiv joked.

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“Ah. Such is the dream.” The automaton placed a hand on Shiv’s shoulder. In that moment—

Foreshadowing: Replacing the Arachnae automaton was the result of more luck than planning. The raven just so happened to be of the same core model as Metven, and be practically aligned based on general skills.

Needing to ensure Metven remain stationed at Passage, it made the kill just before the Cherished could achieve a Master-Tier skill of its own, and took on the components of its victim. For months after, it lived as the one it replaced, learning the secrets and mechanics of Passage.

Fortunately, the assassin’s Foreshadowing made upholding its facade and stealing intelligence far easier.

And then, finally, came orders—orders sent by Aviary—of an essential mission, one that required the absolute collapse of the city’s spatial defenses...

Foreshadowing > 10

“So... where are we going?” the young Umbral called out. “Where did they put her?”

When Shiv came back to himself, his group was inside the teleportation chamber, while he stood just in the doorway. Uva looked back to Shiv, confused why he had stopped.

The Deathless was staring up at “Metven,” suddenly transfixed. And the raven was looking back at him, internal machinery screaming.

It has Foreshadowing too, Shiv realized. His own glimpse into who they were revealed it. That likely meant—

“*Shit*,” Shiv and the automaton muttered at the same time.

Uva frowned at them. “What is—”

Shiv lashed out, striking at the automaton’s face using Valor. He might as well have been standing still. A blast of incredible force hit him—launched him back-first into the chamber, knocking over Uva in the process. As he bounced off the far wall, Shiv felt several bones inside him break and one of his lungs burst.

Still, he landed on his feet and growled as he immediately began charging the automaton. He didn’t care if he was bleeding internally. He didn’t care if he died. A fight was on, and his blood was high.

Too bad for him, the mechanical raven didn’t feel the same way.

“Close it!” the automaton shouted into their brooch. The chamber’s doors slammed shut in an instant and sealed with several clicks. A protective spell took shape a moment later. The Umbrals—still stunned by what just happened—failed to respond in time. Shiv’s stomach dropped. He slammed into the door, insides jolting with agony. He punched it several times, then tried to lever it open with Valor.

But he knew it was pointless. He didn’t have the Physicality. He didn’t have the Reflexes. And with the way the spell patterns around them were forming, the intensifying glow and the rising temperature, Shiv knew what was coming next.

All teleportation anchors had failsafes and *purification* measures. Among the simplest was *fire*. Because with enough heat, viruses and even most unnatural diseases died. It worked pretty well against vampires and invaders too. Now, Shiv and the Umbrals were going to enjoy a firsthand experience of said purification unless they found a way to break out of the chamber.

“What—” Uva sputtered. “Operator!” she called into her brooch. “Operator! We are—we are in a chamber! Do not trigger the purification mechanism! Do not! Operator!”

Shiv only heard interference coming from her brooch.

“And communications have been compromised again,” Valor mused, unnaturally calm. *“Shiv. I believe I can guess what situation we find ourselves in. And I suspect that Nomos’s death might also be New Albion’s doing. In fact, it would fit their needs if I was taken back by the Court of the First Blood... Yes, some of this is truly starting to come together. How impressively devious...”*

“Yeah, well, I’m less inclined to praise the bastards who are about to burn me!”

Uva reached out and took him by the elbow. “Shiv? What just happened? Why did—”

“That’s not Metven. Metven’s dead. That’s a New Albion assassin that replaced them. It’s one of those ravens—the same kind that attacked Blackedge. And they’re about to turn us all to cinders if we don’t find a way out.”

Somehow, Uva’s face managed to get paler. She looked around and swallowed as her other sisters called into their brooches or unleashed spells against the anchor. “We can’t... Nothing short of a Master can force their way through these protections...”

Shiv stared at her, and a building tide of dread rose inside him. He wasn’t worried about himself—death was his nutrition. But Uva... the others... Watching them be incinerated might hurt his mind more than an attack from a Psychomancer.

And Valor knew this too. *“Steel yourself, boy,”* the dagger said. *“You are about to take a wound that may never heal. I have many. I know the moment when this comes. For the rest of you... The fire will be hot. But the pain will not last long. It will be quick.”*

“No,” Shiv snarled. He couldn’t accept that. He looked at Uva as she closed her eyes, straining her mind. A set of translucent spell patterns flared bright, but then she recoiled, clutching her head. Shiv caught her before she could fall.

“I can’t get through!” she coughed. Blood was leaking from her nose and eyes.

Shiv wiped the red from her face. “Are you alright?” he asked.

She shook her head, grimacing. “Soon, we won’t be anything at all.” She looked at her sisters. The youngest among them was frantically striking her daggers at the door. “It’s... a real shame. I won’t be able to have that dinner after all. Or make you another set of clothes you’ll immediately ruin.”

Shiv looked down at his torn up clothes. “You made these?”

She shrugged.

“They’re great. And Adam’s?”

“Thrift store.”

He couldn't help it. He laughed. Her smile grew bitter, but remained. She wrapped her arms around him and drew closer. "I suppose there are worse ways to go. The Composer will avenge us. Trust in that, Shiv."

But she was shaking, and he knew she was scared. So were the others.

But Shiv wasn't scared. He was *furious*. And he wasn't going to let life take anything from him. Not if he could help it. He would *die* before... before...

Shiv blinked. He had an idea. A very *painful, fatal* idea. "Are any of your Cryomancers?"

Uva blinked. "I have a Cryomancy Skill."

"You do? Damn, you're good at everything."

"It's not even at the Adept threshold yet," she muttered.

"Hopefully that's enough." Shiv looked to the others and waved for them to come in closer. "Alright. Get close. I don't know if I can do this well enough, and it might be a little gross, but it's our best shot." The Umbrals stared at him uncertainly. The room was getting hotter fast. They didn't have time. "Now!"

They rushed over and Uva just stared at him. "Shiv—"

"This isn't a last ditch attempt at polyamory, but you're probably going to hate it just as much," Shiv said, turning his Biomancy inward. "Truthfully, I hate it too. But maybe it can work. Maybe..."

"*What are you planning, boy?*" Valor said. "*Tell me your idea. I might be able to help.*"

"I can't heal myself very well. But I can make tumors." Shiv thought back to the masses growing all over him, even as the fire weaver tried to burn him. Pair that with his Diamond Shell... "Cancer expands. Cancer has mass. And I might just have enough durability to make a proper layer of insulation with a Cryomancer fighting the heat."

The other Umbrals gathered close, going back to back behind Uva. She looked at Shiv, trying to process his plan. But he already started. He bit back a cry of pain before he tore open his arms and sides, stretching out his skin and sinews, fusing them together as an ugly, messy layer of netting around the others.

The young Umbral gagged. The others looked on, horrified—chief among them, Uva. "Shiv! Stop! What are you doing!"

"This hurts about as felling much as I expected," he spat out between clenched teeth.

Biomancy > 20

“Thanks System,” Shiv whimpered. “Great consolation prize.”

Armored hands seized him by the chin. Uva was staring at him, blood still running from her eyes. “Stop—this, you’ll die!”

“Probably,” Shiv chuckled. He started forcing his body to *regenerate*, and the cancers began to spread. The tumors had the Diamond Shell gleam, too, which made Shiv more confident about his plan. Slowly, he began to encase the Umbrals in his flesh—which was really messed up, but the best he could do in a bad situation. *Please, System, let this work... I won't let them die... You can't make me...*

As Uva continued begging him to stop, Shiv found himself battling to stay conscious. *Well, we're at that point of pain. I sure as hell hope I can stop myself from screaming when the fire comes. My dying howls might just traumatize Uva and others worse than I already have.*

“Peace, Sister Uva, peace,” Valor said, trying to calm her. “His mind is set. Soon, you will be needed as well.”

Shiv blinked dark spots out of his eyes. There was little light inside the shelter he made from his flesh. A layer of tumors clutched the Umbrals tight and pressed Shiv’s head in deeper as it expanded out from the back of his neck. Uva’s face was *sheer misery*.

“You... look how I feel,” Shiv laughed.

She chuckled too, her throat thick with something else. “You... I won’t forget this... I won’t... I’m sorry...”

“Listen,” Shiv said. Outside, there came a sound of something sparking. Then the *flames* came, and pain beyond Shiv’s ability to describe followed. Whatever he was going to say died as he almost blacked out. Only the cold touch of Uva’s forehead pressing against his pulled him back from the darkness. “L-listen.”

She was shaking. Her eyes were closed. She placed her hand on his cheek. The other Umbrals stared at him with misted eyes as well. The youngest was outright sobbing. “I’m here,” Uva said. “I’m listening.”

He tried to keep speaking but—*holy felling gods why do these tumors feel like nerve endings!* There also came pressing waves of force, grinding at him, breaking things inside him. Shiv responded by generating more tumors to make up for the weakness of his muscles. If he made himself a dense mass of flesh, that would work where his Physicality failed.

To Shiv’s pride, he didn’t scream in Uva’s face. That would have been very impolite. And humiliating. Instead, he waited for all his nerves to die before he continued.

Through it all, he kept forcing his body to regenerate—never stopping—even as the flames melted layers of flesh and tissue away.

At least he got something out of it.

Diamond Shell > 59

“I-in a few moments, they’re... they’re going to come in. I hope.” Shiv swallowed. He dropped Valor. “One of you... hide Valor. T-the assassin has Foreshadowing too. And I think New Albion will try to steal the dagger if they get the chance.”

“*They would,*” Valor confirmed.

“Okay,” Uva said. There were clear streaks on her bloodied face. “We won’t let him be taken.”

“Good... but... next part’s important.” Shiv shuddered. He could feel his blood practically boiling inside of him. Diamond Shell was truly a double-edged sword. It was the only reason why they weren’t immediately evaporated, but it also *really* prolonged his suffering. “When the raven comes back in—I’ll open up my body. You need to be prepared for an ambush. The raven’s strong... At least one skill at Master Tier...”

Shiv lost all feeling in his legs. It felt like the flames were in his gut. But a wave of cold washed over him. Blinking, he saw an ice spell dancing between Uva’s hands and spreading around the inside of their tumorous chamber. The Umbrals were sweating, but they looked fine otherwise. Good. They weren’t dead. He tried to finish the rest of his thoughts, wanted to tell them that someone needed to run to find Adam—and that even more of the order might be compromised, but the only thing he could manage was a pained wheeze.

He blinked twice, and he felt darkness creeping into his vision. The last thing he felt before this death took him were cold arms embracing him one final time. Or so Uva thought.

Shiv returned as a Revenant inside his own fried corpse-shelter and watched Uva weep silently as she held him. She wasn’t the only one. The other Umbrals looked distraught and horrified at Shiv’s fate. Personally, he was kind of *pissed*. Lacking intangibility, Shiv *swam* out from his body using his Biomancy, passing through without compromising the structure. By this point, the flames were dimming, and the other sterilization spells were taking effect. He briefly felt a force pull at what felt like his soul, but it faded quickly.

And a few seconds later, the sound he wanted to hear came. The unlocking of the doors. The fading of its spell. And the return of the damned automaton raven he was about to turn to scrap.

Shiv eyed the outer cocoon of what used to be his body and learned he could gag as a spirit. Never mind Uva and the others, *he* was traumatized from that.

And it was all New Albion's fault.

Physicality > 50 (Skill Evolution Imminent)

Diamond Shell > 67 READ LATEST CHAPTERS AT

Biomancy > 25

Skill Gained: Pyromancy 1 (Initiate)

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22 (I) Bone

Quest Gained: Collapse Weave's teleportation network to ensure the immediate extraction of a critical and compromised asset.

Success: +10 to Stealth; Realmsplitter Dagger (Heroic); Shroud of Veiled Existence (Heroic)

Failure: Briefly alerts the Composer to 50% of Aviary's agents operating within her dimension.

-Quest granted to the "Corvids" of Aviary operating in Weave

22

Bone

The first thing that surprised the raven was the large mound of horrifically burned, but still somehow gleaming, tumors in the center of the teleportation chamber. As the automaton reeled back in surprise, two crow-helmed agents entered the room right after, with one of them asking: "You said the boy had the Cage of Valor Thann? Where is it? And what is—"

This led to the second surprise—when missiles molded from tumorous tissue were suddenly ripped free from the disgusting mass. Two tumor-missiles smashed into the

crows before fusing over them, encasing their struggling, screaming forms in diamond-dense cages molded from fried flesh.

The raven who pretended to be Metven wasn't going to be so easy. It was much faster than the crows, and by all rights should have swatted the approaching biomass projectiles aside. Too bad it wasn't ready for the third surprise, which was Shiv ripping the vitality out of its mechanical body.

Shiv was surprised automata had vitality, but thinking back to what he overheard from some Slayers back on Blackedge put things into perspective. Humans and most races were made from living matter—organic beings, as some Biomancers called them. However, they weren't the only *living* beings. Automatons numbered the largest among all the inorganic species, and they too had vitality in them, as Shiv confirmed right now.

Such was why the raven let out a mechanical wail of surprise before Shiv's missiles slammed into it. The raven toppled over as it tried to move—its legs bound by sinews of dense, Diamond Shell-enhanced tissue, while Shiv fused more of his flesh over its head and encased its staff in layers of coiling muscle. Finally, all of his unmelted ribs and bones clamped down around its body and *squeezed*.

To Shiv's delight, he felt *parts* inside the automaton start to break.

It's not that tough, he realized.

This culminated in the fourth surprise when Shiv pulled open his original body and unleashed the Umbrals. His pre-death warning worked. They came out ready for violence and a desire to inflict harm.

The two crows Shiv had captured twitched as Uva reached out for them with her Psychomancy. Her face was a mask of cold rage, and she advanced on the struggling automaton with a shortsword drawn in her other hand. Thrusting out, a spear of ice formed in the air and smashed into the raven's underbody. The other Umbrals were in motion as well. Two of them were already withdrawing bloodied blades from the crows—Shiv left them gaps in his flesh for exactly this purpose. The youngest Umbral slashed at the raven's limbs, and her nightglass blade sparked with every cut.

To her credit, the raven's right leg was swinging by a wire. Shiv decided to test his new Pyromancy by launching a stream of flame into the gap. What emerged was a brief flicker of a spell as Shiv's newest—and smallest—mana field spat sparks at the opening.

True to Valor's words, having a high magical skill in one attunement didn't do anything for another. Shiv was going to need to practice his Pyromancy pretty hard if he wanted it to catch up with his Biomancy.

Then, a piercing siren screamed out from the raven. Several unseen mana fields intertwined as a spell born of a fused skill formed on its chest. A blast of air, fire, water, ice, and earth swept out from the automaton. The young Umbral caught a heavy stone on her left hip—and Shiv felt her leg leave the socket. She shrieked as she was flung out of the room, slamming into a wall outside. Uva formed an ice wall to protect her, and the other two Umbrals *phased through* and *parried* the magic respectively.

And to the young Umbral's credit, she crawled back in the room, dragging a dangling leg behind her, cursing about how she was going to take the automaton's leg for that.

Despite everything Shiv had been through, he still lacked experience regarding how powerful certain Tiers truly were.

The raven gave him a hands-on demonstration as it reflexively tore open a gap in reality, summoning a combat dimensional in the form of a massive elemental golem. Shiv gawked. The raven was still encompassed by his flesh and couldn't reach its staff. It could call upon this much power without even focusing?

The behemoth practically took up half the space inside the chamber, standing well over four meters tall *and wide*. It resembled Metven to some extent, but its head was an orb of angry fire, its body was something of an animated landslide hiding chunks of ice, and its limbs were made from a mix of lightning and water. Uva and the others started making their retreat, moving for the door as the walking natural disaster roared at them.

"Out, sisters! Out!" Uva cried. "Someone get to control! We seal this room! We purify the *bastards!*" She didn't notice Shiv's presence in all the chaos of combat—but before the doors slammed shut again, her expression was one of pain as she looked away.

System, this isn't going to be easy to explain to her, Shiv thought. Dinner and dessert better put her in a coma later, because if not, she might just kill me too.

Of course, he would need to survive this mess first. As the monster pulled its arms back, the limbs crackled with lightning and building force, and Shiv wondered if it could smash its way through if what Uva said about the chamber requiring someone to be Master Tier to break out was true. However, *Shiv* was still in here, and he was not leaving until everyone else was dead. In a few moments, the purification spells were going to spin up again.

Well. This is going to hurt. Time to see if I can kill the golem before that happens.

As the golem smashed its arms against the walls, the room shook, and spell patterns flared brightly. It tried to take another step, but Shiv used all of his original body's remaining biomass to bind its legs and arms together. It tripped and toppled backward. On top of the raven.

The automaton cried out in pain, voice echoing with static interference. It didn't have any living matter, but Shiv could feel part of its chest sink in and crack open—and he took that opportunity to seep his flesh into the automaton's inner machinery. *Looks like you might be a Master in terms of magic, but just an Initiate when it comes to your Toughness. Negligent.* Shiv expanded more tumors inside the automaton, ripping its body open more. Meanwhile, its golem rolled off and began to pull at the bindings on its legs.

Just then, Shiv resurrected, emerging from his shadowy husk to truly join the battle. He suddenly realized how *expansive* the raven's mana field was—stretching far beyond what he could sense. Thankfully, it was too busy howling in pain and choking on its inner fluids to focus its magic. Shiv's plan had been a good one. If he allowed it to hold onto its staff or achieve any kind of focus, all the Umbrals would have probably been flash-fried by a Dynamancy spell in an instant.

Fighting was a quick and messy thing. And that meant endings came quick and messy, too.

He pulled on his field and ripped a piece of rib out from the flesh holding the automaton. As he opened a path to its head, the raven looked up and flinched in surprise. “How—”

That was all the assassin got before Shiv drove a diamond-tipped piece of rib bone through its skull and twisted up at an angle. The automaton tried to create a final spell—but fast as it was, spells took time and focus. A *dagger* just took direction and force. With a wrathful cry, Shiv pulled and tore out a mess of circuitry and silicon. He guessed this was the equivalent of ripping out someone's brain matter.

“Foreshadowing didn't warn you about this, huh?” Shiv said, spitting on the automaton's corpse.

Biomancy > 26

Knife Proficiency > 23

As he looked at the tip of his rib-dagger, an idea occurred to Shiv. *Actually, these make pretty good weapons now with Diamond Shell. In fact, most of my body is a good weapon with Diamond Shell.* He watched as the golem struggled, pulling hard at Shiv's biomass restraints. Slowly, he could feel the flesh attached to its legs reach the breaking point, but the monster was still extending significant effort. *Yeah. You know what? I'm going to keep these ribs as daggers. I can control them with my Biomancy too—fight using my field too. Shit. System. Why didn't I think of this earlier? With my Diamond Shell... I am the weapon! I am my own armory!*

The idea was macabre but *really godsdamned awesome* too.

Just as the golem ripped through Shiv's bio-binds, he repurposed the flesh he used on the crows and latched them around the giant's legs and face, respectively. Once more, it crashed down, its burning orb of a head hidden from sight by the immense density of Shiv's flesh. At the same time, fragments of sharpened bone began punching through its body. Shiv felt his soul strain as he used his Biomancy over and over, but he wouldn't stop. Not when he was having so much *fun*.

"I killed your master too quickly!" Shiv taunted, advancing on the elemental dimensional. He molded the rib he was using into a proper dagger, giving himself a handle and adding a finer edge to the blade. "I burned real slow. I'm still pissed about that. So... I'm going to ask you to put up more of a fight.

The dimensional cried out in pain as Shiv tore into it. Sharpened bone arrows punched deep into the golem's body, drilling through dense stone before Shiv ripped them out for another go. At the same time, he cut and slashed at its abdomen, chipping chunks of moving rock away to find where its core was. *Heather always talked about a mana core for the elementals. Just have to find it.* He leaped back as its body tumbled and twisted, struggling to free itself from the restraints again. Its water-lightning legs couldn't just pass through a solid object without destabilising it, it seemed.

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Made sense. It wouldn't be easy for it to stay standing otherwise.

I'm surprised it's still doing stuff without a summoner to guide it. Not that I know the first damn thing about dimensionals or summoning magic.

Shiv struck the same part he did earlier with his biokinetically-guided bone missiles. He shaped their tips into wedges, and he pulled up as he ripped them out this time. Shiv laughed as he continued his onslaught. *Yeah, this was a great idea. I don't think anything short of a higher-Tier weapon or something made by a proper craftsman is going to outdo my flesh and bones.*

Again and again, he struck at the golem, ripping chunks of stone away with every strike. What was better about Biomancy was that since he could force his tissue to heal, even if it did become a clump of tumors, he could still slam it into someone like a blunt weapon—or wrap it over them. Even without proper knowledge of biology, there was still a lot he could do—especially since he was willing to *die* for it.

He saw a flash of light before a wall of ice fused over the creature's insides. More rocks covered the wounds he dealt, and Shiv cursed. The damn thing was *regenerating*—or at least moving the bits he chipped elsewhere. He was either going to have to crack the entirety of the golem's torso in a single, massive blow or...

Shiv had another funny idea. He sent his bone missiles forward again, but this time he turned them in the air—like they were *drills*. Immediately, they began to grind deeper

into the golem—and it wasn't as stressful on his mana field, either. He made it even easier by gathering all his bones into one long, thin drill and grinding it in. Stone and ice dust flew everywhere. The golem roared as it struggled to dislodge the attack—only for Shiv to pull its legs out from under it, using his biomass bindings as a handhold.

I felling love Biomancy, Shiv thought as he roared with laughter. He released his bone knife and let his mana field catch it, and then, with a primal roar, he used all his strength to drag the golem against a wall to better hammer the bone drill in deeper.

He felt his drill start chipping at an inner core of *pure ice*. The dimensional was starting to panic, and the room was starting to heat up again as well.

“Come on, you big tainted shit,” Shiv growled, the thrill in him rising high. He shouted as he slammed it into the wall again. “Don't go out like your master. Give me—”

And then, its strength prevailed again. Lightning blasted out from its limbs as it broke Shiv's diamond-hard bands of flesh. Kicking off the wall, it was on Shiv in an instant. And the felling thing was *fast*. At least twice as fast as he was. He tried dodging out of the way—but a fist made of surging, electrified water slammed into him.

Shiv's muscles seized as he was launched into the opposite wall. A resounding crash echoed through the room. But the damned golem was on him before he could even finish his fall. Its fists fell like a bastard hate-child born of an avalanche, a tsunami, and a thunderstorm. It hit him no less than ten times each second. Every punch made his muscles spasm, made his bones shudder and creak.

But after his last death, Shiv's perspective on pain had shifted. The golem wasn't going to top that.

After a good ten seconds of unleashing everything it had on Shiv, the golem staggered back, and Shiv dropped. His face was a swollen mess. Most of his ribs and sternum were fractured again. He was probably bleeding somewhere else inside as well. But he landed on his feet, and when he did, he spat blood at the foot of the monster and gestured for it to continue. “Well, I guess the raven didn't summon you for all that *stamina* you don't have.”

Just then, the behemoth peeled the remnants of Shiv's flesh off its face. For the first time, it laid that baleful, burning eye on him, and the orb quivered with building fury. Shiv sensed something with his Pyromancy. Something from the golem and the chamber at once. Mana fields were moving in the air, and things were about to get doubly hot for him.

Unfortunately for the golem, it was slow on the draw.

Shiv's fused bone drill slammed right into its back, knocking it off balance. The fiery beam it was about to unleash went off course, splashing against the wards lining the

walls. As it toppled forward, Shiv yanked his bone dagger off the ground using his Biomancy and added its mass to the drill as well.

Biomancy > 27

The effort was tiring for his soul, but he could keep it up.

He smashed his shoulder into its chest at an angle as it continued to stumble—intending to keep it off balance. Only for it to immediately backhand him. Once again, Shiv went flying across the room, rolling along the walls. And once more, it pinned him in place before he could get far.

Stupid thing's impossibly fast for its size. This is bullshit.

In its hands, Shiv could only twitch and shake. The electricity made him unable to control his muscles, but though it tried to crush him with its watery fingers, Shiv felt his body endure. Even if a few of his ribs finally broke outright.

“D-d-diamond S-s-shell, a-a-asshole!” Shiv managed through trembling lips. The blow had broken his focus. The drill was laying discarded on the ground again. Still, Shiv could see two massive holes in the golem’s body and glimpsed the radiant light of its core. These holes weren’t being filled up at all. He was close... He just needed to do this one more time...

He struggled and fought as much as he could. But it was to no avail. His muscles wouldn’t—*wait, I’m an idiot*. Shiv could move his body—he just needed to force it to obey him instead of the lightning. The electricity was causing him to lose control of his physical muscles? Fine. Time for his *magical muscles* to pitch in.

Shiv applied Biomancy and Physicality at the same time. Despite all the electricity, his pain tolerance refined from earlier made the exercise of focusing his mana field *easy*. Suddenly, his body shot forward, surprising the monster with an explosive burst of strength. He blasted through its fingers and slammed fist-first into its chest. However, Shiv felt his flesh and veins unlatch from their proper positions as he snarled in pain. *Right, different parts of the body moving at once. Not great... Might be able to fly using Biomancy if I had more control...*

That was for the future. Right now, he resigned himself to death—but was determined to take the elemental juggernaut with him. He landed three hard punches on its inner core of ice. Flashes of brilliant light splashed over him—and Shiv felt his Physicality advance once more, bringing that skill into the Adept Threshold as well.

But before he could claim final victory or examine his new Skill Evolution, the golem adapted to his strategy by wrapping its hand around his face and channeling its electrified water down his orifices. Shiv immediately lost focus again and found himself

slammed against the walls. Worse, the chamber began its incineration process for the second time—while the felling monster was firing its beam at his chest.

Dammit! Shiv snapped mentally. *Seems like this isn't going to be a no-death fight. Well. I asked for this. Better than the bast—*

And then thinking got hard as his stomach, lungs, and other organs filled with water. Shiv struggled and kicked as his drowning Reflexes kicked in. And that was what did him in this time. Not the fire. Not the golem's beam. *Drowning.*

It was actually quite pleasant by the end.

Skill Evolution: Physicality (Initiate) > Might of Mass (Adept)

Might of Mass > 56

Reflexes > 48

Pyromancy > 2

Biomancy > 30

Diamond Shell > 70

Knife Proficiency > 26

Grappling Proficiency > 35

Striking Proficiency > 21

Foreshadowing > 11

Shiv reached out and started draining from the golem. A flood of vitality filled him as he sensed just how potent the golem was. The raven must have had an absurd summoning skill to bind such a creature to its will.

Then, another unexpected occurrence followed. A spell formed at the center of the teleportation chamber as purifying flames splashed down. However, the fires meant to cleanse the chamber surged into the golem's burning skull, and the wounds Shiv left in its body began to fill with rock and ice. In seconds, it was fully healed.

Is this thing... regenerating from elemental mana?

Suddenly, the spell patterns lining the walls winked out. The flames died. Shiv felt his Foreshadowing trigger—saw an image of Umbrals fighting crows somewhere. But it promptly vanished as the golem swung through his Revenant form.

Shadows began to condense around Shiv as he approached maximum vitality. He took the time to consider his approach and avoid the mistakes he suffered for during his last death.

Not exactly sure what Might of Mass does yet, but more Physicality is always helpful—especially since it's still much faster than me. I have to keep it pinned or distracted long enough to finish it off with my drill. But how the hells am I supposed to do that when it can shock and drown me at the same time?

Then, Shiv remembered what he did *right* to overcome the monster's grip. He used his Biomancy in tandem with his strength. He could move himself, if nothing else, but it still left him internally wounded.

Maybe if I had an external rig or structure I could pull on... Like an armor of biomass. Then, Shiv made the next logical leap as he looked first at his newest body and then at his gleaming bone drill. *Or just a literal exoskeleton.*

A flood of vicious excitement rushed through Shiv as he felt his imminent resurrection. He grinned at the golem. The poor dimensional didn't know what was coming.

As the golem launched another ineffective fist at his peeling shadow, Shiv launched the bone drill into its back—and knocked it onto its hands and knees. His Biomancy field was now much stronger than before his last death. Not a surprise considering how much he was using the skill.

Instead of drilling further, however, Shiv left the weapon temporarily embedded in the golem as he shifted his intent onto his nearby corpse. A crimson spell came to shape atop Shiv's outstretched hand as his mana field shifted. He felt his will sink into his flesh and close around his bones. Original content can be found at

Then, he *pulled*.

His skeleton slipped free like a sword leaving its sheath. He resurrected completely while it was in flight. Shiv ripped the burned scraps that remained of his shirt off, leaving his torso bare as the upper layer of his exoskeleton arrived. He aligned the spinal cord with his back and part of it with his abdomen before commanding the ribs to close tighter around him, clasping him like a cuirass. The other parts were simpler—he sculpted the bone around his body, coating himself in a layer of gleaming white. His hands were soon encased by diamond-sharp digits. Smooth slats of plating covered his limbs, while he sharpened the edges of his new “exo-feet.” His former skull he wore as a full helmet, the sockets he made wider to allow for better sight.

The final bits of leftover mass he decided to shift into a thin shiv that he took in his right hand. That final bit made everything feel right.

As the golem rose, Shiv ripped his bone drill out of its back. The dimensional toppled over on its side, thundering in outrage. But as it rose again, it caught sight of Shiv standing just a few steps away. Next to him, a two-meter-long bone drill as thick as two fingers and as sharp as a knife hovered in midair, a Biomancy spell pattern coiled along its length.

What was it that Valor said? Shiv thought as the golem slammed the ground. Lightning and water splashed out. A shockwave struck Shiv. He rooted his armor in place with his Biomancy and didn't budge. To his surprise, the golem's wave broke against the non-skeleton-clad parts of his body like a stiff breeze as well.

He felt not just stronger, but heavier. Like he was an oak rooted to existence itself.

Is this Might of Mass?

He got a clear answer when the golem attacked. He brought his arms up defensively. It fired its beam. Fire splashed over his body—and a good portion of the initial heat was blunted by his exoskeleton. Shiv launched his bone drill. And missed. The golem was on him faster than he could blink. *Damn thing had no right to be that fast.* Before Shiv could shift the focus of his Biomancy field from the bone drill to his exoskeleton, he felt the golem drive a fist into his outer sternum.

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22 (II) Bone

22 (II)

Bone

An explosion of lightning and water detonated against Shiv. This time, though, Shiv didn't go flying. This time, as he braced against the blow, as he pushed back, he felt the ground groan beneath his feet as his *mass* swelled.

Shiv budged. *Barely.*

The absurdity of the moment made both golem and Deathless pause.

Then Shiv launched *himself* into the golem using his Biomancy, and he proved to be more like a missile than his bone drill ever was. Getting dragged into motion by his

exoskeleton didn't feel good, but it was far better than ripping his tendons and veins out of place. *It's closer to launching myself like a javelin than actually flying.*

Regardless, the effects were *incredible*. Between the velocity offered by Biomancy and his spontaneous implacability via Might of Mass, Shiv smashed the golem's constant rockslide of a chest and *cracked it*.

Holy shit! Shiv cheered mentally. Somehow, the dynamic had shifted. He was now the juggernaut in this brawl, and the golem was the underdog in a head-on collision. The golem stumbled back. Shiv used this opportunity to recall his bone drill—right into its exposed back. The weapon struck this time, and at an angle. The golem lost its balance and crashed on its side. Shiv called the drill into his right hand, letting his small dagger fuse with it.

Then, as the groaning golem fought to rise, Shiv pulled himself high up into the air using his Biomancy—and *spiked* himself back down. He hit the golem drill-first, straining both Biomancy and Might of Mass as much as he could. A shockwave tore through the room as the golem's outer shell of stone cracked like an egg. Now, Shiv felt himself standing on the inner crust of ice, so he released his bone drill and made it spin. Ice chips filled the air. The golem tried to roll over—but Shiv punched in the back of its burning skull, and it felt like he dropped the weight of a small building down on its head. The golem's burning eye fractured as it crashed into the ground, and jets of flame sprayed free in all directions. Shiv ignored the heat licking at his body as he continued drilling and punching.

Through it all, he pressed his body weight down against the golem—and despite everything it tried, it couldn't move him. Even when it reached behind its back and tried to toss him off—it yanked, but by Shiv's will and his Might of Mass, he stayed in place.

It doesn't have the strength to move me, Shiv realized. *Not when my Skill Evolution lets me increase my own mass.*

And that was another thing working against the golem. Shiv was at once both small and heavy at the same time. Even if it was bigger than him overall, it couldn't apply all that strength against him easily. Not when he was pressing everything he had into its already broken body. Then, it applied its last ditch effort. Shiv felt fingers of electrified water rush up to flood his skull helmet.

He responded by fusing his sockets and jaw shut. Water splashed against his face but found no point of entry. The golem's struggle grew more frantic as Shiv continued driving elbows down on the golem while his drill pushed ever deeper. Then, he felt it. The last bits of ice broke away and his drill sank all the way in.

The golem stopped struggling. Shiv expanded his eye sockets again and studied his enemy. The rocks lining its body were scattered around it in a mess. Its limbs were more like sparking puddles than electrified jetstreams. Wisps of faded flame spilled free

from its head as if it were weeping tears. Slowly, Shiv walked over to his drill and ripped it free from the behemoth's back. At its tip was a gleaming core of shifting colors—a mixture of different elemental mana.

The golem let out a low, mournful groan as Shiv clutched the monster's mana core in his hand—and *crushed* it.

A final detonation of uncontrolled, elemental mana washed over him, but Shiv held himself in place using his Biomancy and Might of Mass—refusing to yield an inch even at the very end of the fight.

Finally, the golem's burning eye fizzled and died to an ember. And then what remained of its body came apart as well, crumbling beneath Shiv's weight. He splashed down into the remains of his enemy, and Shiv found himself shivering from leftover adrenaline.

Biomancy > 31

Knife Proficiency > 28

Spear Proficiency > 6

Grappling Proficiency > 37

Striking Proficiency > 22

That... was godsdamned felling awesome, Shiv laughed. Looking down at his own reflection in the water, he studied his new appearance. The skeletal armor looked intimidating enough—but it was the glowing white rings within the skull sockets that really did the trick. There were a few nicks and cracks lining the bones, but he could sculpt over those pretty easily. The only part of him that was still exposed was his torso and—*well, damn, am I twice as muscular as before?*

Shiv was always reasonably tall and well muscled, but now he was built like a brick wall. Still, it would be wise to fill in the places between the ribs with bone plating when he next died. That would complete the external protection.

Actually, the combination between my Diamond Shell and Biomancy makes bone the perfect material for me. I can shape and sculpt whatever I need this way and make it as heavy or light as I want. Just like my own mass.

Shiv triggered Might of Mass out of curiosity, and to his surprise, his muscles visibly grew thicker and denser.

Broken Moon, Shiv said, shaking his head. *I should have thought of this sooner. Gods, that was effective.*

And then he looked at his bone drill in the water's reflection. It hovered in the air next to him, adding to his menace. This was a *great* weapon for him. It was even a modular weapon, Shiv thought as he reached into it and pulled out his small shiv again. Even with his Biomancy field in the throes of exhaustion, he could still keep it aloft.

Still, he wanted to give his mana a break, so he attached it to his exoskeleton for now.

He didn't even feel the mass. New novel chapters are published on novelfire(.)net

The last two deaths had made him a *lot* stronger. Even his Reflexes were close to reaching the Adept-Tier Threshold. *I wonder what I'll get when it reaches that point.*

Shiv had a feeling he might find out sooner rather than later.

Well. Whoever comes next best bring all they have, because I'm pretty close to indestructible right now.

Just then, the door to the chamber snapped open, and Shiv saw—

A *hammer* smashed into his mind. Shiv's consciousness reeled.

Pretty close to indestructible physically, he realized. There still wasn't anything he could do against a Psychomancer's attacks.

Two more mental hits blew holes into his focus. Shiv clutched his head and nearly doubled over.

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Then, someone slammed something over his head. That *something* broke. Shiv remained absolutely fine.

More hits rained down on him. He felt pinches of pain like someone was jabbing a needle into his torso. A swarm of hairy hands grabbed and pulled at him—and Shiv just shrugged them off. Growling, he reached out with his Biomancy and—

—realized he was surrounded by Umbrals and Weaveresses. Blinking, Shiv's mind stopped spinning long enough for him to realize that a group of Umbrals and spiderfolk were stabbing at him, using their skills on him and restraining his limbs. Behind the group, a few dozen mages were shaping new spells.

All of them except for one.

Uva stood at their center, her eyes wide, her mouth open.

“*Shiv?*” She said, her mind brushing his.

Hi, Shiv replied lamely. An Umbral’s nightglass spear left a skin-deep cut under his left pec before bouncing off. Shiv winced as he looked down at himself and realized why they were attacking him—his appearance practically *screamed* evil assassin. That, and the Umbrals probably all thought he was dead. *Uh. Sorry. I’ll explain later. I promise! But for now...*

Shiv used his Biomancy to unlatch his armor from his head. “Can you all please stop hitting me! I killed the raven. I killed the summoned golem. The fight’s over. Stop!”

He held up his hand, and slowly, the Weaveresses and Umbrals all halted.

Most of them looked at him with expressions of astonishment or disbelief. “I am not Risen,” Shiv added. “I will explain later! The Composer knows about this! But we’re not done.” He stepped past the Weaveresses—several of whom were of the invisible cloak variety, and even they were leaning in, staring at him as if he was something unbelievable. “There are still more enemy spies. They’ve infiltrated your order.” He checked his Quest and saw that it was still active. “We still have time to find Yunni and stop this.”

He marched past a dozen Umbrals—all of whom gawked at him, and came to a stop before Uva. “I need your help. I need you to scan the minds of those we’re not sure about—I don’t know how deep this goes or who we can trust, but... Uva? Are you listening?”

She reached out and touched him, feeling at his cheek. “It’s... really you?”

“Yeah,” Shiv said, sighing. “It’s a... It’s something to do with my Path. It’s the reason why I didn’t want you to read my mind. I’ll explain later—I swear.” He chuckled weakly. “And it’ll be the best godsdamned dinner and dessert I’ll ever make. But right now, we have to stop New Albion.”

She blinked twice and then swallowed. Then, something broke her focus. “I—wait, what are you wearing?”

“And did you get even bigger?” the young Umbral said, hobbling closer beside Shiv. She pointed at his bare torso. “More... *muscular*.”

Uva reactively dragged the other Umbral away by the scruff of her neck, as if she was a small kitten.

“This,” Shiv said, gesturing to his exoskeleton and bone drill. “Yeah. Got it from myself. My last few corpses.”

“Corpses,” Uva muttered.

"I wasn't really using them anymore," Shiv joked.

She kept staring at him like he was insane.

"Uva. Bombing. Passage. Adam?"

"Right," she said, snapping out of it. She looked over the rest of the group and drew in a breath before speaking into her brooch. "Operator: Public frequency. Mass broadcast: I am Sister Uva Mettabon. Esteemed Sister. Designation: Intel-0122. Everyone not of my team—I am invoking Contingency Albion. Submit yourselves to emergency detention. Prepare for deep-level mind scans and switch to emergency mana frequencies on your brooches. We have been infiltrated."

And that was all she needed to say. As she looked away from her brooch, she eyed Shiv again and shook her head. There was a lot she wanted to say—and a lot he had to say to her, too. But that needed to wait. She reached behind herself and handed Valor back to Shiv.

"So," Valor said, speaking to Uva. *"Do you believe me now? I told you not to worry."*

She didn't say anything.

"Shiv. How did things go with the adversary?"

"Oh. You know. The usual. Died twice. Got a Skill Evolution. Made a set of armor out of my old bodies using Biomancy. Smashed an elemental golem apart."

The dagger let out a sentimental breath. *"Ah. To be young again. I hope you enjoyed yourself, because the day's nowhere near done, I'm afraid."*

"That's good," Shiv said, licking his lips. "I'm still pissed at them for burning me to death."

"Come on," Uva said. She twisted the sides of her brooch as if it were a dial, and a different spell pattern flashed. "I'll see if the operator can get me a lock on Adam's location. We secured the control center earlier—there were crows there. Right now, an Honored Mother I trust is manning all stations for this sector of the building. But that's all I am sure about."

"So. That means no reinforcements or support past a certain point?"

"Something like that," Uva muttered.

Shiv sneered. "That's fine. More ravens for us, then."

Adam Arrow proved surprisingly easy to find. All they needed to do was follow the bodies.

Ten dead crow-helmed assassins were left in the Young Lord's wake. All of them had arrow wounds left where their eyes used to be. Then came a dead Weaveress, a smoking automaton, and a headless Umbral. A few steps away from her, standing in front of another teleportation chamber was Adam Arrow, glaring at something. He bled from several shallow cuts, but his own blade was drenched in a deeper red. Close to his back quivered a Hydromancy-forged bow and several watery arrows.

The Young Lord sensed their approach even before they turned the hall. He almost put a shot through Shiv's eye socket before he paused and lowered his weapon. "Uva? Is that you?"

"Adam," she greeted, looking over the carnage he left behind. The Umbral Psychomancer regarded the Young Lord with a bit more respect in her voice. "You did all this?"

"Most of them," he said. He kicked the headless Umbral. "This one was a traitor, I think. She stabbed that spiderfolk in the back before she tried going for me." He snorted. "That was her last mistake. She was slow. And the friends she had waiting in ambush weren't as sneaky as they imagined." Adam looked at Shiv and narrowed his eyes. "Who's this? Do you Abyssals have some kind of Necromancer?"

Shiv opened his helmet again. Adam blinked. "Shiv?"

"Hey, Young Lord," Shiv said. He looked appreciatively at the bodies. "I see you've been busy too."

"I would have been less busy if I had my armor," Adam said, frowning at his cuts. He paused and looked at Shiv again. "Shiv—what the *hells* are you wearing?"

"Bone armor," Shiv said with a straight face. "I harvested them from my corpse. Now I got an inside and an outside skeleton. A dagger and a bone drill too." He made the bone drill hover beside him. "Pretty cool, huh?"

The Young Lord hesitated for a moment. Shiv saw him wanting to disagree, but then Adam sighed. "*Yeah*... Yeah, it really kind of is."

Shiv grinned. "I knew it."

"But still, your own body? That's... *demented*. I always knew you had *problems*, I just didn't know how severe."

Shiv frowned. "Some of us have to be resourceful, Adam. Some of us don't have Legendary armor gifted to us by daddy."

“Well, until I see *daddy’s* Legendary armor, I’m not going forward.” Adam said, cocking his head at the chamber.

“Why?” Shiv asked. “What could be so—*oh*.”

And there, in the corner of the teleportation chamber, was a dark, narrow crevice framed by a dense weave of webbing. A stream of blood led into the blackness—and three severed Weaveress limbs lay in a puddle right before the portal.

“That Yunni elf—whatever her name was—vanished down this hole with two crows while I was occupied. A couple of the invisible spiders went in after them and didn’t come back out,” Adam said. “That was ten minutes ago.”

“That,” the young Umbral from Uva’s team began, “should not be there. That is not an approved spatial tunnel. I’m sure of it. I’m not much of a Jump Mage yet, but... that spell pattern is *wrong*—it’s stealing parts from the existing containment spells. It doesn’t lead anywhere.”

“Maybe not outside,” Shiv muttered. “What about to another teleportation chamber? Or all of them.”

The young Umbral stared at him for a moment before her eyes widened. “Oh. Oh, *shit*.”

“Composer protect us,” one of the Weaveresses whispered in the back.

Shiv stared off into the darkness for a few moments and sighed. “Well. Looks like we’re taking a walk into the dark.” He reached out and extracted another bone dagger from his drill—a dagger he offered to Adam.

The Young Lord arched an eyebrow at the weapon. “Really? I already got a bow and a sword. I just need my armor.”

“It’s for when the claustrophobic knife fight inevitably begins,” Shiv insisted.

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23 (I) Tunnel

Though a teleportation hub is essential to any major city’s infrastructure, nowhere is it closer to being a city’s lifeblood than with the City of the Hidden Song. It is theorized that the Composer likely started creating the city using Passage as a major fulcrum,

bound to Integrated Earth. After all, even if this is the personal realm of a goddess and her protected peoples, it cannot be fully disconnected from baseline reality per the laws of spatial relativity. It needs to remain tethered by some means or some strands of access.

This, more than the constant stream of logistics and the traffic of her people, is why Passage is so essential. If the right thread gets cut, potentially everything that the Composer has built might be unveiled—cast back into the prime dimension of Integrated Earth, or cast back into the Abyss, where she, as the newest and least developed of the Five Faiths, finds herself vulnerable to attack from all sides. And so, Weave's great transportation hub also stands as an open vein.

Some say, however, that Passage is a false target—that the Composer has her own thread leading back into reality, to a place on the surface where none of the other Abyssal Nations can reach her. Others claim that the severing of Passage is fated, only a matter of time, and that Weave, as a great city and a faction of the Five Faiths, is doomed to an early demise.

Yet this begs the question: If it were so easy to bring down an empire or to lay low the youngest goddess in existence, then why hasn't it happened? With so many enemies, with so many schemes, plots, and elder empires seeking her demise—why hasn't the Composer fallen? Why does her song still play on? Sometimes, a long-unanswered question becomes an answer in itself...

-City of the Hidden Song

23 (I)

Tunnel

"Finally," Adam said as he equipped the final piece of his Legendary armor. His body was now clad in dense plates of polished blue. It was the color of a clear sky captured in the matter of a crystal, and when the Young Lord moved, the slates crenelating his armor made his body appear as if it were a gentle ripple on a lake's surface. The pointed heads of twin hawks jutted out from his shoulders, and his sharp, open-faced helm only further emphasized the aesthetic. "Properly protected. And I no longer look like a clown."

Uva wrinkled her nose at him, but Shiv noticed how she eyed the armor with something bordering on curiosity—or envy.

"Now," Adam continued, tilting his head to look into the darkness. "I suppose the next pressing question is who takes point." Chapters first released on Nov31Fire.net

"Me, probably," Shiv grunted. Several Weaveresses and Umbrals looked at him in surprise. He didn't get why. "I'm the only one that gets to come back if things go wrong."

“Can you see in the dark?” Adam asked.

“No. Can you?”

The Young Lord grinned. “My senses are beyond mere sight.”

“Another skill.”

“Adept-Tier,” Adam boasted.

Shiv nodded slowly, pretending to be impressed. “And how’s your Toughness. Or Physicality? What evolutions do you have for those two?”

The Young Lord knocked his armored knuckles against his chestplate. “My durability is far beyond yours right now—” His expression flattened into one of reluctance. “Even if you do have some... *style*.”

“I can practically hear the bile rising in your throat,” Shiv said, smirking. “But the armor isn’t going to save someone from overpowering and twisting your limbs out of place, is it?”

Adam scowled at that reminder. “Oh, and you have the Physicality to fight someone capable of that off?”

“Yeah,” Shiv said. “I’m an Adept there as well. I got Might of Mass. It helped quite a bit when I was pummeling that elemental golem into submission. But hey, I’m sure the couple crows you killed were more impressive.”

“Might of—” The Young Lord did a double take. “What? How? That skill should only be something that those of the Wrestler or Laborer Paths get after years and years of constant—” He narrowed his eyes at Shiv’s partially exposed torso, and his lips twisted into a sneer. “Is that why you look...”

“Bigger?”

“*Fatter*.”

“What are they doing?” the young Umbral asked, nudging Uva with her elbow.

“Picking an unfortunate time to be *men*,” she said, narrowing her eyes in disappointment.

Shiv grinned as he continued. “Yeah. You can say I’m a bit harder to move now. Like an oak. You... really should eat more, Adam. Don’t worry, though, Young Lord. I’ll make sure you get all the protein you need. Soon, and with enough nutrition, you’ll be able to look like a... *smaller* version of me.”

“As if I want that Skill Evolution,” Adam said with a shrug. “My strength will work in tandem with my speed. Fluidity and flexibility is where true power lies. I will achieve *Kinetic Overdrive* for my Skill Evolution—jump that skill straight to Master Tier. That’s a truly worthy advancement in my eyes.”

“So. What you’re saying is that you accept the fact that you’re going to be *smaller* and *weaker* than me, and that you surrender to fate? Great. Good talk. I’m going in front.” Shiv walked right past Adam as the Young Lord’s mouth dropped in offense.

“How developed are your Reflexes?” Adam snapped from behind. He practically had his head pressed against Shiv’s neck. “And do you have a *Portomancy* Skill? Because we are dealing with spatial magic here. You’ll get lost, blind and ignorant as you are.”

A Weaveress cleared her throat. “Honored guests, I think that we, warriors of the order—”

“No,” Adam and Shiv said at the same time.

“They boiled me alive,” Shiv growled. His bone drill trembled in the air and stabbed at the darkness. “I’m going in first. I’m going to rip the bastards apart.”

“And they tried to ambush me—tried to kill me,” Adam sneered. “This will not go unpunished. Nor will them bending a non-combatant to their whims by kidnapping her child!” The Young Lord’s outrage was genuine with the last part. Shiv was almost surprised.

Well, I can’t say he’s not his father’s son...

The Weaveress fell quiet and looked at her comrades. The Umbrals blinked. The youngest member looked back and forth between Adam and Shiv with a glow of excitement to her eyes. She was enjoying their posturing.

“You know what, Adam? How about this: I’ll walk in ahead of you like a shield. You can be right behind me and tell me where the threats are coming from and which way to go. This way, you can fire your arrows from behind the safety of my *immensely muscular* body, and I can fight off anyone who seeks to overpower your nubile body.”

Adam’s mouth opened and closed several times as he processed how outraged he should be.

“Shiv. In countless nations I have been, what you just said to the Young Lord constitutes grounds for a duel,” Valor said with a chuckle.

This book was originally published on NovelFire. Check it out there for the real experience.

Finally, Adam shut his jaw and hissed: “Fine. But don’t expect me to go rushing into the darkness to save you if someone drags you off. I might not have the strength to lift someone of your immense weight.”

“Mass,” Shiv replied.

“Call it what you want,” Adam finished. “Just start walking, *meatshield*.”

The Deathless snorted as he shook his head at Adam. The Young Lord kept glaring, but allowed Shiv to take the first steps into the crevice. Before he pushed into the spatial passage, he shot a look at Uva, and she nodded at him.

“I will make sure our minds are defended,” she said. There was a slight coldness to her thoughts. He wasn’t sure if it was because they were preparing for combat, or if she felt offended by his secrets. Whatever the case, he trusted that not to be an issue right now. They were martial Pathbearers right now, and there was a crisis to stop.

“Man, this place is dark as shit,” Shiv muttered. He kept his long bone drill moving ahead of him—swinging it from side to side so he could keep track of the walls. That proved to be unnecessary, as he sensed some grains of organic material in the webs. *I’m really lucky that damn high vampire killed me so many times. Don’t know where I would be without Biomancy. Though maybe I would have some other magical skill...*

As he continued shuffling through the darkness, he felt Uva touch his mind again. Instead of sending him a message this time, he felt a weight settle into his thoughts. *“Tethered,”* was all she said.

Tethered? Shiv thought.

Behind him, Adam flinched and went still. “What did you just do to my mind, elf?”

Uva didn’t answer. Shiv could see the members of the Arachnae Order filter in behind them, keeping ample distance between each person in case of a magical attack. They took on a formation with two martials in front of and behind a dedicated mage while the Weaveresses prodded at the webs.

“They’re extremely dense,” one of the towering Weaveresses said. “They won’t let me through.”

“Tether complete,” Uva shouted over their connection. *“Confirm status!”*

“CONFIRMED!” A deafening chorus rushed through Shiv and Adam’s minds at once. Both of the surfacers jolted, and they looked at each other.

“Did you hear that?” Adam whispered. “What did your bloody girlfriend do to us?”

"We are all synchronized," Uva answered. Suddenly, Shiv received a burst of brief images from her perspective. She was looking at the back of a Weaveress, and the young Umbral and two others were to stand guard at the entrance of the crevice to ensure they wouldn't be flanked. "All surface thoughts and details will be filtered through me and can be transferred to another member of our force. This way, we will all be aware of each other's situations—and what's coming ahead."

Adam shivered. "Mind mages," he muttered. "I can't believe the Composer doesn't have them running a Curse."

"Honored Guest Adam," Uva said, her tone like hardening ice, "keep all non-operation related thoughts quiet—and to yourself."

"Well, how do I felling do that when you're already deep in my head," the Young Lord complained. He somehow realized Shiv was grinning at him from behind his skull helmet. "Oh, keep walking, meatshield. And don't stop until you stick yourself on a blade. Broken Moon, I really need to develop a Magical Resistance soon..."

"Aye, Young Lord Arrow," Shiv replied. He understood the Magical Resistance part, though. It would be a convenient skill to have. But then, there was the other question of if Magical Resistance would stop him from using his Biomancy on himself. *I'll ask Valor about that later. If we get out of this intact.*

The synchronization proved to be invaluable as they continued on. Every few steps, Shiv would get a snapshot of what the tunnel looked like from the perspective of someone who could see in the dark. The webs here were corded and dense, practically all bunched over each other in knots. There was also an ambient pressure in the air—that faint lurch of spatial magic pulling at his body.

"Hey, Adam," Shiv sent. The Young Lord grunted from behind, signaling that he received the thought. "Can someone be torn in half by spatial magic? You said you had the skill earlier, so..."

Adam scoffed. *"Torn in half? How? That doesn't even make sense."*

"I don't know. I don't have the skill, nor did I go to a proper academy. That's why I'm asking you. I can tear myself in half with Biomancy, so I was wondering if someone could maybe shift the tunnels around somehow and flatten us all or something."

"Biomancy is the manipulation of biology and life, yes," Adam said, his mind taking on a tense and frustrated tone. "What is Portomancy? The manipulation of spaces—and the first step toward the Skill Evolution of Lesser Dimensionality, but that's—"

"Just the question, thank you. I don't want a lecture before I head off into battle," Shiv answered.

Adam sighed. *"No. Because space cannot naturally tear you in half. You exist in a space. It's like a pocket or a patch of occupiable area. When a portal collapses, one gets displaced along with the spatial bubble they're in. Which means that if this collapses, we'll likely all get launched out from a crevice or another connected to this passage."*

"Good to know. The spatial bubbles... That's why I feel a pressure?"

"Yes. That is one of the few things that can kill us here. A High-Tier Jump Mage tactic is to open a portal that leads to the bottom of an ocean or some other disastrous environment. Or to dump you into such a place. But reaching such a place requires an especially developed Portomancy Skill—or more preferably, Dimensionality, because that allows you to create and carry a minor dimension inside yourself. Like one of those aforementioned oceans."

Shiv blinked, and he connected these details to the automaton raven he killed earlier. *"So that's how it managed to summon the elemental golem so easily—it was always there... in a minor dimension."*

At the same time, Adam let out a gasp as he flinched. *"You—Broken Moon, you weren't lying. You did beat an elemental golem to death with your fists! And your own bones!"* The Young Lord let out an incredulous laugh as he reactively slapped Shiv on the shoulder. *"You're bloody mad!"* Then, he seemed to remember who he was talking to and pulled his hand away. *"Well. I would have done it without dying at all."*

"Without your Legendary armor?" Shiv taunted.

"Yes. Without. Because I'm not a plodding, slow flat-foot like you."

Uva cleared her throat mentally. Both of the surfacers quieted their minds. But only for a second.

"Still," Adam said out loud, shaking his head. *"A bone drill."*

"It's awesome," Shiv insisted.

"Yes, damn you, it is. I admit. But still. Do you not feel... disturbed? Bothered by your deaths?"

"No. It makes me better. It shows me my mistakes. It can only be good."

Adam scoffed. "You're cracked in the—" The Young Lord froze and held up a hand. *"Wait!"* Their entire convoy went still. Then, Adam did something strange—he *closed* his eyes and just stood there.

"Adam?" Shiv asked.

“Quiet,” The Young Lord snapped. “Give me—” Then, Adam opened his eyes again and his head snapped between several directions. “*Shit! Everyone down!*”

And then, as everyone instinctively dropped, Adam Arrow once again became an echo of his father. A cluster of watery limbs branched out from the Young Lord’s back, but rather than all repeatedly loosing shots from the same bow, he formed new bows and fired what felt like four separate streams of azure death. Fluid arrows screamed through the air like comets in every direction. This time, with all the levels he gained for his Reflexes, Shiv glimpsed the trajectory of the arrows and realized they were all being adjusted mid-flight.

Broken Moon, Shiv thought. The amount of focus that took must have been colossal. And the speed at which Adam shot was absurd. Shiv couldn’t even follow the Young Lord’s blurring hands.

A full second after his call for everyone to duck, the crows came—bursting out from the dense webs that the Weaveresses of Shiv’s group couldn’t penetrate. They arrived with gleaming blades infused with spell and skill drawn—only for all of them to receive a swarm of arrows through their eyes, throats, hearts, and joints at the same time. Shiv guessed there were twenty crows in the ambush. None of them managed to do anything but die.

As they slumped and fell, some Umbrals stabbed at them—only to realize their enemies were already slain.

“*Condition check!*” Uva said, her mind racing.

A chorus of “*optimal*” and “*uninjured*” came from everyone in the group. Shiv, meanwhile, found himself gaping at Adam. The Young Lord dismissed his Hydrokinetic limbs and bows before regarding Shiv with a smug grin.

“How the hells did you know that was going to happen?” Shiv asked.

“Oh, I heard them. They were quite loud.” Adam wiggled his eyebrows.

“Loud?” Shiv barely felt anything—he only sensed a few of the crows with his Biomancy when they burst in. “Your Awareness must be *ridiculous*.”

“Yes, well, not everyone can come back from the dead,” Adam shrugged. He eyed Shiv with a look of exaggerated disdain. “Some of us need to be—”

The webbed walls beside the Young Lord burst open. To his credit, he turned and unleashed an absurd amount of shots into the approaching figure. Unfortunately, most of his arrows exploded against the already mutilated corpse of a Weaveress—a corpse that slammed into and knocked Adam against the opposite wall. Just then, a thick metal arm reached out with a mechanical whine.

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23 (II) Tunnel

23 (II)

Tunnel

It closed around the Young Lord's neck and started pulling him toward the ambush rupture with reckless ease. And Adam would have been dragged across and through if not for Shiv gripping the assailant by the arm.

"No," Shiv growled. The enemy stopped dead and tried to pull hard. Shiv clenched his teeth as his Might of Mass grew, allowing him to match strength against strength. For a half-second, they were at a stalemate while Adam gagged. Then, Shiv ended the contest by boosting his strength with a surge of Biomancy. "Get your own Young Asshole!"

Instead of Adam getting yanked into the gap, Shiv ripped the final crow into the tunnel and swung them around. Umbrals ducked. The automaton crow struggled and slashed at him with a nightglass dagger, which Shiv blocked with his own blade. Chips of bone flew off Shiv's dagger as edge met edge, but that was as far as the crow got before the bone drill arrived.

Two meters of diamond-edged bone punched straight through the automaton's chest before twisting upward and tearing out the enemy's insides. The mechanical crow shuddered—and then Shiv seized the assassin by a gap in its neck and tore, flexing Might of Mass and Biomancy at the same time.

A horrible noise sounded. Steel, glass, plastic, and more came asunder. Coolant sprayed and sparking wires whipped through the air. The Deathless dropped the two halves of his enemy and turned to pull the stunned Young Lord back onto his feet.

Reflexes > 49

Knife Proficiency > 27

"So, how did you miss this one?" Shiv asked, pointing at the bifurcated automaton on the ground.

Adam rubbed his neck and swallowed painfully. “I... I... I don’t know. They were... *quiet.*”

Shiv scowled and looked around. “I guess their Stealth must’ve been more ridiculous than your Awareness.” He turned back to the convoy and sighed. *“Uva, I think these rats have been living in your walls for a while.”*

A cold and terrible dread followed her reply. *“I was thinking the same thing. Composer... Have we truly been so blind? Have they truly pierced our Sisterhood so deeply?”*

“Psychomancer Uva, we have a problem.” The urgent-sounding thought came from one of the mages in their convoy. She was looking down at an unmasked crow—and the dead woman proved to be an Umbral. At first, Shiv assumed the problem was the revelation of Umbral traitors, but the actual issue proved to be even more chilling. *“I recognize her... This is Cherished Sister Gehe. She... she died last month protecting some of our Honored Mothers from Compact Raiders at an outpost.”*

Shiv felt at the dead Umbral using his Biomancy. There didn’t seem to be anything wrong with her from what he could tell. But he was still mostly a thug with his magic. Mostly brute force and violence. They needed an actual expert.

“I recognize this sister too,” another Umbral in the group cried out. *“Composer—she went missing last year!”*

“Shiv,” Valor said, breaking his long silence. *“Can you explain to me what is happening? The fighting sounds like it has ended, but what is wrong with the bodies?”* Shiv conveyed to the dagger what the Umbrals just discovered, and Valor scoffed. *“Ah. New Albion falling back on old tricks again. They’ve always been intent on getting Umbral bodies for use—and not just any Umbral bodies, but those of the sisterhood. Buying corpses or prisoners from other Faiths is very much in line with their methods of operation. You’ve stumbled on quite a sophisticated operation, I suspect.”*

“Yeah, well, they’re throwing bodies at us.” Shiv eyed the walls with paranoia. The gaps the crows came through were closed now. But at any moment, even the ground beneath his feet could see Shiv betrayed... “It would have ended worse for us if Adam didn’t sense them coming.”

“All of them but one,” the Young Lord said, still staring at the automaton crow that nearly got him. He looked at Shiv briefly but shook his head instead of saying anything.

“How many did you just kill?” Valor asked.

“Around twenty or so,” Shiv said.

“Twenty-six,” Adam said, giving a more concise count.

“Hm. Proceed with greater caution. But know that you are close to what they’re trying to hide. Aviary is not afraid to spend the lives of its agents, but doesn’t do so wastefully. The fact that they are throwing these forces at you in such numbers represents desperation. Or a necessity. Nearly thirty crows dead is practically decades of careful insertion and tradecraft undone.”

“So, what, we just cleared out a good portion of the spies here?” Shiv asked.

“I wouldn’t call it a good portion, but a not-insubstantial percentage of their active agents hidden in Passage. Their bigger loss is the exposure of this branch. The crows and ravens are assassins, and assassins are not to be seen or known. Now they are drastically exposed. But that also means they believe this operation is something worth sacrificing all their people for. I also know they are unready for proper confrontation because they are throwing lives to stall us instead of setting up any traps—I suppose they hadn’t the time.”

“Then let’s see the rest join their comrades,” Uva said, entering the conversation. There was an undercurrent of growing unease that she channeled into anger.

Shiv studied Valor for a moment, wondering why he didn’t reply, before he realized the dagger can’t hear Uva’s thoughts. “Uva, could you tether Valor too?”

“No,” she said. “His cage is... It is a prison in more ways than one. The fact that he can be heard is a small miracle already, and a testament to his great power.” UPDATE FROM novel~fire~net

The Deathless winced.

“It is fine, Shiv,” Valor said. “I can hear enough. And I have lived through enough battles to guess that you are very close. Proceed with caution but aggression. But I also recommend using subterfuge. If you can confuse the enemy and inflict a paranoia in them at the heart of their defenses, you will have an easier time getting through.”

“Let’s keep moving,” Shiv said. He looked at the rest of the convoy as they stripped the fallen crows of weapons. One of the Weaveress knelt in mourning over the mutilated Weaveress the automaton crow used as a shield to ambush Adam. There was a building tension in the group that matched the pressure in the air. As for the Young Lord himself, he kept closer to Shiv. So close Shiv could hear the other man’s breathing.

He might be a warrior, but he’s not used to near-death encounters yet, Shiv realized. Adam was talented, well-trained across a variety of skills, and a prodigious Adept-Tier Pathbearer. But he spent most of his time refining himself at an academy and facing enemies in controlled situations. Aside from the attack on Blackedge and the battles he experienced in the Abyss, Shiv didn’t know if the Young Lord had any practical combat experience.

In comparison, Shiv was nothing *but* practical. One had to be when hunting lesser vampires as a Pathless.

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

“Just let it hurt,” Shiv said.

“What?” Adam rasped. His throat was bruised. Maybe even swollen. Shiv could *feel* the inflammation.

“The fear. The tension. Don’t give it any thought. Just let it be a feeling and focus on other things. That’s what always made the pain weaker for me when I was raiding vampire nests.”

Adam breathed. Shiv guessed he wanted to say something about how easy it was for the Deathless not to fear death, but the example Shiv gave predated his Path. “Why did you do it?”

“Hunt vampires?” Shiv replied, scanning his surroundings. He was receiving mental images from the other members of this force. The Weaveresses kept their hands pressed against the webs now, trying to track vibrations. The tunnel was starting to get wider. A gust of air washed over Shiv, telling him there was probably a channel up ahead.

“Yes. I asked Adept Tran about you after—”

“After you got back.”

“Yeah. He told me that you killed your hundredth. I didn’t want to believe him, then. But I knew. Even when I was looking at you. I could smell their blood on your body, and I *hated* the fact that you weren’t a coward.”

“Don’t get sentimental on me now, Adam.” Shiv chuckled. But the Young Lord didn’t insult him or laugh. *Shit. His mental state must be a mess right now.* “Hey. Are you good? Can you keep going?”

“Don’t mock me, *Lowe!* Do not mock me!” Adam almost snarled. Shiv turned to glare at him—partially for using a name Shiv didn’t acknowledge, but also to make sure the Young Lord wasn’t going to turn into a liability when the fighting started up again. The people in the back were beginning to look uneasy. Uva was about to say something, but Shiv responded to her first. “*Let me handle this. We don’t need this problem when the fighting starts in a minute.*”

"I'm not," Shiv bluntly said to Adam's face. "No one doubts you but you right now. Whatever you want to say or do with me, we can deal with that after. Right now, we need your shit together. Is it?"

Adam swallowed. The part of him that remained the hurt, traumatized boy from all those years ago during the night of the ritual wanted to continue his building tantrum. Roland Arrow's heir locked that boy away. "Yeah. It is."

"Okay," Shiv said. "I trust you."

Their trek continued on in active silence for some time. Shiv checked his Quest status every few minutes, worried that the failure condition might register. So far, though, it seemed that Yunni hadn't triggered her bomb yet. Whether that was because of a malfunction or a delay, he didn't know, but he heeded Valor's words the most.

"If you rush in and lead the others to their deaths, the outcome will be the same. I have failed Quests and come out a better man for it, despite the rewards lost and the punishments inflicted. Do things well before you do them fast. And do everything you can to avoid letting the enemy set the terms of this battle."

Then, their approach finally came to a halt as Adam called out again. *"Wait. Huge—huge clearing ahead. Like the size of a cavern. Five hundred meters of space across. Maybe. Close to that. And there are..."* He closed his eyes and concentrated hard. *"At least fifty people there. Crows. Their footsteps are very light, but their heartbeats are loud. There must be more."*

"Fifty?" Shiv thought. That was... quite a bit more than he was expecting. But his own group wasn't insubstantial either. They had around thirty Umbrals and four Weaveresses in total. Quite a few full mages in the group as well. *"Well, that's a big nest of rats to clear. Nice job, Adam. Any chance your hearing's good enough to guess their Tiers?"*

"Ask me in about a month or so when I become a Master." The Young Lord noted Shiv's surprised stare. *"My Awareness is, indeed, ridiculous."*

"So, then, how'd you sleep at the academy?"

"What?"

"Since you can hear everyone's bowel movements so well?"

"Oh, get tainted, you street rat bastard."

Shiv laughed. To his pleasure, a few of the Umbrals did as well. The Weaveresses were more reserved—and *furious*. They seemed to take the loss and disfigurement of their kin on another level.

“Okay, Adam,” Shiv said. “What the hells do we do now?”

The Young Lord blinked. “You’re asking me? I thought you were the leader of this damned expedition.”

“I thought I was just the meatshield. I’m only in front because I’m expendable—and to stop anyone from taking advantage of your waifish physique. You’re the one who went to Flaming Chicken Academy.”

“*Phoenix*,” Adam growled mentally. The Young Lord sighed before looking to the Umbrals behind him. “*You all still can’t get the webbing to part?*”

“No,” a Weaveress replied. “*Every time we try, it is like a counter-pressure pushes back against us.*”

“*Ah. The bastards put vacuum lining along this tunnel. We’ll need a proper team of Adept Jump Mages to deal with that. Or a Master. That also probably means we’re being led along a forced path—into a killbox. Not optimal for anyone but Shiv.*”

“*It’s not optimal for him either,*” Uva added, a heat in her voice.

“*Well, the rest of us don’t get stronger from dying over and over,*” the Young Lord said with more than a little envy. “*I suspect we will be trading lives if we make a hard push.*”

“*Shiv. We’ve stopped. I suspect that means you know where they are?*” Valor spoke.

“Something like that,” Shiv said. He held the dagger closer to Adam. “The Young Lord here’s trying to figure out how to get through without making this a bloodbath.”

“*I have a recommendation—though it carries its own risks.*”

“Yeah? And what’s your idea, *dagger?*” Adam snorted. “Stab them in the eyes?”

“*No. But I wouldn’t be against it if Shiv did that to you right now if that would make you listen and let me finish you stupid, ugly child!*” Adam flinched back from Valor’s outburst. “*Now. Have you all looted the crows you slew?*”

“Some. Why?” Shiv wondered where this was going.

“*Because if they have a mask and cloak, you might just be able to confuse the enemy long enough to let you walk into the middle of their nest—especially if you had a prisoner in tow, along with an invaluable relic containing one of their ancient foes...*”

Shiv had a pretty good idea where this was going.

“Alright.” Adam nodded, his face taking on a look of appreciation. “That’s not bad, dagger. Not bad at all. But... who’s going to be the crow? And who’s going to be the prisoner?” Shiv grinned at Adam. The Young Lord bit back a shiver of unease as the man wearing his own skeleton beside him stayed quiet. “I... can be the crow. I attended a few acting classes back at the academy.”

“It should be one of us,” Uva said from the back. “They have infiltrated our sisterhood. They might not notice so fast.”

“No,” Shiv said. “Too much risk. And I don’t think the subterfuge is going to last long. Just enough for us to get a gauge on their defenses—and try to break whatever formations they have going.”

“We still haven’t decided who’s going to be the crow,” Adam said.

“Yes, we have,” Shiv replied, patting the Young Lord on the arm. “The victim requires more acting chops anyway. The crow just has to be strong and silent. *Strong*. That means muscles, Young Lord.”

“I have muscles,” Adam said with a scowl, folding his arms. And he did. He really did. But Shiv felt like being a bit of a bully.

“Not compared to him, you don’t,” one of the Umbral Pyromancers muttered. “It’s like he’s smuggling my grandmother’s washboard under his skin.”

“*Sister*,” Uva said, tone tense. “*Please focus*.”

“I am focusing,” the Pyromancer said, chuckling. “I am focusing, *indeed*.”

As Uva glared death at the Pyromancer from the back, Adam flexed his arms at the Weaveresses, trying to get the spiderfolk to compliment him.

Shiv, though, felt the weight of the moment press on him. He might be Deathless, but the others... *I really, really don’t want to see any of these people die*.

And so he was going to make damn sure that none of them fell. Even if it killed him. *Especially* if it killed him.

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24 (I) Surprise

The gap between a Pathless mortal at the height of their natural potential and an Initiate Pathbearer who just started their journey isn't that wide. For warriors, it just seems like they're a little stronger, a little faster, their weapons a little bigger. Mages are even more embarrassing. Most of the other magi in my company didn't have maxed out Pathless Physicality. They're slow, they're sloppy, they get hurt and sick easily, and their magic isn't anything remarkable either.

At the first level of Pyromancy, your mana field is little better than a broken matchstick. As you get up past the tenth level, you can create a small but focused torch. Still not impressive—but at least you aren't useless. That's why, during your initial enlistment, you're supposed to develop other skills as well. Skills that help the army you're with—skills you got from the university.

That's why I sometimes question the term "War Mage." Frankly, if judged by what I did the most at the start of my career, my role would have been Combat Engineer from all the bridges I collapsed and the fortresses I raised from stone. And frankly, it aligned with my actual Path better. I was supposed to be an architect, after all. Except after your elder brother betrays the nation and turns, jobs and prestige flee easily as well. The source of this content is

But then things get different if you hit Adept. Most don't. Even more find themselves bottlenecked there for life. But that's where everything changes.

Sure, some of us mages are still barely Initiate-Tier in Physicality and have bones made of glass, but as our magical skills hit their first Skill Evolutions, souls change. What we're capable of changes. I thought I was powerful after hitting 40 in Geomancy. I ripped open the earth and made it eat a troll. Then, I got to 51, and suddenly, Geomancy became Warden of Stone—and I found I skipped a Tier for that skill. I was now a Master.

Suddenly, I wasn't marching with squads anymore—I was with the real monsters. Adepts and more. This is where I saw the true separation begin. Together, my new comrades and I moved entire towns and cities across the land. Lone Adepts were dispatched to slaughter nests filled with hundreds of monsters or close smaller Primal Gates. Masters were regarded as an artillery brigade unto themselves—mage or not. And the few Heroes I did see... well, they might as well have counted as an army in one.

I still remember seeing my wife for the first time—how small she seemed. How bright her smile was. And then, when the battle started, I watched her draw that rusted old saber she got from her grandfather—and when she cut, she split the clouds above with one blow, and parted a distant mountain with another...

-Memoirs of a Master-Tier War Mage

Surprise

"I can't believe I agreed to this *shit*," Adam muttered, marching toward the wide-mouthed exit with a miserable scowl on his face.

"Shut up, prisoner," Shiv rumbled, chiding Adam while remaining in character. "Move your feeble legs and thin calves."

"Don't *felling* judge my calves—it's—it's genetic! They're lean! It's lean muscle!" Adam's offense and outrage were pretty well acted. Until the Young Lord continued to mumble bitterly about his calves not growing even after focused exercise. That's when Shiv realized Adam was actually offended.

The sheer amount of noise they were making drew out several cloaked figures into the exit ahead. Each of them wore a bird-styled helmet. Most were crows, but Shiv could see a few ravens among them as well. There were also those who looked like sparrows, shrikes, and... some other types of bird he didn't know. Blackedge was a place that was absolutely festering with eagles. As such, lesser birds like pigeons were nonexistent. Even the rats that lived in Blackedge were either quick, sneaky, extremely large, or a combination of all three.

"I have him," Shiv growled as deeply as he could, shoving the Young Lord slightly. They added a bit more dust and dabbed bits of blood onto Adam's lip to make it seem like there was a struggle. For Shiv, he just wrapped a crow's cloak over his exoskeleton and placed a larger crow's helmet over his existing skull-helm. He expected them to notice some issues with him soon—but not before Valor and Adam distracted them a bit. "I captured one of the surfacers helping the order. They were in the tunnels—the others are still fighting. They will need support."

Two of the ravens looked at each other, and Shiv had the feeling they didn't buy any of this. Before he could reassemble the bone drill he had taken apart and hidden all across his body, Valor spoke. And this time, several of the enemies took a step back in surprise.

"*Release me, slave of the Stolen Throne,*" Valor spat. It was embarrassing to realize that an ancient man trapped in a dagger possessed more gravitas and performance artistry in him than Shiv and the Young Lord combined. Shiv guessed Valor had a lot of time to practice. "*Release me, I say. Do this, and I will not visit death upon you and your blood when I am inevitably freed.*"

"The Cage!"

"The Cage of Valor Thann!"

"He Who Stills Eternity!"

“The Blade of Sublime Darkness...”

“Lifesplitter. Deathbreaker!”

Titles left the lips of the masked assassins in hushed and awed tones. Several of them bowed to the stone dagger outright as the ravens approached to take Valor from Shiv’s hands. *“Stop!”* the dagger commanded as he heard them draw near. *“Do not approach me. Take me to your master. I wish to hear the purpose of your presence—from the true mastermind.”*

The ravens froze. All of them looked at each other, but said nothing. Not even sign language. However, the gap of silence was long enough to fill a conversation, and Shiv realized something that filled his guts with ice. *They have a mind mage with them. They have to. Shit.*

Well, it was a good thing that Uva hardened Shiv and Adam’s minds. Beside masking their surface thoughts, it should protect them against a mind mage’s focused attacks.

“If they’re not a Master,” Uva finished. She studied Adam and especially Shiv with worry. *“Another Adept I can confidently overcome. But a Master... a Master I might only be able to stall. And for how long, I cannot say. It depends on how developed of a Master they are.”*

Right now, Shiv had a very bad feeling about what lay ahead.

As they entered the room, Shiv continued shaking Adam about while the Young Lord did his best to act outraged. He spat insults and saliva at the agents of New Albion, and several of them regarded him with something bordering on amusement. However, a few noticed something wrong with Shiv as well—and their eyes followed him across the room.

This scheme isn’t going to last long. When it all goes to hell, I’ll splatter whoever I can and go hard after the mind mage—wherever they are. Gotta get as close as I can before proceeding to the next step. I’m not taking any chances. His rough outline of a plan lasted until he was led into the cavern proper. There, he saw Yunni again—her hands shaking as she slotted what looked like a golem’s mana core into a large mechanism. The construct resembled a beating heart in a sense, and it took up a considerable amount of space, multiple square meters. It was bulbous but uneven, and inside countless oscillating spell shapes ground against each other. Shiv also noticed all the wires fusing it to the surrounding webbing. It was connected to the spatial tunnel somehow, and he had a feeling that if it went off, something terrible might happen to all the teleportation anchors.

What worsened Shiv’s nervousness were all the different tunnels leading into this cavern. The space here was tall and wide, and there were many exits. Shiv wondered if they led to other chambers—or elsewhere. On the level above, dozens more agents

looked down over a makeshift railing, bows and exotic barrel-looking weapons in hand. Valor was right. If they had rushed in, this would have been a mess. Especially with so many enemies holding the high ground at multiple angles.

This text was taken from NovelFire. Help the author by reading the original version there.

Then, Shiv saw something that made his heart pump faster. One of the Trapdoor Weaveresses was still alive, kneeling next to a very tall, white-cloaked figure. The stranger in white was like an aberrant spot in the near darkness. The way they held themselves—they way they barely moved at all—made Shiv feel a growing sense of wrongness.

The thing with most skills, aside from those of the magical variety, was that they were hard to detect. Not without specific soul-accessing machinery. You didn't know if the older looking man you insulted was some kind of Adept brawler who could put a hole in a steel wall until he actually did it. This is why it was illegal to not declare your Pathbearer Tier when someone requested it in the Republics. Because a whole slew of silly deaths ripped through the noble families, brought on by the arrogance of unassuming Masters and offended Adepts.

Suddenly, Shiv felt a presence prod at his mind. Uva's spell held, but he felt a distinct crack somewhere.

The stranger in white was looking at Shiv and the Young Lord. Shiv hadn't even detected a hint of motion. Even Adam flinched back in surprise. He didn't see the bastard move either.

The figure in white wore a mask different from all the others—one resembling an owl's face. Rather than being made of metal, it was a solid chunk of focus crystal with two holes for the stranger's deep, green eyes. "Ah," the owl spoke. *She* sounded mature and measured. But also aloof. "And what is this? Do I spy Young Lord Adam Arrow here? How... *unexpected*."

"You know me?" Adam sneered. "Then you know who I am. You know—"

"I know that Blackedge is currently being besieged by Vicar Sullain and his Avenging Faithful. I know that your father is the main reason your town is still standing—and that reinforcements will be blocked for some time because the other noble families yearn to see your upstart branch removed."

Adam clenched his jaw. "You—"

"I also know a few more things. Such as how the Auroral Council is divided in focus and interest. Some of them yearn for another war—but with whom? Of this they cannot agree. And others, well, they wish for peace. But they also might want to see your father

dead. Because it would spite a rival so nicely. And then there is your father's main benefactor. But that one is also indisposed. Desperate to hold the Republic together even as all his former friends betray their ideals day after day after day..."

The owl paused and chuckled. "I am afraid that no help will be coming for some time, Young Lord Arrow. Not for you. Not for your town. And not even for your father."

"You're lying," Adam said, hissing through his teeth. "My father is a hero to the Republic. The Republic never abandons its heroes."

"Oh, but they do. And that's the least of what they do. Tell me, what do you think happened to veterans of the Abyssal War? Hm? Oh, right. They don't teach that in your history. Do you think all your warriors and mages forgot an entire *five-year campaign* filled with blood and misery *naturally*?"

"Shut up!" Adam shouted. He struggled against Shiv's grip, and the Deathless had to apply some effort to hold him. The Young Lord was well past acting now. He was genuinely enraged. "Shut your tainted lips! I won't hear such slander—"

"But that is not up to you," the owl said, sounding confused. "How can it be? Are you a Master? Are you powerful enough to command me? Do you hold my loyalty?"

Adam didn't answer these questions, choosing to glare with eyes of pure hate.

The owl remained indifferent. "No. None of those things. So you have no choice but to listen. Or until you and your friend here stop with whatever foolish ploy this is."

Shiv felt his stomach drop. Well, he wasn't expecting this to last that long, but being seen through so fast—

"A skilled Psychomancer has shrouded the two of you," the owl continued. "It is good—though inefficient in places. Shrouding is only achievable through a few rare Skill Evolutions. Why, even now I can barely quite get a grip on your minds. My compliments. I expect to be instructing her soon. I can feel that it is a *her*—and I can feel a great deal of affection from her... invested in *you* rather than the Young Lord." She strolled toward Shiv. A loud rumbling noise sounded from the construct Yunni was completing.

The blackmailed Umbral let out a sob. "The bomb is armed. Now... my son."

"He will be released. Into the care of New Albion," the owl said, barely concerning herself with the Umbral.

"What?" Yunni said. Her eyes were wide with confusion. "No, you said—"

"That he would be released. The contract did not state to which nation or what wards. And New Albion is rather fine this time of year. Don't worry yourself. Your song will end

soon, but his will begin. He is quite a talented boy, all things considered—a talented *boy* in a society that is... *inconsiderate* of him. But such is the case when you base your structure off spiders. They barely consider their own males sapient. Best that he be given ample opportunity and a finer place to grow.”

“No!” Yunni cried. She blinked, and her face took on a look of primal rage. “I did everything you asked—” Her words turned into a shriek that would follow Shiv into his nightmares. In a second, she went from angry to agonized as her eyes rolled back, and she toppled, foaming from the mouth. Shiv’s Biomancy sensed she was still alive, but her brain was burning up. *If her temperature keeps climbing—*

Before he could strike the owl with his mana field, Valor spoke.

“Enough, Lady Harkness. Release the woman. Release her child as well. Show a fraction of the honor your grandmother did, and stop debasing yourself before me.”

For the first time, the owl seemed human. She took a step back, and her white cloak fluttered—Shiv could see no armor on her body. Just a pure white suit. “My, is that truly the Great Valor Thann I hear? So our eagles were accurate for once. You have struck a bargain with the Composer, consigning yourself from prisoner to slave. How... *disappointing.*”

“Your grandmother would have called you the same,” Valor said with a sigh. *“For a moment, I wasn’t sure... that’s why I waited and listened. I couldn’t believe it was you. But the more you spoke, the more I heard her voice. You sound just like her. But the way you act—”*

“Your friend, Lady Lara Harkness, died years ago, I’m afraid,” the owl said. “Framed, imprisoned, and murdered in front of the ignorant masses like cattle by the throne of the Child Queen Alice.” Harkness laughed. *“Eternal* may she reign.”

“And so you became this in revenge?” Valor asked, his voice tense with disbelief. *“You joined with the Faceless Queen and aided in her reign of terror?”*

“Is that what our revolution was?” Harkness said. “When I took revenge, it was an ugly thing born of trauma. But when you murdered your own mother—and slit the throat of your infant half brother before her—that was a tale of noble righteousness.”

“I make no excuses for my past. But that does not absolve your present. And it is all beside the point, because you are no longer slaughtering the corrupt nobility that were selling your nation, but torturing an innocent woman by turning her against her people and tormenting her with the fate of her child. Now. Release her. And release the child.”

The owl hummed. “Very well. Who am I to refuse the commands of a Legend, after all.”

A second later, Shiv felt Yunni's mind start to cool. She remained unconscious but alive, though her eyes fluttered and blood spilled from her nostrils.

"You're a godsdamned monster," Adam spat. "You have no honor treating the weak like that. A proper Pathbearer would never debase themselves hurting the small and the helpless. I will have your head for this, *felling* vermin."

But the owl just ignored the raging Young Lord. Instead, she took a few steps closer to Shiv, and he prepared himself for battle.

"But who are *you*?" the owl said, pointing a curled finger at Shiv. "Valor Thann does not allow just anyone to hold him. Even as little more than a voice in a dagger, his prestige and legend bear weight. So why *you*? And *who* are you?"

"Someone rapidly developing a hate for most birds," Shiv grunted.

The owl laughed at his words. "Oh, my, this is precious. Truly. This...This is your newest disciple."

"No," Valor said. "*For now, he is just my friend. If he wishes to learn my ways, however, I will guide him. Especially after what he has done today.*"

The woman in white paused. "He has impressed you that much? How? I don't quite see it."

"You can find out," Shiv sneered. With the masquerade broken, he shrugged open his cloak and tore the raven-helm off his head. He released Adam, and the Young Lord took a single step behind Shiv. "I'm ready to do this if you are."

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

24 (II) Surprise

24 (II)

Surprise

The owl paused again. "Well. He is fearless. Or very stupid." She craned her head and hummed. "Adept. At most. But there's something more than that—a secret skill? A Bloodline Skill perhaps? Or a great Blessing? From the Composer, perhaps. No, no,

no..." She stopped again as he examined his armor. "Oh, this is precious. Valor, did you put him up to this?"

"Up to what?"

"He's wearing vestiges of death. He's clad in armor that resembles bone. Does he not know of the significance of such a look? Does he not know the meaning he invokes?"

Shiv recalled something of that. Valor explained to him the nature of becoming a *lich*, how they infused a part of their soul into a body with a skeletal aesthetic. Despite what Shiv always thought, it was not an act of undeath and Necromancy, but actually a declaration against death.

The Great Enemy, Valor had called it.

"No," Valor said, though he sounded proud. *"I did not tell him to do this. Shiv. Would you like to inform her why you look the way you do right now?"*

"Because bones are easy to sculpt, the exoskeleton's easy to use, and I bloody well like the felling look."

The owl barked a pitched laugh. "You jest. You must jest. That's why? Because you like the look."

Shiv reassembled his thin bone drill and let it hover beside him. The Weaveress next to Harkness took a step toward him. The other agents of Albion readied their weapons. "Stop," she said, like a mother chiding her children. "Let the boy have his fun. System. What a pure and intoxicating innocence you have. Valor... Truly... Really?"

"Truly," Valor said. *"And the vestiges of death fit him. More than you could possibly know."*

"Well. Who am I to doubt the words of a Legendary Pathbearer such as yourself." She looked Shiv up and down one more time and let out a thoughtful breath. "Ah. I have a guess as to who you are now. You are the *other* surfer. The one that killed the rogue operative."

"Rogue?" Shiv asked.

"Oh, yes. Do you think a raven works for coin? No. The fool ran from us. He kept what he learned and the face we gave him, and decided he wanted to be rich more than he wanted to serve true power. And so he finished a few contracts. And then some Republic nobles took notice—and one of them saw the opportunity to do something very interesting while removing a rival from the board."

"What?" Adam said, blinking rapidly. "What are you talking about?"

“Oh, poor little hawk. The one that took you wasn’t one of mine. He didn’t belong to anyone in the end. Just the idea of money. But who the raven worked for wasn’t of the Abyss, but of your own nation. It all goes back to your father. Poor fool. He did the right thing all those years ago. And he remains punished till this day.”

The Young Lord’s expression became a maelstrom of disbelief and building agitation. Shiv looked around and began noting all threats he could see. *Damn. Adam was pretty accurate. Fifty-six. He only missed the automata. Might be something about the machines...*

“Still. It was a very impressive showing of... Toughness.” The owl sighed. “I cannot say much for your other skills. You have the Path of someone that takes and endures pain. Were you a slave? Is that why you are so close to these Umbrals?”

Shiv shook his head. “No. It’s mainly the fact that some assholes planned to bomb the first city I got to visit. It kind of spoils the sightseeing mood.”

“Oh, and there’s that smart tongue. Grandmother always did say you liked the ones with wit.” Harkness sighed again. “But I question how much wit you truly have. You walk in here with a terrible disguise, Young Lord in tow, and deliver the Cage of Valor Thann... to me. Why, it is ironic that your earlier disguise was not true, for you certainly served me better than whatever poor fool of mine you took the mask from.”

“You might think that. I have a different perspective.” Shiv folded his arms, taking a step closer to the owl. She remained in place, but the Weaveress loomed over him. Shiv wondered if the Trapdoor Weaveress was compromised or mentally dominated. Judging from how unnaturally she moved, he guessed the latter.

“Well. Tell me about this *perspective* of yours.”

“First, we planned to come in and get close enough to see your operation. We assumed that between me pretending to be a crow, Adam being Adam, and me having Valor Thann, you would let us in deeper.”

“So, you have seen my operation.” Harkness gestured toward the mana bomb. “You see that the moment is close at hand—and that all it will take to collapse Passage’s teleportation network is just simply activating the bomb. Something that can be done with the press of a spell.”

“It also looks awfully vulnerable,” Shiv said. “Lots of complex machinery and intermingling spells. Tell me, will it still work if the threads binding it to the webs around us break?”

“Unlikely,” Harkness said, rubbing her fingers. “But I doubt you or the Young Lord are fast enough. Well. Perhaps he is a close match for a few of my ravens. But close will not do. Not while I’m here. Anything else?”

“Yeah,” Shiv continued. “I also wanted to see the layout of your troops. Looks like a lot of ranged fighters upstairs. All your mages and archers up there—it will be a real shame if an actual warrior managed to make it up and slaughter them.

“It would, but I would ask how a warrior might make it up.”

Shiv ignored her question and looked at the forces she had on the ground level. “And as for your forces here—well, the crows are nothing too impressive. So far, it feels like they’re just here to eat up my time by dying. The ravens? They’re actually dangerous—but you only have five of those guys left. The only surprise I see here is the Weaveress—is she mind controlled?”

“There’s hardly any mind left in the creature, after I—” Harkness paused. “What is this? What are you doing? Why are you narrating—”

“Adam,” Shiv said. “Show her the final step of our plan.”

All eyes shifted to the Young Lord as he... fell backward and huddled up into a ball. Harkness stared at him. “What... Is something supposed to happen?”

“Yes,” Shiv said, grinning at the owl. Even he was surprised how close she'd let him get. “It already has. You let Valor distract you with conversation, and what’s worse—you let me get too close.” He ripped off his crow’s cloak. The flesh along his torso promptly tore open, and packed inside his increasingly tumor-consumed body was *every last mana bomb* and *natural explosive* his comrades had.

Valor laughed, and a huge blast swept out from Shiv’s body as he launched the bombs he hid inside his own body right at the owl’s face.

Shiv grunted as he crammed the last bomb into his stomach and willed his wounds to close. A dense patch of cancers fused over the large incision he made on himself. “That’ll... do for now,” Shiv said, blinking away his lightheadedness. When no one responded, he looked back at the group, and found most of them looking at him with an expression of silent respect mixed with open horror. “It’s not that bad. I’ll be able to last. Trust me.”

“As I felling said earlier, you're bloody demented,” the Young Lord said, shaking his head. The ugliness of Shiv’s wound made him nauseous. “More than demented, you’re insane. I’m glad you’re playing the crow now.”

“Shiv? How is it? Can you hide the pain?”

The Deathless shrugged. "Well, it feels like I'm bleeding internally, dying of cancer, and have ruptured my stomach to hide a few more bombs inside. But compared to getting cooked to death in a teleportation anchor? Maybe four out of ten."

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"Four out of... ten?" a Weaveress muttered in disbelief. "By the Composer... Even if it is true that you can return from death, I will... I must see your nobility reported to the Exalted Mother. Such sacrifice..."

"Yeah, just hand me the helmet and cloak," Shiv wheezed.

"That does not sound like the noise someone makes when the pain is four out of ten," Adam murmured.

"It's fine," Shiv lied. "Just a natural physiological response. I'll last."

He put on his disguise and prepared for the final bit of his preparation. Uva slipped by the other members of the group. Why she needed to personally administer these spells and not use her field, Shiv didn't get at first. Then he saw her face. The pattern she formed within Adam's mind was quick and easy. The Young Lord blinked at her and asked if there was more, but found himself ignored.

Instead, she took a long look at Shiv, and grimaced. "We're taking too much from you. Every time..."

Shiv chuckled—which proved to be a mistake, as he barely stopped it from becoming a wet cough. "I—I'm getting skills out of this. If anything, I think you'd be in your right to bill me the bombs I'm about to use."

He stopped talking as she pressed her gauntlet against his head. He felt a denseness fuse around his thoughts and layer over his consciousness. "This will make it hard for any Psychomancer to seize you. No matter what their Tier, they must undo my bindings first. And that will not be easy." She spent a few moments longer forging his protection compared to what she did for Adam.

The Young Lord made his offense known. "What is this bullshit? Do I have to cook her dinner and flirt with her constantly to get the deluxe treatment as well?"

"You are now Shrouded as well," she said. "This is the best I can do on short notice." Instead of removing her hand, it ran down and Shiv felt her palm against his chest—right above his wound. He placed his hand over hers.

"I'll be fine," Shiv said. "Well. I'll be dead. But then I'll be fine again."

Uva nodded. She looked at him and took a breath. “Dinner. It best be the best food I’ve ever tasted in my life.”

Oh, shit, Shiv shivered. Something in her expression was... *terrifyingly exciting*.

She removed her hand and took a step back. “You’re ready now. To be... What did Legend Thann call it?”

“*A veteran suicide bomber*,” Shiv and Valor replied at the same time, both chuckling.

Force, fire, and blood blossomed out from Shiv’s chest. Diamond Shell prevented him from disintegrating outright—unlike the Weaveress standing right in front of him. Might of Mass allowed him to root himself in place against the force of the blast. Biomancy allowed him to shape the path of the explosion somewhat, directing as much as he could at the owl. And nothing but his own stubborn will kept him conscious through the whole ordeal—even though the pain got *really* bad.

Yep. Eight out of ten. At least.

To his surprise, the owl was blasted off her feet. Shiv guessed her Physicality must not have been that high. However, he didn’t assume she was dead for a second, and launched both his mangled body and his drill after her.

At the same time, Adam, protected from the shockwave by his armor, stopped tumbling across the ground and manifested his bows. He fired in three directions at once. The first person he shot was Yunni—coating her in a coursing shield of water. His second target was the giant mana bomb at the center of the room. He burst part of its core open with a massive arrow. His third bow took part in a massacre; he put shots into the eyes and necks of every crow in the room before moving on to the ravens.

And on the inside of the Young Lord’s neck plate was a communication brooch—one that transmitted every detail of what just transpired to the Arachnae strike force laying in wait. They came charging in with the sound of the blast, knowing exactly what to expect in terms of enemy force composition, their location, and the position of the primary objective.

The raven closest to their tunnel entrance died as ten different spells hit her all at once. The other four *moved*. One rushed Adam—still laying on the ground—while the other three vanished outright, disappearing into the chaos.

Bodies fell from the floor above with azure arrows covering their faces.

In seconds, the long-time stronghold of New Albion hidden within Passage fell as absolute havoc swept through the ranks of Aviary.

To the credit of New Albion's agents, they made a fight of things—some more than others. It was also an absurd attack they experienced. They couldn't possibly sense what Shiv was hiding under his flesh without having another Biomancer overcome his mana field or surprise him. They also couldn't possibly have guessed that Shiv was *casually suicidal*—willing to detonate a cluster of explosives while using his own Adept-Tier body as something of a cannon.

Two of the ravens emerged from shadows in an attempt to inflict some losses on the swarming Umbrals. They were ripped off their feet by unseen attackers. The Trapdoor Weaveresses ripped the assassins apart brutally and slowly. The last raven toppled over unceremoniously on the second level as a mind mage tore their consciousness apart.

Though they remained whole of body, there was nothing left of their self. Nothing at all.

But though an entire cell of Aviary was slaughtered, the Quest remained active, and the Master of the lesser birds still remained. A Master that Shiv did his best to kill. His bone drill shot after Harkness, and he followed soon after. But rather than crash against the webbed walls, the owl somehow *halted* in midair and drew a rapier from within her white cloak in an impossibly fluid motion. The blade was like her, in a sense—pale and wrong in this black place—and rather than dodging Shiv's weapon, she struck it dead on.

The tip of her thin rapier greeted the tip of his drill. Then, there was a flash of light that danced across her blade. A flash that extended through Shiv's drill and his exposed heart as well. The Deathless gave a guttural gasp as he felt a length of metal slide casually through his pumping core. His drill blasted through Harkness. But she faded like a mirage, taking no wounds. As his weapon bounced off a webbed wall, he felt a perfect hole running through its entire length.

And then she stood before Shiv. As if she had always been there. She held her blade at an angle, her other hand behind her back, the stance of a proper duelist. "Well played, boy," she said, her voice filling with genuine warmth. "It might have cost you your life, but you most assuredly have destroyed my cell."

She glanced around as her forces were culled, taking in the scene as if she was beholding a street performance.

Shiv gripped her blade and slammed his Biomancy against her. His field crashed against what felt like a mountain. The owl didn't even react. He adapted, growing a dense weave of tumors over her rapier, trying to hold her in place as he recalled his drill. But before he could finish his spell, three more blades pierced through his chest at different angles. Three blades held by three clones of the owl. He noted how she avoided striking his ribs or exoskeleton—aiming specifically for his exposed skin.

Shit... really need to patch up that exposure next time...

And then there was another question. He could sense all four owls with his Biomancy. Yet, there was something deeply wrong. All of them *were* her at the same time. Their biology was the exact same, their hearts beat at the very same pace, and they all mirrored each other in action.

“How...” Shiv gasped. Blood poured out from his mouth. He tried for his drill again—but a fifth clone materialized with a flash of her rapier. This one placed her heel on his weapon—and her Physicality proved stronger than his Biomancy by far.

“Because, dear doomed child, I am a *Master*,” she replied, her eyes bright with malice and amusement.

Shiv snorted. “So? Think... the raven I killed a few days ago was one too...”

Harkness laughed joyously. “Oh. A delusional High-Adept at most. Perhaps a Master in a single skill. But I am not one of those who believes that simply crossing 100 levels in a skill grants you the right to be called a Master. No. You need to be *well-rounded*, in your mastery—for every lack is a grave weakness.”

She twisted her blade inside Shiv, and he felt death loom close. Spitting blood on her sword, he pulled himself along her weapon to shove his bone dagger into her neck.

The owl allowed him to do it.

Shiv felt his dagger sink through her soft cloak and hit skin. It was then that his strike was torn *brutally* off course. Shiv’s right arm came loose from his socket. Before he could cry out, she seized him by the neck, and he felt a *horrific* amount of strength within her thin fingers. It felt like there was some kind of movement-redirecting-skill infused into her flesh, and a similar power was within her very hands, allowing her to channel impossible amounts of force without moving her body at all.

“How many Master-Tier skills do you even have?” Shiv croaked, more curious than scared.

The owl laughed, indifferent to the deaths of her final few soldiers. The surviving members of the Arachnae Order and Adam advanced on her as one. She let out a relaxed sigh. “It would be quicker to list which ones *aren’t*.” She looked down at the stone dagger Shiv had shoved under one of his bottom exo-ribs. “Sorry, Valor. This one was fearless and durable—but not too smart. I don’t think you’ll be keeping him.”

“*Oh, he will surprise you yet, I think.*” Valor chuckled. “*Shiv. Show her a messy death.*”

The owl cocked her head in surprise. Shiv laughed. And promptly levered his Biomancy to channel all the blood and viscera in his body all over her face.

The so-called Master did not expect that. She also didn't expect Shiv to drain her vitality—and for his skeletal armor to continue attacking her immediately after. The act was so sudden, so *ridiculously* audacious, that even the System seemed pleased, and it saw fit to reward the Deathless for daring to go this far.

Might of Mass > 59

Parry > 23

Diamond Shell > 72

Biomancy > 35

Knife Proficiency > 29

Skill Evolution: Reflexes (Initiate) > Momentum Core (Master)

Momentum Core > 54

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25 (I) Master

I didn't expect to become a Master. I didn't expect to skip Adept altogether for my Geomancy and for it to become Warden of Stone. It was just a thing of desperation for me. But I suppose the way my comrades tell the story sounds different.

We were being assaulted from all sides, taking heavy losses. We were fighting some group of invaders that day, towering grey-skinned monsters, who were, for all purposes, heavily magically resistant. Direct magical attacks didn't work against them. They shrugged off bombardment from our conventional artillery corps, and, to our horror and surprise, they were, to the last monster, terrifyingly strong and brutally resilient, even against concentrated fire.

As you can imagine, the battle was going poorly. But command refused to order a retreat. We were told to hunker in place until reinforcements came, and to create a fortification to establish a foothold within the primal gate.

There was simply one issue, however: I was the last Geomancer alive. When the Greyskins launched an attack, they did so cunningly, dropping their own forces using a

crude catapult from high above. They survived the impact, slaughtering countless rear support and logistical Pathbearers.

The fighting was brutal, and in the combat, my Geomancy Skill reached 50. A breath away from that final threshold, the System indicated to me that my Skill Evolution was imminent. But so too was the enemy, massing their hordes and coming at us from all directions. They had these primitive, sharp-tailed and winged raptors they rode on, and they lobbed explosive eggs the size of small boulders that crashed into us at alarming speeds.

Right then, I found myself exhausted. My Geomancy was stretched to the very limit. I knew that there was a good chance the magical strain could kill me if I tried any harder. However, if I didn't, all my brothers and sisters in arms would die. And that idea, the concept of failing them, proved to be a darker nightmare than my own demise.

I don't know where I found the strength, drawing from reservoirs I didn't think possible. But then, as my eyes bled, as I coughed blood from my mouth, as all my senses faded, I reached deeper and deeper into the earth, feeling like I was burning my very soul to come to a pact with the stone.

I was supposed to be an architect.

My brother ruined that. But I told the stone I could still shape it, that I could still make art even in this ruined place, in these damned gates, and that I would always be its slave if it would only be my sculpture. And to my astonishment, the stone listened, and the System blessed me with a Master-Tier Skill Evolution.

And that's just the thing. The System, godlike as it is, is always watching. It always studies your experiences, judges you based on your feats, your achievements. And when you finally push yourself beyond all your previous limits, and have done so over and over again, your soul will be broken, and then reforged into something magnificent.

Now, as for how I managed to fuse my Master-Tier Warden of Stone with my once-lacking Physicality, that is a story for another day. Skill Fusion... that requires a bit more... proactivity from a Pathbearer.

-Memoirs of a Master-Tier War Mage

25 (I)

Master

Vitality Drain > 7

As it turned out, even a woman with multiple Master-Tier Skills could be surprised. And who could blame her? It wasn't often that one was attacked by a set of skeletal armor—

a set of skeletal armor made from the literal bones of the man it held a moment prior. A man who, in an apparent moment of fatal madness, unleashed all the blood and viscera in his body all over his opponent as if a final act of spite.

Shiv wielded his armor like a puppet, using its arms to strike at Harkness. When his attacks were launched off course by whatever strange skill she had protecting her, he attacked her from several more angles, and via different means. The bone drill slammed into her back—and glanced off at an angle. The kitchen knife descended on the back of her neck but was thrown off course, cleaving nothing but open air. Only Shiv's Vitality Drain did any true damage.

That was something even a Master-Tier opponent couldn't resist.

But as her inner flame flowed into him, Shiv tasted just how much power her soul had. Her vitality was *monstrous*. It might have been the greatest amount of vitality he felt in a person so far. If the first raven Shiv fought was a raging inferno, then Lady Harkness might as well be the sun in the damned sky. And to his astonishment, rather than writhing in pain while crying out in confusion like most of his adversaries before, she *noticed* him immediately.

"Ah," she said, her voice like thunder gracing his mind. With a single off-hand parry, she swatted his armor off course, shattered the blade of his kitchen knife, and launched the rounded edge of Shiv's bone drill into the ribs of an unprepared Umbral. Shiv held his position and drained as much as he could, but then he felt her *squeeze* his mind.

His consciousness rattled and *cracked* in places. Shiv thought he knew pain when he experienced purification in the teleportation anchor. He was wrong. For the brief moment she crushed his mind, Shiv was *agony*. It was only because of Uva's shrouding that he didn't shatter immediately. Even then, it felt like how he imagined pieces of steel slicing through the soft tissue of his brain would.

"Oh? You haven't cracked yet? Impressive. Whoever made your protections is truly talented." Harkness's blade flashed. Two more clones of her suddenly appeared, swatting aside a wave of azure arrows and even knocking the *spells* off course. Fire and lightning curved around the owl's body, as if terrified of striking her. Through it all, she continued staring at Shiv, studying him with interest. "Well. Do continue. I want to see the depths of your capability."

Pushing through the sea of torment, Shiv planted both of his ghostly hands on her again and *drained*. But while he did, he turned his focus to where his armor lay. He remembered how she slew him last time, stabbing at his exposed flesh and not the exoskeleton. Shiv extended his Biomancy field and fused the bones of his previous corpse with the armor. New ribs filled the gaps in the exoskeleton's torso. He sculpted most of the remaining bone to create a dense layer of plate—and even inserted his newest skull into the chest. The excess matter he used to repair whatever nicks and

fractures lined his armor. He also added bladed edges to his shoulders and elbows—so he could better slice and cut during a grapple.

This book was originally published on NovelFire. Check it out there for the real experience.

Of course, Harkness noticed this too. She followed his Biomancy as she *allowed* him to drain from her, nodding her head as if impressed. “Well. It seems you’re still a boy indeed. How very... *loud* and *outrageous*. But I do like it. I have always had a taste for people who wear their nature openly. Like a moth has a taste for flame.”

Valor called out to her from his armor, but whatever the dagger said was lost over the chaos of battle.

Though the remaining agents of Aviary were being slaughtered and Yunni’s mana bomb was badly damaged, the Quest remained incomplete. Furthermore, with each gleam of Harkness’s rapier, another instance of her would emerge somewhere, strolling off as if she was taking a leisurely walk while twirling her blade in a mock salute. Umbrals rushed her. Adam launched a tide of arrows at every clone of the owl he could see.

But Harkness was too arrogant—or lazy—to even respond with proper blocks anymore. She let spells and blades and arrows and halberds hit her over and over. And every last strike twisted violently out of her way, choosing to crash into the ground or tumble off in another direction altogether. It was like her body was maintained by a directing field.

Shiv found himself awed—and *excited*. If this was what it meant to be Master-Tier, then he couldn’t wait to find out what Momentum Core would let him do—because he had a Master-Tier Skill now too, thanks to Harkness.

And so he might just have one more surprise for her when he resurrected from this death.

She watched as the shadows condensed around his body, sinking a gloved finger through the darkness as if curious about its composition. “How very interesting. You’re not dead at all, it seems. You’re a continuation of the same vitality signature, even after the destruction of your material vessel.”

How did she tell all that at a glance? Shiv thought. Harkness’s eyes flashed with a surge of mana, and her green irises became as if emeralds beneath starlight.

“Deathless,” she breathed. She sounded almost... excited? “How apt. And you have skills that I cannot perceive? At least two Legendary Skills, then. Oh, poor boy, you tease my curiosity so. Fine. If the System won’t let me see, I’ll just find out from your *mind*—wait, where did that *Master-Skill* come from? Your Reflexes... weren’t they just Initiate?” Find the newest release on

Shiv didn't answer her question as he resurrected. Instead, he called his newly-improved exoskeleton to him, the armor unfurling into petals of bone before closing around his fracturing shadow. He returned to life, already encased in a protective shell, but Harkness just hummed and thrust her blade at his neck where the armor was thinnest.

Despite the strike being a nonchalant jab on Harkness's part, it was still impossibly fast. Shiv blinked, stunned that he could *almost* track the incoming hit—even if he was still dramatically slower. Yet Harkness was a Master among Masters, and her blade split a clean gap in his armor. A clean gap that required more effort on her part to completely punch through to where his flesh awaited. Only then did Shiv manage to react. His Reflexes felt far faster right then, but he was still nothing compared to the owl's speed—even the elemental golem he fought earlier was faster.

For the briefest of moments, Shiv wondered if the System notification was wrong, if he hallucinated that Master-Tier Skill Evolution. But as he moved, he felt like part of reality moved with him. Then the first distortions appeared. They manifested as faint ripples around his body, translucent tides of energy crashing against him as if his being was a shore. A few other things became apparent to him as well.

The world around him was slowing—and doing so fast. Spells and attacks previously too fast and hard for him to track were becoming observable, but more noteworthy was how the few projectiles that passed close by him stalled drastically as rippling currents of energy were ripped out of them before splashing into Shiv. But it wasn't just the projectiles that were affected. Of all things in motion, Harkness slowed the most. The progress of her rapier stalled while Shiv felt his own Reflexes *accelerate*. Just enough to save his life.

Shiv felt the tip barely kiss his neck before he launched himself off to the side.

As he stabilized himself using his Biomancy, he closed the hole she made in his armor and called his bone drill back. Inside, it felt like his body was caging a growing thunderstorm. Something was building: a force that was only partially fed from his recent evasion.

Harkness staggered, her balance lost. She slowly turned to gaze at him a moment later, and Shiv realized all her clones were doing the same. They weren't even focused on the other combatants anymore, choosing all to zero-in on him.

"You had my curiosity before," she began, rubbing at the tip of her rapier between two fingers. "Now, you have my *keen* interest."

Shiv didn't like the sound of that at all. "Shit," he muttered.

And then she and five other clones practically teleported from where they stood, driving their blades into his armor. Once more, he felt her chip through his exoskeleton—but he

delayed her points of penetration by actively concentrating and reshaping the bones using his Biomancy. At the same time, he sensed the flowing paths of her *momentum* as her blades drew close to his body—something he failed to notice earlier.

Whatever absorption he performed during her first strike was purely instinctive. Now, his Reflexes amping up and a raging power rattling at his very core, Shiv focused on the waves pulsing out from her blades and reached out to touch them. A shudder of energy rushed through his form as he grasped and then *tore* the very momentum out of her strikes.

Momentum Core > 55

Parry > 24

Biomancy > 36

Three of Harkness's clones staggered to an abrupt halt. All the motion in their bodies vanished—was sucked out of them into the building maelstrom of momentum that was Shiv. However, her final two clones were merely slowed. Slowed because the raging cataclysm within Shiv reached an unbearable peak.

For a moment, it felt like the world stood still. With all the momentum surging through him, Shiv found that his Reflexes were supercharged as well. He could practically count each of Adam's arrows passing through the air, see the surviving force of Umbrals and Weaveresses trying to push through the owl's clones to assist him, and read the astonishment in Harkness's wide, green eyes.

Then, she surprised him in turn by *blinking*. *"Well. I suppose congratulations for your Reflexes Evolution are in order. Here, boy, let me finish giving you my metal."*

And the remaining two Harkness's clones thrust *harder*.

Shiv felt these blades slice through the dense knots of bone he composed and press against flesh. He tried to absorb more of her momentum, but his insides flared with explosive pain. That was the limit of energy that his Momentum Core could store for now—and he wouldn't be able to endure all this energy for long. He needed to *unleash* it. Before it boiled him alive from the inside.

And so he did the only thing he thought was logical. He called the bone drill into his hand, picked the closest of Harkness's clones that he stole all momentum from, aimed his weapon at her face, and released the storm inside.

An enormous blast of force exploded out from Shiv like a tidal wave—pushing the blades still sunken into his armor back out. A veil of sound burst around his body, and the air briefly combusted into flames, lighting up the dim cavern. Though the initial

detonation of kinetic energy simply folded around Harkness's many bodies, something very different happened as Shiv drove the tip of his drill into her mask.

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25 (II) Master

25 (II)

Master

As his weapon struck her body, he felt a bubble of energy press against him, trying to wrestle his blow off course. Her bubble didn't pop, but it folded far in, and the tip of his drill cracked hard against her forehead before the bubble snapped back into form and flung him and his weapon drastically off his trajectory.

A string of incoherence left Shiv's mouth as he blasted across the cavern. As he expended all his stored momentum, his reflexes returned to what they were at baseline—still far greater than what they used to be, but practically frozen compared to the speed he was capable of when his Momentum Core was full.

The world was a rolling blur around him for the briefest of moments before he slammed hard against a webbed wall. There was so much leftover energy in him that he just kept pressing for a while—and, to his astonishment, a few of the webs snapped outright trying to bear his weight before he remembered his Might of Mass.

Shiv drew on his strength and, with a brief struggle, blunted what remained of his kinetic charge as he landed on a knee. "Ow," he surmised. Half of his body felt like it was bruised even with Diamond Shell. He guessed that was the consequence of using a Master-Tier Reflex Skill in tandem with an Adept-Tier Toughness Skill.

Spear Proficiency > 8

Before him was a scene of stunned carnage. Several Umbrals and Weaveresses had been thrown off their feet by his momentum discharge. The Young Lord was gawking at him while lying on the ground—but to his credit, his other two arms continued firing at Harkness. Shiv also caught sight of Uva on the second floor above. She and the mages had taken that position from their slain enemies and had been constantly lobbing spells down at the woman in white. Right now, she stared at Shiv. The spell was broken. He briefly offered her a thumbs up—and she went right back to trying to break the owl's mind.

As for Harkness, *something* about her had changed. For a few moments, Shiv thought he severely wounded her and that this fight was soon to end. To his satisfaction, each of her clones were also clutching at their faces, and they faded like mirages in the light, just as before. In an instant, only a single version of her remained, and a literal deluge of destructive spells splashed down on her. Yet, as the elements bathed her body, as dozens of magi tried to crack her immense Magical Resistance, as Adam launched larger and larger arrows at her, she simply pulled her cracked mask of white off her face, and *smiled*.

“Remarkable,” she mentally said to Shiv. She was laughing. Chaos furled around her, painting her in a backdrop of fire and devastation. As the room came alight, Shiv saw her face for the first time. Her straight hair was midnight black with a streak of white on her left, and it rested where her neck met her body. Her features were thin and elegant, with a slim nose, wide eyes, and lips painted dark red. There was a distance in her gaze, like she was lost in a moment of nostalgia—but Shiv saw in those eyes something that made him clench his drill tighter.

He was facing someone that fed from misery, from cruelty. He saw the same look in the lesser vampires when they attacked, when they smelled blood. She might be a human, but this one was more predator than even most monsters.

Too bad for her, Shiv had a hobby of killing predators.

He advanced on her, sharpening the deformed tip of his drill. He swung his weapon and reshaped his armor for battle. She mirrored his bold gesture, bringing her rapier in front of her eyes and swiping down. As Shiv moved, he discovered that he could drink in the momentum from the passing wind currents and friction—anything that moved in relation to him, really. And so he began to fill his core, and her blade flashed once, twice, and many times more. In seconds, her clones were back, walking out to battle the Arachnae Order. Only for their path to be interrupted by brilliant blue arrows that splashed over them as walls of water.

Then, the Young Lord was behind Shiv again, firing over his shoulder while using him as a shield.

“How’d the floor feel?” Shiv asked.

Adam’s hands were a ceaseless blur—but Shiv slowly found himself able to perceive each individual shot as his core filled. “Get tainted. What the hells was that?”

“Reflexes Evolution,” Shiv grunted.

The Young Lord turned to glare at him. “What?”

“Yeah. I got something called Momentum Core.”

“*What?*” Adam practically shrieked.

“It’s pretty useful—especially since I would be a sitting duck against a Master-Tier opponent without it.”

“M-m-master,” Adam sputtered before composing himself. “*This is bullshit.*”

Shiv was about to say something before he heard Valor mumbling inside his armor. The Deathless winced. The dagger was pinned against his hip right now. “Sorry, Valor. I’ll get you out if she doesn’t kill us all. For good.”

Then, Shiv caught something moving in his periphery. It was so sudden and brief that he should have missed it—would have missed it without his Momentum Core. But he turned on instinct and swung his drill high. A resounding clash echoed through the room as diamond-layered bone turned away a gleaming rapier. The Young Lord’s eyes widened as Harkness’s blade sparked against the side of his helmet rather than punching through his open mouth.

Parry > 25

New Skill: Awareness 1 (Initiate)

And then both he and Shiv attacked at the same time. A stream of arrows exploded in Harkness’s face as Adam detonated them prematurely. He adapted to the fact of Harkness’s protective bubble by trying to hammer her with flat, concussive force. This didn’t phase the owl of New Albion at all, but it did allow Shiv to siphon some momentum out of the blasts.

The world around Shiv got slower as his momentum climbed. He swung his bone drill at Harkness like a club. Her arm blurred five times before he was even mid-swing. Every one of her cuts landed perfectly in the same place, turning a nick into a gap into a split. Shiv felt his drill part in half—and then she was rising just below him. Shiv inhaled and drained what he could from the oncoming blow with his Momentum Core. Her hand slowed substantially; time itself seemed to drag. But Shiv reacted too late. Her open palm cracked his helmet and sent his head snapping back. The secondary effects of her strike became a shockwave—one that launched Adam off his feet and into the air.

Between Diamond Shell, Might of Mass, and a considerable sip from his Momentum Core, Shiv managed to stay conscious—if only barely. His thoughts bounced around like broken teeth inside a can—much like the literal broken teeth inside his mouth—and Shiv felt himself slide meter after meter backward despite his increased mass. The damned golem hit like an insect compared to her—and this was after he drank a huge amount of her momentum away. Her Physicality had to be Master-Tier as well—at least.

And she’s still just playing with us, Shiv realized. But he was going to make her regret that mistake.

Shiv stomped down with his rear leg and stopped his slide. He absorbed the final drip of momentum needed to fill his core. Once more, his chest felt like it was gripping an expanding bomb. The world around Shiv all but halted. He and Harkness were the only people that still seemed capable of moving—and despite this, she was still faster, driving her blade toward his head.

But once again, she wasn't prepared for his counterattack. Shiv discharged every last bit of momentum stored in his core. His head snapped forward, and he practically rematerialized with his skull smashing against the owl's nose. He felt her protective field curve around him, trying to redirect him. But he was going too fast, and this time, he remembered to use his Might of Mass and his Biomancy in tandem with his Momentum Core to achieve the mother of all headbutts.

Her rapier skipped off the side of his helmet. Her protective field flattened. An explosion of force and fire from air friction swallowed both of them as Shiv felt his helmet *shatter*—and his forehead beneath fracture. He transferred every bit of force he had into her—and this time, instead of sliding off her person, Shiv launched the owl across the entire cavern with a deafening crack.

All her clones also went flying before vanishing in smears of light. Shiv managed to stop himself from falling over, but only barely. That hit left part of his skull in floating pieces. There was also the spiking headache that made his eyes fill with flashing colors. It felt like he was standing on a boat. Shiv tried taking a step forward, only to lurch over. The webbed ground came at him fast, but someone caught him—stopped him from falling all the way.

“Broken Moon, you're bloody heavy,” Adam complained.

Shiv grunted. He doubted his weight was actually enough to strain the Young Lord's Physicality. “You're... always complaining.”

Adam wrenched Shiv back on his feet and allowed the Deathless to lean on him. Only after pushing Shiv's head the other way, though. “Point your face away from me. You're bleeding all over my armor.”

Shiv laughed, despite all the pain he was in. He tried to stand properly, but the world kept spinning, and a groan escaped from him. Adam was leading him somewhere, and Valor was still speaking—the dagger's voice sounding like a muffled mess from inside Shiv's armor. “Maybe... I should have punched her instead,” Shiv muttered.

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“Yes, you idiot,” Adam snapped. “But if it's any consolation, I don't think you had much brain to lose.”

“Just jealous... of my Master-Tier... Reflexes.”

When Adam didn't reply in offense and stopped walking, Shiv knew something was wrong. As he blinked a few more times, his vision cleared, and he saw members of the Arachnae Order pulling their wounded and... *unmoving* back through the tunnels. A mage called out in alarm from above, and Shiv soon noticed why.

As the dust and chaos settled, as the leftover friction-flame caused by Shiv's *mother of all heatbutts* died, what came into view was Lady Harkness strolling back through the haze with a most peculiar look on her face. As she stepped through the smog, Shiv saw that she wasn't entirely uninjured. No. There was a slight, reddened patch lining the bridge of her nose, and a trickle of blood flowed beneath. She dabbed at her nostrils with her white glove, staining the tip red. She held it out for Shiv to see.

"Well *done*," she whispered. She offered Shiv a genuine smile. "Where is Valor? I wish to declare to the old Legend my intent to *steal* you for my own."

"Steal?" Shiv asked. The first spells came down on the enemy Pathbearer again, but she ignored them as usual.

"Oh, yes. You owe me an entire cell of good killers. Well. Good in a relative sense. You did manage to slaughter them, after all. Still. To give one's life in service of the throne is not such a bad end. And besides, I have traded copper in them to discover gold in you."

She switched to speaking telepathically when the spells got too loud. Shiv swallowed but pushed off Adam despite his still-spinning head. He glared at Harkness and ripped away the broken pieces of his ruined helmet.

"Ah. There you are as well. And what a vicious expression you have. I suspect that the instructors at Aviary will find it difficult to properly recondition you. I hope they fail. I appreciate pugnacity and aggression in a warrior."

"I think I'm going to say no," Shiv muttered under his breath. He looked at the Young Lord—and then at the mana bomb. It just occurred to Shiv that the Quest *still* wasn't over. The interweaving magical fields inside the bomb were spilling out through the cracks and several of its cords had been ripped out of the surrounding webs... but its bulbous body still seemed operational to some extent. "Adam. The mana bomb is still active. The spell's not done. I need you to destroy it completely. Break it wide open."

Adam blinked and leaned closer to Shiv as Harkness stretched out her right arm. "I do that, might just fry us all. I know you're not afraid of dying, but with all those spells running at the same time—"

"Then I'll do it," Shiv said. "I'm going to distract her. You get everyone out." The Young Lord opened his mouth. "Take them by force if you have to. There's nothing they can do against her."

“There’s nothing *you* can do against her. I know you technically have a Master-Tier Skill, but she is fully in the Master-Threshold! And not only for that one skill. That means she has at least fifty more levels on you in terms of Reflexes—and far more than that everywhere else.”

“Yeah,” Shiv said, spitting out a mouthful of blood. “But I can die. Over and over and over.”

“But can your mind be unbroken?” Harkness asked. Shiv looked at her again, and scowled. She smiled sweetly back at him, as if she knew everything he was thinking. *“I told you. I am a Master in far more skills than one. But I do want to keep you as whole as I ca—”*

And then another force *pushed* Harkness out of Shiv’s mind. A psychic scream sounded from Uva as Shiv felt a denseness form within his mind. “*Shiv,*” she said, her breath trembling with strain. *“I am with you. Let’s finish her.”*

Shiv’s gut clenched. He wanted her to run—to get out of this place, but he asserted himself over his emotions. If she left, Harkness would grind his mind down to nothing in an instant. Uva was probably the only reason why all of them weren’t drooling at the owl’s feet right now. But he could feel the strain she was under as the owl shifted her attention. Neither of them were going to last long.

He needed to make this fast.

“Shoot the damn bomb anyway,” Shiv said. “If it looks like we’re going to lose—”

This time, Harkness didn’t stroll, but *sprinted* at him.

He guessed her coming as a current of wind shivered next to his right ear.

Awareness > 2

It didn’t help.

She slipped under his guard, and her blade ignited like it was the sun itself. She slashed, and suddenly, Shiv couldn’t feel either of his arms. Not with his physical body, anyway. He launched his severed limbs at her using his Biomancy—and tried to hit her with the drill from behind. Instead of manifesting any clones, she simply parried them all at once—even as he drained her momentum; even as that single sequence of cuts, blocks, and stances flooded his Momentum Core to the max.

Even as the world ground to a halt again, he felt like a tortoise plodding through existence, while she was the wind, her blade slicing across the bridge of his nose as he barely flinched back in time. He discharged his momentum again and launched himself shoulder-first at his foe.

But this time, she learned—or was finally taking him seriously. Her protective field caught him before he could get close, and then curled his momentum back in on himself. Waves of web-shredding force tore through the world around them. Shiv was like a bomb unto himself, his kinetic energy launching everyone but him and Harkness off their feet. His organs burst. Ligaments tore. Bones snapped and dislocated. Shiv sank through her protective veil and got within a finger's distance. But that was when all his momentum died.

And then he closed his diamond-hard teeth around her neck.

He bit at her, finding her actual skin nigh-impenetrable as well. Rather than counterattacking, she gave a *shrill* laugh. Before jabbing him in the gut with her knuckles. Shiv endured the hit with his Might of Mass, but the cost he paid was colossal. His armor shattered. Parts of his spine folded out of alignment. Shiv gnashed his teeth harder—would have kneed her too, but he couldn't feel anything beneath his chest anymore.

As spells crashed down on both of them, Shiv could hear Uva calling for the others to cease their fire, that he was at risk. The other members of her order didn't hear her in time. Fire, lightning, ice, force, water, stone, acid, and so many more variations of magical attacks buried both him and Harkness. His flesh burned and froze and bled and melted and *suffered*. The owl's outfit was barely even smudged.

But Shiv kept biting her, and finally, he felt her react.

"I'm actually feeling a bit of a pinch here," she whispered to him. "Ah. You remind me of *Toro*. He was my mastiff as a girl, you see—a real fearless warrior. Quite like you. Your teeth even somewhat feel the same."

She hit him again. He drained most of the blow with his Momentum Core.

It still wasn't enough.

Pain. Dark. Then white. Then noise. And peace.

This time, Shiv did pass out. For a moment, everything was blissfully white and peaceful. Then, Uva wrenched his consciousness back, and he surged back into awareness. He was flying through the air. So he used Might of Mass and Biomancy and Momentum Core to still himself. He slammed down on the ground. And promptly collapsed. The pain broke his focus, and with it, his spell. Without Biomancy, he was too broken to stand. There was little in him that wasn't broken or torn. Blood and water was filling his lungs. But still, this was mostly a *nine out of ten*.

He handled the teleportation anchor. He could handle this. Wrenching himself off the ground, he turned an agonized howl into something more of a growl and spat blood at the owl's direction. A gust of wind passed over him, and Shiv drank in a final drop of

momentum for his core. She mockingly clapped for him—only for him to discharge his core and launch his ruined body at her once more.

Momentum Core > 60

This time as a distraction.

She brought her radiant rapier up, waiting for him to impale himself. Shiv didn't stop. He just angled his body and accepted that he was going to die again. The blade passed between his ribs—but missed his heart, thanks to a last minute tug with his Biomancy. He crashed against her hilt—and then her protective bubble collapsed around him, stalling out his remaining momentum.

Shiv took this moment to attempt something. On the very edge of his mana field, some twenty meters away, he felt a fragment of bone that came free from his armor. A bone he shaped into a spike and launched at Harkness's back. To his pleasure, it struck home—and failed to pierce her actual flesh. But he learned something: Her bubble was something that she actively had to wield, rather than a passive barrier.

Adam saw this too, apparently, as a tide of arrows blasted into her a half-second after.

That's when Shiv learned another thing about the owl—she might be a Master-Tier, but her skills were far different from his. Harkness, split between Shiv's charge and the sudden opening behind her, was flung off her feet. She almost caught herself before Shiv finished the rest of his discharge, bladed-shoulder first into her chest.

Her white suit tore, and his blood painted her in smears of crimson. She looked down at Shiv. And nodded. "Fine. You earned *this*."

She then drove her head against his, and his skull caved in completely.

Diamond Shell > 75

Might of Mass > 65

Momentum Core > 61

Parry > 29

Biomancy > 40

Awareness > 5

Spear Proficiency > 10

Shiv tried to keep on fighting after he died, but without a physical body to gather momentum, his Reflexes were slow. Far too slow to reach his enemy before the full might of her Psychomancy struck at his mind. His consciousness spun as if it was being shaken inside of a cage, and in the depths of his awareness, he heard Uva let out a scream of effort, trying to keep him whole.

“Well, you’re quite good, Psychomancer,” Harkness complimented. “I think I’m going to play with you for a while. Your shrouding is good. A rare evolution.” She looked upward and spotted Uva immediately. The Umbral was bleeding from all her orifices, and Shiv reached out, draining the owl to get back into the fight.

I won’t let any more of them die. I won’t let her die. He couldn’t. He made it an impossibility in his thoughts.

Yet, even as an ocean of attacks crashed down around her, Harkness gave a huff. “Would you believe that my true talent does not lie in physical combat? I know I haven’t truly shown you yet—I was so focused on indulging in a bout of quaint savagery against you with my blade and fists. But I can show you now. I can show you the distance between a Psychomancy Adept and a *Master*.”

No! Shiv willed himself to drain Harkness faster. And she let him. Like all the times before. But, instead of attacking him, she lifted a hand up and cast her first true Psychomancy spell. “Let me assure you, dear boy, that nothing quite breaks like a mind.”

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26 (I) Victory

I have seen once-hopeless Initiate Pathbearers become reborn through the completion of a Quest. And I have seen Masters fall and shatter from the consequences of failure.

There is something every Pathbearer learns during their life: the System abhors the weak. The System abhors defeat. And the System wants you to struggle, to fight, to claw at the lid of your casket even as it is closing to reach one more level, to slay one more foe.

And every now and again, when the stars align and fate’s ugly face sneers down upon you, you will find yourself bestowed with a Quest through the divine or—in the most remarkable of circumstances—the System itself.

And the rewards you get from the System are staggering as well. For each person, it often creates something they need—or something that drastically boosts the effectiveness of their Path and skills. Even if they don't realize it. These items can rarely be found naturally, unless purchased from a dedicated crafter. Or the reward can be an awesome flood of skill levels—enough to break someone's bottleneck or send them into a new threshold after years of languishing.

But that is if you succeed.

*When it comes to failure, the System rarely focuses on punishing you specifically. But it **does** punish you. It punishes you by changing something in the world, or upending a certain status quo. Because change invites conflict. And that, more than anything, is what the System thirsts for.*

War.

-Memoirs of a Master-Tier War Mage

26 (I)

Victory

Harkness's Psychomancy spell was a shapeless, colorless thing. It looked like a shifting, translucent net manifesting around her hand, and Shiv felt his dread spike. But then another spell smashed into Harkness's first. The owl's spell shattered into fragments, and she glanced upward for a beat, smirking at the culprit.

Uva launched spell after spell of her own, even as her face turned into a mask of blood. Shiv's stomach twisted. His shadows were forming, but it wouldn't be fast enough. Harkness casually traced a few quick spells before launching them at Uva. The Umbral cried out with effort and strain, but Shiv felt something *break* somewhere, like a tremor of a fallen vase rushing past his feet without the accompanying noise.

The other magi tried to support her, unleashing all they had on Harkness. But the owl continued as she did before with Shiv, focused on a singular individual, her face awash with shifting expressions. "Hm. Good, good. Very thorough. How extremely skilled for an Adept—detail-oriented." She created a large spell that expanded around her head like a crown. She slammed it down on the world—and for a moment Shiv felt the urge to *kneel* and *obey*.

Then, with a defiant cry that built and built, a counterforce impacted the crown like a falling axe. The oppressive urge to submit vanished as the crown shattered. Uva snarled as she burst another of the owl's spells. But the way she blinked the blood out of her eyes, the way she swayed, told Shiv she was long past spent. Even he hadn't strained his mana field to this extreme before, and if she kept going—

Uva, stop! You did enough! Run! Get out of here! Shiv called out to her mentally.

“No,” she replied without hesitation. There was a resolve in her akin to cold steel. *“I will not abandon you. I will not abandon my mission. I will not. If this is to be death, then so be it. But if you can do it, then I can too.”*

Then a memory from her brushed his mind. It was a memory of terrifying pain and bitter-sweet wonder. It was of him as he endured the cleansing flames within the teleportation anchor, sacrificing himself to keep her and the other Umbrals protected from the purification process. Before that moment, she was fascinated by him, attracted to him, amused by him. But with that sacrifice, a part of her was in awe of him. Was enamored and wounded by him.

Now she wanted to see if she held the same strength inside her. Because what Pathbearer didn't?

“And yet you stand,” Harkness said, chuckling. She gave a slight bow at her Adept rival, indifferent to the other mages. *“You trace a pretty little weave of thoughts, girl. You're a seamstress as well, aren't you? I recognize that thought process—that thought pattern. That, and I also took a peek at your surface thoughts while you were struggling to undo my workings. So much frustration. So much pain. So much yearning to find out if your mother was slain by someone like me.”*

The owl smirked. *“I might know, but I'll keep you in suspense. Maybe I'll inform you after I finish shackling your mind.”* She looked at Shiv's breaking shell of shadows. *“Not truly what I hoped for after sensing your skills, boy, but it's fitting. Two promising soldiers for the price of all my current forces. The System gives. The System takes. But I am always generous.”*

Revenant > 4

Shiv burst out from his shadow cocoon, preparing to strike his enemy from as many directions and through as many methods as he could. She could be distracted and overwhelmed. She could be bled. He *could* kill her—as long as he was willing to die over and over again. But before the broken remains of his skeleton armor could reach him, she cut into him using her true blade: her Psychomancy.

Shiv heard Uva scream his name as she was forced out of his consciousness. His protective shroud cracked. Lady Harkness *pried*. It felt like someone was ripping his brain open down the middle. The pain nearly drove him insane. It wasn't anything like physical pain—it didn't last nearly as long, but the hurt ran so deep that it was beyond words to describe. Shiv still managed another step before he felt her full presence bear down on him. In that moment, as she tried to pluck through his personal history, he wanted to *hate* Psychomancy. But he failed. What he actually hated was the fact that she had this power while he didn't.

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Magic was bullshit. And Shiv wanted more of that bullshit for himself. Even now.

“Get... out...” Shiv gasped, clutching his skull.

“Hm. Resilient. Unnaturally resilient. I've only seen something like this a few times. You seem to be absolutely devoid of *genuine* trauma. How curious. You have the mind of someone that had a charmed life—yet that is most assuredly not who you are. And what's this in the shallows? A building affection for... *her*?” And she looked up at Uva—the Adept Psychomancer pulling at her Master-Tier adversary to no avail, like a mouse trying to move a mountain. “Oh, how sweet. The seed of unblossomed want and affection.”

There was nothing mocking in Harkness's tone. She genuinely sounded happy to discover this. “You might not believe me, but I'm really quite the romantic. But alas, this life of mine doesn't allow anything beyond impersonal moments of the flesh, so we make do sometime, vicariously. Perhaps you two can start something terribly taboo and forbidden when I leave you at Aviary. The instructors will hate it too.”

She suddenly lifted a finger and made a gesture. Four Weaveresses promptly collapsed behind her, their invisibility cloaks flapping as they started writhing and clawing at their skulls. She pointed again, and other members of the order cried out as well, wailing as she took their minds. And then, she looked at Uva. Uva, the Adept Pathbearer, still struggling against her, practically the last woman standing. The Umbral looked on the verge of unconsciousness, her eyes rolling while her body shook. But then she bit down and let loose two final spells before collapsing.

Shiv felt her body with his Biomancy, and her skull felt like it was on fire—and so much blood was rushing out from her. He wanted to try and heal her, but he knew that his touch would only ensure that she died. *Godsdammit all!* She felt alive but—

But his thoughts were his own again. Shiv realized that after a beat. A gap had formed in Harkness's attention. It was like she was momentarily blind to him. Shiv snarled as he rose. He drew on his Biomancy and Might of Mass once more as he slammed into the owl. To their shared surprise, he managed to pick her off the ground in a brutal takedown. To his continued surprise, he found himself on top of her, slamming elbow after elbow into her face as she blinked, frowning at the impacts.

Whatever Uva did, it somehow made the Master-Tier Pathbearer *blind* to his presence. She carved out wildly—her glowing blade ripping whips of blood out from Shiv's now bare torso from the quantity of her strikes alone. Shiv snarled and continued raining blows down on her while using his Biomancy to bludgeon her Magical Resistance. Right then, Shiv was willing to die for good if it meant taking his enemy with him, and with each of his punches, his Momentum Core climbed.

Soon, he was dodging and parrying some blind strikes—at least angling his body and inner organs to avoid taking a fatal wound. Harkness summoned more clones, their blades flashing out. Shiv felt several strikes punch clean through him, parting essential veins and arteries. He was a dead man again, but he was going to make this death matter.

Just as she started shaping a new Psychomancy spell, Shiv roared as his Momentum Core hit capacity. He wrapped his Biomancy around his body, straining his field so hard blood erupted from all his orifices—uncaring if it killed him. He used that to accelerate every part of himself in tandem with Might of Mass as he emptied his Momentum Core via a descending elbow that he landed against the owl's jaw.

Momentum Core > 61

Might of Mass > 68

Striking Proficiency > 23

Grappling Proficiency > 39

Diamond Shell > 76

This time, her head snapped back, and he heard it—a distinct gasp of discomfort from her even as both his spirit and body practically came apart with the blow. He used *everything* he had, and death claimed him instantly. His reward was a front-row seat to the absolute destruction that followed.

His corpse deformed and warped into a horrific shape as his elbow impacted Harkness's jaw. The air completely ignited this time—not just a brief combustion. A wall of force and flame swept out—and it was only thanks to the Umbral magi that most of the order wasn't killed as well. Adam was flung off his feet and sent flying against the mana bomb—the mana bomb he still hadn't shot yet.

And then there was Harkness. The webs beneath her tore as the spatial stability of the entire cavern *fractured*. It felt like the entire chamber was tilting at an angle.

But despite getting hit with a blow hard enough to snap even the hyper-dense webs serving as the foundations for an entire cave's worth of spatial magic, all Harkness sported was a split lip and a scowl.

Yet, Shiv didn't walk away empty-handed.

Biomancy > 44

Might of Mass > 69

Diamond Shell > 79

Momentum Core > 63

Skill Gained: Psychomancy 1 (Initiate)

Shiv felt a third mana field expand around him—this one mainly encompassing his mind. He also had the displeasure of sensing how *colossal* Harkness's field was compared to his. If he was a flea, then she was the entire sky. Her mana stretched beyond the point he could see—and Shiv wondered how Uva could contend with this monster at all.

But then he sensed another thing: there was a dense layer of magic coloring his mind, and he realized he was camouflaged within Harkness's own field. Shiv's astonishment at Uva's feat grew as he turned to regard the Umbral. Her field was huge too, encompassing a large part of the cavern they were fighting in, but he could still see the edges. She was ridiculously dwarfed by the owl as well.

Shaking off his admiration, Shiv reached down and started draining his enemy again. He tried to use his Biomancy field as a weapon again, but it felt raw, like a flayed limb. Every time he moved it, he writhed in spiritual agony. *I can't be using that until it gets better*, Shiv thought, and he focused on draining his adversary's vitality.

By this point, Harkness knew something was wrong, and she adapted with rapid efficiency. Once more, she formed a Psychomancy spell—this one larger and more complex than the others. It shaped, twisted, and writhed, creating a rounded pattern that circled itself faster and faster, until it seemed to move like a solid sphere. Then it slammed down on his field, rippling across it.

Shiv felt it hit his mind like a colossal wave flinging a small boat into the air. Suddenly, the coloring that hid him within her own mind was broken. He emerged, a small dot in the domain of her Psychomancy, and as she pressed in on him, he struggled back. It was feeble, it was hopeless, but he still struggled—because that's who he was; a pillar. Even if that pillar was going to break.

Once more, though, Harkness stopped. She observed him, blinking as she licked the blood from her lips. "You. I... forgot." Her mouth fell open once more as an expression of sublime delight spread over her features. "Well, well." She smirked in the direction where Uva once stood. He saw other Umbrals dragging her away to safety, and his gut tightened even more. "I must have that one. As I must have you."

The owl let out a breath as his resurrective husk began to solidify. "In the beginning, I thought you were just a reckless—albeit fearless—child, willing to die for whatever lies or glory Valor filled your mind with. Then I understood you have something special: something to do with your soul. Maybe you were an Animancy experiment. Now, I don't know *what* you are at all, Deathless—but I am so very keen to find out."

His small field of Psychomancy mana flexed outward for but a flickering heartbeat—before she overwhelmed him, like a hurricane dragging away a singular raindrop. Shiv prepared himself to experience the inevitable pain of a mental attack.

Yet, before Harkness could do anything further, a notification appeared in his mind, just as he resurrected for a second time.

Quest Complete: Stop New Albion's Aviary from bombing Passage and crippling Weave's critical teleportation anchors.

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

26 (II) Victory

26 (II)

Victory

A complex, divine sigil flared over his adversary. The owl's face became solemn and sour. "But, how... She said the bomb would go off even if—"

A third voice joined the fray, interrupting Harkness. An agitated, aggravated, but ultimately triumphant voice. "Well, I discovered why the Quest was still ongoing," Adam said. Most of his face was swollen, but he still managed that sneer he liked so much. He chucked a threaded, spherical mechanism onto the ground. Shiv couldn't recognize what it was. Behind Adam, a panel beneath the mana bomb was folded outward, bearing the indentation of the Young Lord's body.

Both Shiv and Harkness shared a look of mutual confusion as Adam advanced on them. "This," he said, pointing at the now smoking spherical device, "is a Spatial Frequency Amplifier. I didn't recognize what it was at first, since I only saw devices like it in the manuscripts. Not until someone"—he glared at Shiv—"launched me into the damn mana bomb. Then, I got a look under its proverbial hood."

"Oh, you're fine," Shiv muttered, looking Adam up and down. "That armor's the stuff of legends. And nepotism. It'll keep you standing."

"You're a godsdamned bastard, Shiv."

Harkness blinked several times, her mouth opening and closing as if she couldn't process what was happening right in front of her. "But the bomb—she said it would still work if..."

"The bomb is the bomb," Adam explained. "I damaged its containment unit earlier, which I thought was enough to ruin its activation—especially since I blew some of the wires connecting it to the surrounding spatial tunnels apart. But the Umbral you kidnapped knew her science well. She had an interior containment cell as well to ensure spell stability in case the outer casing was damaged. But that wasn't the important part. This is."

Shiv looked at the *Spatial Frequency Amplifier* again. "This thing?"

Adam nodded. "Absurd, isn't it? Without this little device, the bomb wouldn't work all that well. Sure, it might deal some lasting—incredibly substantial—damage to the entire building, and it would kill us all. Except for the Omenborn." He glared at Shiv. "Not for long, anyway. But it won't be able to knock out the city's teleportation network completely. Not with how well-shielded and warded each of the chambers is individually. Frankly, you would more likely destroy everything *but* the teleportation anchors. And that's why the mana bomb has so many spells running inside it—to overload the internal mana fields stabilizing the teleporters."

Both Shiv and Lady Harkness were staring at Adam Arrow in baffled silence, even as more of the webbing constituting the cavern fractured, and Shiv felt a strange pull begin to grasp at his person.

"But this wouldn't work without precision. You knew that. Because as a Master, you know what it takes to break one of these anchors through raw force. That might take even you some time. So. What you needed was an overwhelming and complex layering of countless mana types to strike all the teleporters at the same time. And that's why there are so many tunnels around us that seem half finished. They're not really connected to any of the other teleporters. Yet."

"I... you... how?" Harkness looked truly incredulous.

Meanwhile, a few brave Umbrals dashed nearby to drag the comatose Trapdoor Weaveresses away. Harkness barely even noticed them, still trying to process the abruptness of what just happened.

Shiv, meanwhile, continued staring at the magical symbol that burned over her head. As he regarded it, the System offered him insight into what it meant.

CURSE: ABSOLUTE EXPOSURE

Why does that mean? Why does she have a Curse now?

“Because of my *Awareness*,” Adam answered Harkness with a sneer. “The echoes coming from them sound different from the one we arrived from. Like there is a dead end. Now, you might be a Master Pathbearer with a great many martial and magical skills, but those aren’t the skills that matter when it comes to making a mana bomb. Or collapsing a teleportation network. To build a stable bomb of this size? Craft a Spatial Frequency Amplifier so small? I can barely conceive of this. The one you blackmailed has to be a master of both Spatial Theory and Practical Dynamancy. Nothing less will suffice. And I don’t think you’re a master in either of those things.”

Both Shiv and Harkness stared. She looked at him for answers, and for a surreal moment, he just shrugged. “I don’t get it either. He’s the one that went to an academy.”

Adam continued, ignoring Shiv. “As for why it’s necessary? Because you won’t be able to reach the other teleportation anchors without it. Because Yunni likely mapped these tunnels close enough in spatial relativity to all the teleportation nodes—and when the bomb detonated, the amplifier would draw on the excess waste mana, resonate with the surrounding spatial tunnels and thus expand them to *overlap* with the anchors, allowing the blast to strike practically every teleportation chamber at once without ever needing to connect with them. That was her plan, wasn’t it? That was what you and your people have been working on for months—no, *years*.”

Harkness just kept staring—baffled. Shiv realized just now how strange it was that she was just listening instead of acting, and something in his gut tightened.

But then the sigil over her grew brighter and brighter. Shiv looked at the growing Curse again, and a *weight* hit him.

Foreshadowing: And the Composer opened her eyes, and suddenly there were so many vermin within her web. They weren’t there a moment before, but now the System betrayed them. A Quest had been failed—a Quest even she was unaware of, granted to Aviary of New Albion. Who were within Passage, no less.

The Composer hated liars. She despised them. And so, she would make them hear the *volume* of her displeasure. Threads drifted in from the webs of her Symposium, and she began to play.

All over the city, her people heard the music, and they found themselves delighted.

But for the vermin she could now sense... They heard a very different tune—a fatal melody that no mortal could endure...

A deafening note shook the tunnels. It was the sound of a lyre; plucked by divine hands, by wrathful hands, by hateful hands.

The melody swept through Shiv and he suddenly felt *refreshed*. Nourished in mind, spirit, and body.

But as Harkness heard the noise, she staggered backwards as blood poured out from her eyes, nose, ears, and mouth.

For the first time, Shiv saw genuine *fear* in the owl's eyes, saw true pain writ upon her face, and saw the desire to flee resound in her body language.

Then, for a split second, that strange feeling from earlier returned. For there was also something else there in her expression. Something Shiv still couldn't quite place. But he shrugged the feeling off. This was their chance.

Shiv chuckled. Shiv laughed. Harkness tried to run, but he drained her momentum. His Reflexes surged as her acceleration slowed. Once more, his Momentum Core was filled to the brim. Another note from the Composer passed through the tunnels. The Master-Tier enemy gurgled and vomited blood—just as Shiv discharged his core and sailed into her. In her weakened state, she failed to evade—and her protective bubble didn't arrive to stop Shiv from grabbing her by the neck and slamming her down against the ground. He increased his mass as he dragged her all the way across the cavern, spearing her hard against the mana bomb.

Grappling Proficiency > 40

The bulbous construct cracked and deformed as Shiv burned away the final bits of his kinetic charge. A prismatic flood of light and chaotic mana cleaved out from rents and gaps. It was beginning to tremble, destabilized. Harkness clenched her teeth as she formed her bubble, pushing back against him. She was far weaker than before, but even so, Shiv felt like he was wrestling with a giant.

“Adam! Run!” Shiv roared. He needed them gone—and he wasn't going to miss out on an opportunity to end Harkness if he could. “Get everyone out! Seal the teleportation anchor and keep moving!” He saw that most of the Umbrals and Weaveresses had retreated. Good. He just needed Adam to get out as well.

“Not gonna work,” the Young Lord said with a snarl, looking at the trembling construct. “But there's a quicker way out.” He nocked an arrow at the frequency amplifier. This arrow wasn't one of the blue variety, however. Its tip left spatial distortions in the air, and Shiv remembered getting hit by this on the Young Lord's lawn when they battled the raven-helmed stranger. But what was Adam doing?

A teleportation arrow? What is he—

“Two pockets of space can't exist at the same time,” the Young Lord said, sounding like he was quoting something, and he loosed the arrow. It struck the amplifier, and a pocket of what seemed like *nothing* expanded. As it did, every spider web it touched untangled

and came apart. A pressure pulled at Shiv like a riptide drawing him out to sea. He saw Harkness's eyes widen as she felt the pull too. Space around them was collapsing. Shiv tried to slam the owl against the bomb one more time, but her bubble flung him off.

He felt her Psychomancy collapse in on him again—but her focus broke, and so did his as they were suddenly dragged away as what felt like the very borders of *existence* crashed into their sides.

The world twisted and tumbled in a whirlwind of snapping webs and displaced space. Shiv's senses went haywire, and he couldn't make out where he was or what was around him. Everything felt distant and close at the same time. Faintly, he felt something wrap around his exposed torso and cling to him. It didn't feel like any fabric he knew. As he tried to peel it off, his hands slipped through as if he was trying to grip smoke.

Then, suddenly, a chasm of light appeared ahead of him.

Shiv found himself squeezed out from the tight crevice from which he entered the tunnels, and the pressure promptly vanished after that. As he staggered back into the teleportation chamber, he saw a Pyromancer Umbral dragging a few of her companions toward the door. But he didn't see Harkness anywhere. "Where's—"

Awareness > 6

He got his answer as he heard a breath from behind. Shiv turned—but not nearly fast enough. The owl drove her blade into his back.

But Shiv blinked with surprise, for he felt no hint of pain. For a moment, both he and Harkness stared at each other, confused. Then, a flash of light came from behind her as the mana bomb detonated completely deep in the chaotically collapsing spatial tunnels.

As the light washed over Shiv and Harkness, he noticed that the thing wrapped around his body was of no material composition at all. Rather, it seemed like a patch of shadowy darkness stuck to a weaver's web. What baffled him further was how Harkness's rapier vanished into his cloak without striking his body.

Almost like there's a... extra pocket of space.

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Quest Reward Received

Equipment Obtained: [Cloak of Midnight's Kindred]

Tier: Adept

Condition: Stable

Composition: Spatial Magic

Enchantments > Minor Dimensional Pocket; Portomancy 1; Shadowsense 30; Binding

Equip Item to Back?

Shaking off his surprise, Shiv equipped his first Quest reward with a thought. Immediately, he got a notion of how much space there was within his new cape, and the darkness of the tunnel beyond didn't seem so impenetrable anymore.

Harkness thrust her blade back and forth as she continued trying to kill him. All the blood pouring out from her eyes and ears must've left her senses impaired. Shiv stole this opportunity and drained her momentum again. He shouted for the others to flee as he struggled to hold her in place—long enough for the mana bomb to consume them both. He saw a coruscating stream of annihilation coming for him from the crack in the wall, its light almost blinding.

There likely wouldn't be anything left of him when the blast hit. He hoped this wouldn't destroy his new cape before he got a chance to use it, but he would sacrifice a Quest reward and himself if it meant killing the owl.

Another note from the Composer passed through the halls of Passage. Harkness let out a ragged cry and spewed blood all over Shiv's bare chest. He stole the momentum from that too as she collapsed against him. To his surprise, her rapier fell out from her weakened hands, and he felt it drop into his cape, adding to its previously absent weight.

Despite everything, she laughed and patted him affectionately on the cheek. "Like I said... you're a mastiff."

Then, near death though she was, Harkness opened her eyes again, and Shiv felt his mind go *blank* as she speared a single, overwhelming *command* into his mind.

"Release me!"

But using his own feeble Psychomancy, Shiv defied her for as long as he could. *"No... I won't!"*

Psychomancy > 4

He would have lasted a half second—but Harkness decided to slam a Master-Tier kick in between his legs just as the wave of mana spilled through the spatial crevice. There was a lot of pain for an instant, and then there was nothing at all.

By the time Shiv returned to his senses, he found himself dry-heaving on the floor at the edge of the room, and...

He looked up to behold an awesome sight.

Standing at the entrance of the spatial crevice was Lady Harkness of New Albion. Blood dripped from practically every pore in her body. Her limbs were spasming. A normal person would be dead seven times over. But she was a Master Pathbearer, and, even as she suffered the fatal melody of a vengeful goddess, she pit her protective barrier against the full wrath of an oncoming mana explosion once meant to devastate all of Passage.

Destructive spells of countless mana types crashed into her. Harkness let out a *howl* of incredible effort as she slid back on her feet, pressing against the oncoming tide with both hands. Fire singed her flesh. Lightning lashed her body. Frost clung to her very form. On the opposite end of the chamber, Shiv felt his skin bubble from the heat of the blast, and she was caught directly within its trajectory. The owl slipped back, collapsing to one knee. For a moment, Shiv thought she was finished, that the blast was going to consume them both. But then she gave a final snarl of exertion and *twisted*.

Shiv heard several of her bones snap from the move, but her absurd feat bore fruit. She didn't hold the mana explosion off, but she did divert it at enough of an angle that it started splashing against the wards of the teleportation chamber.

A stream of concentrated destruction. That was the only way Shiv could describe it. With a deafening rumble, it shattered the wards, boiled a hole through the teleportation chamber, evaporated several more walls, and sliced further still until Shiv thought he could hear the city outside. After what felt like a full minute of bending the blast, the last light of mana faded, and Harkness collapsed to her palms and knees. Shiv thought he heard screams and the rumble of collapsing buildings, but his ears were ringing too hard to be sure.

However, a final glowing shape came from the darkness, and it bounced a few times before landing next to Shiv. He blinked at it for a second and judged it to be a molten helmet of some kind. Then, as the heat faded, he saw that it was a melted mix of raven and crow, twisted to be something altogether ambiguous.

Quest Reward Received

Equipment Obtained > [Mask of False Paths]

Before he could reach out to take the mask, he heard Harkness cough. She was still alive, and, to his horror, was slowly rising to her feet. For a few heartbeats, Shiv just stared at her in utter disbelief. He detested this woman. She killed him—intended to enslave him, slew his comrades, and forced an innocent woman into betraying her own

people. But her power just now, what she did while heavily wounded, was a feat of *epic* proportions.

Could Roland Arrow have stopped that blast?

“Is... is this what it truly means to be a Master?” Shiv coughed. He had to know.

Harkness slowly shook her head. Then she laughed. “No. It isn’t. And... I am going to think really, really fondly of you, boy. Because if you didn’t force me to do that...”

Another note from the Composer arrived at that moment, but a gust of invisible power flowed out from Harkness, and the sound turned *distorted*, bending around the owl’s body, leaving her utterly unharmed, like a mountain parting a river.

She breathed in deeply, eyes closed and expression utterly serene. “Because if you hadn’t forced me to true desperation, this would have remained a distant dream for me, yet. I have been bottlenecked at Master for so long... But one cannot flee from death if they wish to be a *Legend*. You gave me more than I could have possibly hoped to gain from this mission. I thank you, from the bottom of my heart.”

It was at this moment that Shiv understood. The pieces fell into place. The strange dissonance in her reactions to danger, her excitement at his skills, how she let them fight back, how she killed him over and over again, instead of simply incapacitating him. A coldness spread through Shiv. But he clenched his teeth and stood, stowing his new mask into his cloak. “Well. Where were we?”

She blinked at him. And she chuckled. “You’re *precious*. But I *am* leaving, before the spider goddess starts playing a heavier tune.”

He advanced on her. “The hells you—”

Harkness flicked a finger at him. All his limbs snapped in the wrong direction, and Shiv shouted in agony as what felt like a mountain fell on him and pinned him in place. “No more easy deaths for you, I fear,” she said as she rose into the air, hovering through the gap she made. She turned her head slightly and smiled at Shiv a final time. “Rest assured, though, I will be seeing you again, disciple of Valor Thann. In fact, I’m already looking forward to it.”

Then, she shot forward and accelerated out into the falling dust and distant light.

Shiv groaned and cursed as he rolled onto his side, his limbs flopping uselessly. “Godsdamned... This is bullshit...” He sounded like Adam—he probably even *felt* like Adam. What she did just now was... It was the very thing that every Pathbearer aspired to achieve someday. Shiv hoped that the Composer’s song would cut Harkness down after all—but something told him he hoped for too much.

I'm not the only one capable of growing. That was a real monster. He let out a breath. Well, threats of mental destruction and enslavement aside... Yeah, I'll be looking forward to seeing you again too, Lady Harkness.

"Shiv? Shiv? Are you there?" a voice sounded from the corner of the room. A stone dagger lay discarded, the skeletal armor that once held it now nothing but ash.

"Valor?" Shiv said. "Did you... did you hear that? What she said?"

"Yes. That was... These things happen. In fact, I obtained my first Legendary Skill Evolution in similar circumstances."

"So, I'll probably be seeing her again, won't I?"

"Likely."

"Great. Wonderful enemy to have." Shiv laughed. "But *I am* going to kill her next time. Legendary Skill or not."

A moment of silence followed. *"And I will help you. I will teach you all that I know, if you wish to learn. I just need the Composer to loosen this cage first... And then we will have a proper discussion. About many things."*

"Yeah? Okay. I think I'd like that."

The doors to the teleportation anchor snapped open, and in came Weaveresses, Umbrals, and more members of the Order. Behind them was Adam and—he was letting Uva lean against him. Her face was a mask of dried blood, exhaustion, and *relief* when she saw him. IF YOU WANT TO

"Broken Moon," Adam gasped as he looked at Shiv. "Is... is she dead?"

Shiv shook his head and looked toward the opening. "She sends us her best, though."

The Young Lord stared through the gap as his face paled and a snarl twisted his features. Uva stumbled away from him and battled every step before she slumped down next to Shiv. Her face was crusted in red and her eyes were bloodshot. He probably didn't look much better. Still, she managed a look of... *Is that hunger?*

"I like the cape," she managed, sounding absolutely spent.

"I like the fact that you're still alive?" Shiv ventured. "Thanks for... protecting my mind even when... I'm just glad you're alive."

"And I you," she said. She placed her now bare hand against his cheek, and he leaned into it. "The headache is phenomenal, though."

Shiv snorted a laugh. Was her Psychomancy field larger than he remembered? He tried saying something to her with his Psychomancy. *"Hello."*

Uva blinked. *"You're..."*

"Yeah. Something good came out of getting my mind shredded over and over. I think I'm going to need some more training from you."

Her surprise faded, replaced by an expression he couldn't quite read. But there was a surge of heat in her mind. A heat that practically burned. *"Then, we should speak. I also want to know how you... don't stay dead. But only after you make me dinner. And dessert."*

"A promise is a promise," Shiv replied.

"And thank me for actually resolving that mess," Adam sneered down at Shiv. *"Shoot the bomb. Kill us all and take her with it.* No, you bloody, simple madman. I will not join you in your urge to complete murder-suicide with the enemy. But I will complete the Quest—even if it's not mine." The Young Lord sighed. "I'm assuming that mess of black you're wearing is one of the rewards?"

"Just wrapped around me as the tunnel collapsed," Shiv said. "I was wearing it by the time I got out. It's made of space."

Adam nodded. "The System forges and delivers its rewards in the oddest of ways. Still doesn't change the fact that I got felling nothing from this."

Shiv paused. "I wouldn't say that."

"You wouldn't?" Adam snorted. "What? Are you planning on giving me an item?"

"Yeah. How about a Master-Tier rapier?"

Adam stared. "I don't get the joke."

"It's not a joke. Harkness dropped her sword in my cloak when she tried to stab me. Didn't have a Binding Enchantment. I also have this mask there. We can take a look later. You can pick."

"Both?"

"One," Shiv said.

"We'll discuss the details later," Adam said, waving him off. The Young Lord looked happier already. "I'm sure the Composer wouldn't be against showing us her appreciation, too."

“Probably not,” Shiv said. “Hey. Adam.”

“Hm?”

“I’m really glad you went to Burning Chicken Academy. I still have no idea what you did, but it worked.”

“Yes. Well. You can thank me by pressing the spider goddess so we can get back to Blackedge.” The Young Lord’s expression hardened. “We saved an Abyssal city. Now let’s see us save our own home.”

Shiv nodded. “Sure. Whatever. Right now, I just want my arms to work again. I *really* need to cook some of this stress off.”

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

27 (I) Conversations

Your body will undergo changes as certain skills evolve. This is a natural part of your advancement across the Tiers.

Most obvious changes occur when your Physicality and your Toughness reach Adept. Some call this the Hardening, or Crossing the First Boundary. It is when you advance from something that still vaguely lingers in the realm of mortality into becoming a true Pathbearer, one that is capable of wrestling against raging storms and the cruel hand of fate.

There are many ways your body can evolve, and this is most often shaped by your experiences, your focus and your Path. The latter molds you further into the champion you can become.

Other skills—such as Reflexes, and even certain magical or intellectual abilities—can also have an effect on your body. For example, someone who is an Adept in mathematics might be able to think several times faster when running advanced calculations in their mind. This affects the brain’s structure as well, and it is why the genetic modifications so often practiced during the pre-System era have long since fallen out of favor, even among the noble families that cling so hard to tradition.

But be warned: These developments are permanent, and a paltry evolution from years of neglect or lack of focus could potentially leave you lacking—or simply not the Pathbearer you were meant to become.

It is one thing to develop a Stonehide after your Toughness hits Adept, but compared to someone who bears Alloyflesh? What is stone before steel?

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

27 (I)

Conversations

Shiv focused as the Biomancers reconnected the tendons for his last broken limb. He watched as they shaped every spell, compelling his biology to react in certain, subtle ways. There were eight Weaveresses and one Umbral working on him. Each seemed to be in charge of a different part of his body: one focused mostly on his skin; another monitored his organs and served as the general director. The rest delved into deep work, working together to rebuild what was destroyed and rejoin what was parted in a meticulous operation.

Though his Biomancy was stronger than before, he still wasn't an Adept in the lore. Each of the biomancers at Cradle was many times more experienced and quite a bit more powerful in terms of the fields they projected. Even so, they weren't absurdly stronger than he was—at least, not most of them. Harkness had set another standard for magical power, and Sister Uva was quite a significant Psychomancer in her own right. Shiv didn't think most of these Biomancers currently treating him were as strong in Biomancy as Uva was Psychomancy, but then there was the one who checked in on him every few minutes.

That one was an automaton. Its body was designed in the general shape of a weaver, but with the mechanical face of an Umbral. Its field seemed to span over half of Cradle—and Cradle was practically five kilometers of building in every direction.

If Shiv had to guess, it was at least well into the Master Threshold, perhaps even a High Master.

Could've used that in the tunnels, Shiv thought.

"We have finished our ministrations, Honored Guest," a Biomancer said as they backed away. Their spells died, and the crimson glow of their mana faded from reality. Each saluted him, and he returned the salute as best he could. His arms still felt itchy in places and slightly sore, but they had done a good job—no tumors at all.

He thought back to what they'd done and found himself lacking in comprehension more than power. "Thanks. Pretty impressive work you did. Usually, when I'm dealing with a Biomancer, they have to spend some time pulling out tumors."

A few of the Weaveresses looked at each other, their postures uneasy. “That is a common outcome of inexperience, inattentiveness to detail, or simply urgency.”

“Why do people get tumors anyway? I should have asked earlier,” Shiv said. He remembered Valor’s general explanation, but hearing it from the true experts couldn’t hurt. “I know they have a chance to pop up when someone drinks a Potion of Regeneration, but as a fledgling Biomancer myself, I’ve noticed that when someone tries to accelerate their own healing, it seems to cascade across the entire body.”

“Indeed,” the Umbral replied. “The common problem. The hard problem of regeneration. This is something most Biomancers learn early on. Your body is a very complicated organism—a very complicated *machine*. The reason you cannot simply accelerate your regeneration is that you are confusing its operations.”

“Confusing its operations—how?” Shiv asked. “I know you all are doing something very carefully on a deep level. It’s like you’re herding a bunch of small motes inside my larger organs and tissues.”

“Your cells,” the Umbral answered. “They determine a great deal about your mortal and biological destiny. If you supercharge your regeneration, to put it simply, it’s like a craftsman cutting corners. Sure, they can finish the order, but what is produced is usually raw and poor in quality in several places, because quality control has been sacrificed in order to achieve maximum speed.”

Shiv blinked, trying to process what she’d just said. “And that causes cancer?”

“Yes,” a Weaveress breathed. “Horrible, body-consuming tumors.”

“In more detail...” the Umbral said, reaching into his body once more as a spell came alight within her hand. Shiv focused, feeling her field prod into his flesh. “...do you feel this?”

He felt a small patch of himself grow still and then accelerate. Slowly, he felt it—a tipping point. Some small things were congealing together, spreading a cancer, and then she broke it apart with a twitch of her finger, dissolving it with a spell.

Shiv’s eyes widened in surprise. “How did you—?”

“That is me removing it by strengthening your protective cells, sourced from the immune system. Your body removes cancers all the time. There is one method of removing cancer, and that’s simply focusing your immune system and directing it to cull the cancers. It requires some focus, but it’s relatively easy to do. It’s also something we learn early on.”

Shiv mentally noted that as a good starting point, but it seemed she wasn’t done yet.

“But to explain things about cancers in more detail: first, if you accelerate your healing too much, you skip through many checkpoints—many checkpoints that check your cells for mistakes. The cells hold a code, something like a status sheet that we all have from the System. If we supercharge our regeneration, these points will be ignored, and faulty or damaged cells will pass through. Then you have replication errors—little mistakes that slip through more and more, and this becomes something that simply continues growing and growing and growing. As said before, your body has something of an operation to it—a programming, if you understand how the automata function. Some cells are meant to self-destruct, but if you tell them to continue building no matter what, they will survive, multiply, and mutate long after they were meant to dissolve. This is why immortality—even the purely biological version—is rather hard to achieve for anyone but a Master Biomancer.”

“Because of division errors and cell mutations?” Shiv asked, trying to process everything.

“Correct. This is an entire study in itself. If your cells get a little too short in certain aspects of their code, they die. This causes variation and affects natural aging. However, you can activate an enzyme within yourself that rebuilds this, causing the cells to effectively become something akin to immortal. That usually results in cancer as well. To achieve immortal cells or functional regeneration without cancer requires constant vigilance and focus and knowledge. Incredible amounts of each. Again: Master Biomancer.”

Shiv thought he grasped some of that. The entire explanation was fascinating. As he looked inward using his Biomancy again, he felt at the smaller cells. He no longer viewed himself as just organs, tissue, meat, and bone—there was something deeper connecting it all, an unseen network that he had only started to reach into and feel. He nudged them slightly; it felt odd—ticklish. But he yearned to learn more.

A case of literary theft: this tale is not rightfully on Amazon; if you see it, report the violation.

Skill Gained: Practical Metabiology 1 (Initiate)

Shiv smiled broadly at the new skill gained. He decided it was a good time to look at his overall progress. He’d been through a lot, and the urge struck him to see just how far he’d come.

Name: Tanner “Shiv” Lowe

Age: 18

Race: Human

Path: Deathless

Feats [1/1]:

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

Skills:

Cooking 23 (Initiate)

Knife Proficiency 29 (Initiate)

Grappling Proficiency 40 (Initiate)

Stealth 21 (Initiate)

Marksmanship 11 (Common)

Baking 9 (Common)

Intimidation 3 (Common)

Striking Proficiency 21 (Initiate)

Barter 10 (Common)

Alchemy 2 (Common)

Engineering 1 (Common)

Pyromancy 4 (Initiate)

Psychomancy 4 (Initiate)

Spear Proficiency 10 (Initiate)

Parry 29 (Initiate)

Biomancy 44 (Initiate)

Disease Resistance 3 (Initiate)

Awareness 6 (Initiate)

Practical Metabiology 1 (Initiate)

Silver Tongue 3 (Adept)

Might of Mass 69 (Adept)

Diamond Shell 79 (Adept)

Foreshadowing 11 (Adept)

Momentum Core 63 (Master)

Vitality Drain 7 (Legendary)

Revenant 4 (Unique)

Blessings:

None

Curses:

None

Shiv let out a breath as he observed all that he achieved. *A long way from being a Pathless chef hunting lesser vampires in my off-time. Hells, I'm a long way from being the same guy that fell down into the Abyss.* But despite everything, he thought back to Harkness, to how she twisted the oncoming mana bomb aside. *And still damn far to go. Looking forward to it.*

“Well, thanks for the lesson,” Shiv said to the Biomancer. “I think I’ll be coming around a little bit more often. A lot more often, probably.”

He told them about the books he had bought and his interest in furthering his own development in the field. He also mentioned how close he was to achieving his skill evolution.

And this surprised the Umbral. “You... you are at level... 44 for Biomancy?”

“Yeah,” Shiv said. “Why—what’s wrong?”

“It’s... Well, it’s high for someone who never uses it toward the purpose of medicine. What have you been using your Biomancy for? How did you get it this high?”

Shiv coughed. “I’ve, uh, been kind of using it as a weapon. Throwing bones at people and stuff.”

He neglected to mention that he was also ripping out eyes and giving people wounds—that kind of thing. The Biomancers all looked at each other; one of the Weaveresses shivered.

“Well, he’s never going to be a practitioner.”

“What?” Shiv asked, looking at the Umbral.

“Oh, we practitioners take an oath.”

“An oath?” he asked.

“Yes—to do no harm using Biomancy. It is an oath passed down from practitioners of healing, because we, more than most others, know what it’s like to break a body, to make a wound. It is a burden as much as a gift.” The Umbral went quiet. “It is not a binding oath, not something from the System, but it is still something that we believe in philosophically.”

Interestingly, Shiv remembered some of the Biomancers at Blackedge also having a similar oath. How Biomancy traditions seemed to cross cultures between the surface nations and the Abyss was something he hadn’t expected. *Maybe it’s a Path thing, something that affects their minds*, Shiv wondered.

“I was just doing it to keep myself alive most of the time,” Shiv said, defending himself.

“We are not questioning your decency, Honored Guest,” the Umbral replied. “Not all Biomancers are pacifists. Many aren’t, especially... those in the field. Because of necessity.” The Umbral’s face took on an expression of disgust. “If you are dealing with the Court of the First Blood, who view Biomancy more as a sculpting tool, you often must match mana with mana.”

“Sculpting tool,” Shiv muttered.

“You should see some of the things they do to people. It’s nightmarish.”

“I’ve had firsthand experience,” Shiv said. “I ran into a high vampire on the way here.”

The Umbral’s expression flickered with fear. “And—”

“I’m here. He isn’t.”

“The Composer watches over you,” she said.

That, and I don’t stay dead. Shiv grinned slightly.

“You’ll experience more of the vampiric method if you read that horrible book...” a Weaveress intoned.

“*Odes of Blood and Flesh*,” he said.

“Yes, that one,” the Umbral said, refusing even to utter its name. She sighed and shook her head. “Well, you are cleared now. I would recommend that you monitor your body. Most of the time, you simply need more nutrition and caloric intake to recover from an operation. However, sometimes diseases or cancers might still develop. If they do, come back to us. We will make sure you are well.”

“All right. Thanks,” he said.

Rising off the chair, he opened the door and found himself standing in an extremely busy hallway. Umbrals, Weaveresses, automata, and other races moved here and there—some carting wounded members of the Arachnae Order, others dealing with existing crises. Cradle was always abuzz, like a little hive. Shiv felt so many bodies around him—so many biologies, architectures, and wounds, and what seemed like deeper *misalignments*. He blinked slightly to maintain his focus. There was so much noise here, so much chaos, and it wasn’t even combat.

“Excuse me, Honored Guest Shiv,” a static-lined voice said from behind him.

He paused and turned to see the automaton that had peeked in earlier—the one that resembled a humanoid spider with the face of an Umbral.

“Oh, hello,” he said, looking at the Master Biomancer. “I just finished my session today.”

“Yes,” the automaton said. “I have been informed by my colleagues that you have concluded your initial recovery process. However, I’ve also heard from one of my field medics that you wish to pursue an education here.”

“Yeah,” Shiv said. “In exchange for you looking into my biology and learning more about surfacers.” He shrugged. “I think that was the arrangement.”

“Indeed, indeed,” the automaton hummed. “I am interested in pursuing this partnership. Quite extremely interested. You are... fascinating,” it continued after a moment of consideration. “Your biology—the way you develop—does not seem to fit your culture or species.”

“My culture or *species*?” Shiv asked, looking down at himself. His flesh gleamed a little where his skin and muscle bulged out of his simple hospital shirt—nothing nearly as comfortable as the clothes Uva had brought him.

“Your Physicality and Toughness—they’ve evolved into Might of Mass and Diamond Shell, respectively, correct?”

Shiv blinked, surprised that it could tell so easily. For a moment, he was going to ask how it knew, but then he realized it was a Biomancer—it could practically read the details from his flesh. “Yeah,” Shiv said, nodding. “You got keen insight there.”

“No,” the automaton replied, “merely experience.”

A screaming Weaveress was carted past them, actively being healed and maintained from a state of death by two Biomancers accompanying her. As Shiv studied the brutal burns on her flesh, he winced—he had a guess as to how that happened. The mana bomb had to go somewhere. The automaton, however, barely noted the mortally wounded Weaveress.

“I’m saying it’s not normal for a human,” it continued, “because Might of Mass and Diamond Shell usually belong to races that forgo armor and meet their struggles head-on without any equipment—races such as primal dragons, certain demons, the war-blooded variant of the orks, but mostly my own people, for we are our own equipment a lot of the time.”

Shiv considered his recent history. *That makes sense.* He had done a lot of things himself without sophisticated gear helping him. Mainly just fire, daggers, and ambushes when it came to lesser vampires.

“You could say I am a hands-on kind of guy,” Shiv said.

“I can also say that you also seem to have no compunction dealing harm to yourself or enemies using your Biomancy.” The automaton’s words were no accusation, merely an observation.

The Master Biomancer took a step closer to him. “You are like me,” it said. Shiv blinked. “You are not afraid of warping and twisting the flesh.”

Shiv nodded slowly. “Yeah, I’m not. How did you—”

“Your field rests in you and reaches into those around you casually. Without thought. It is considered rude, but the way you grip against my field speaks of a familiarity with violence.”

The Deathless winced and forced himself to slacken his field against the automaton. “Sorry.”

“Thank you,” it said with a hum. “I have been looking for someone without the usual reluctance toward experimentation. And this will be to your benefit as well. The way you treat flesh and use your body is more alike to the high vampires—and so your eventual Skill Evolution will likely deviate from what most Biomancers here achieve.”

“Should I be worried?” Shiv asked. He wasn’t sure how he felt about being compared to a high vampire.

“That is for you to decide. And you have already decided in part when you chose to use your Biomancy as a weapon. We teach the System who we are with each action. We

teach our skills what to become. I suspect that your Biomancy will not be that conducive to pure healing and comfort. But it might just allow you to tap into the extremes of bio-modification far more easily.”

Somehow, that sounded both ominous and exciting at the same time.

“I will see you in two days,” it added. “Come speak to me when you arrive at the front desk. Say you have an appointment with Master Biologist Dven Falseflesh.”

Shiv stared at the automaton for a few moments before nodding. “Thanks. I’m looking forward to learning from you.”

“And I as well,” the automaton said. It paused. “The Composer... She says you have something else that both of us will find useful. But that this is a secret that should be yours to tell.”

Shiv understood, and he was grateful that the Composer allowed him this amount of privacy. “It’s something better shown than told.”

Dven nodded slightly, its body giving a mechanical whine.

“Wait,” Shiv called out before the automaton could fully leave. “I’m sorry if this is insensitive, but you’re an automaton. Why are you a Biomancer when you don’t have... you know, biology?”

The automaton turned, its alloyed face unreadable. “To cross over into being a real person, of course.”

There was something joking in its voice—and something that wasn’t.

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27 (II) Conversations

27 (II)

Conversations

“They’re already bloody done with you?” Adam asked, looking Shiv up and down with a curious expression. “You were in there for barely an hour.”

“Probably less,” Shiv replied.

There were even more people coming in through the doors—lots of casualties, lots of injuries. Shiv got a glimpse of the aftermath of what happened at Passage when they transported him to Cradle. Harkness’s final act resulted in substantial casualties and severe damage to the surrounding infrastructure. A mana bomb of such potency, that much power, couldn’t just be released into the city casually. And to make matters worse, there was no report that the Master assassin had been caught yet. *Technically a Legendary assassin now*, Shiv thought darkly to himself. *Though she should only be in the Heroic Threshold in terms of levels.*

It was partially his fault she’d managed to break through and transcend a Tier, but in his defense, that was something no one could have anticipated—not even Harkness herself.

As Shiv prepared to ask the Young Lord if he was ready to return home, he noticed something around the man’s neck. There, dangling from a slim silvery chain, was a red vial—a red vial that Shiv felt to be biological material.

Shiv pointed at it. “What is that?”

“Oh, this?” Adam smirked. “This is a Potion of Disease Immunity—in a pendant. The Abyssal elf who gave it to me said that I saved her sister in the tunnels.”

Adam seemed rather proud of himself.

“And you said you weren’t getting rewarded for this Quest,” Shiv joked.

“I wasn’t! I’m not the one who got a cape and whatever else you managed to obtain.” Adam’s smile faded, replaced by a scowl. “You... you disgust me, you know that?”

“What?” Shiv said, feeling his own smile grow as Adam’s offense built.

“Seriously, what is wrong with you? You’re a walking pile of bullshit—that’s what you are. You get killed by a Master-Tier opponent a few times, you die horribly, and rather than staying dead like the rest of us do, you come back stronger with... with what?”

“Momentum Core,” Shiv replied, speaking as innocently as he could.

“*Momentum Core!*” Adam practically screamed. “Momentum Core—do you have any idea how many people develop Momentum Core?”

Shiv sneered. “No. Didn’t go to an academy. Is it good?”

“You bastard, you bastard-gutter-rat-child!” Adam spat.

Shiv threw back his head and laughed. “Ah, yeah, it did feel pretty good to hit her after the core filled up. The discharge—” He clenched his fist. “—I can still feel it. All that power... Time seemed to stop around me. It was just me, Harkness, and the blow I was about to land. Then the calamity that followed, the devastation.” He winced. “Yeah, Momentum Core seemed to break me more than it broke her sometimes...”

“Because you’re using a Master-Tier Reflexes Skill with, what, two Adept Skills for Physicality and Toughness. Of course you’re breaking yourself.” Adam shook his head. “Momentum Core is something that geniuses and true talents on the Path of the Rider or the Path of the Vanguard can achieve. And even they usually do it in armor so thick that they can survive re-entry.”

“Yeah, using it did feel a bit better when I was in my armor,” Shiv muttered.

“Yes—your armor, made from your own bones. That’s... that’s something else: What is wrong with you?” Adam repeated once more.

“Come on, Adam,” Shiv said. “Let’s go back. You can yell at me inside our apartment.”

“Our apartment—*your* apartment,” Adam grumbled, glaring at the back of Shiv’s head. “Your apartment, because I didn’t get anything. I had to be taken out of this place by you after I woke up surrounded by...” He caught sight of a Weaveress, who gave a loud, disgusted snort and turned away. “*Spiderfolk!* What is wrong with the world? How did my life come to this?”

As they walked onto the bridge, Shiv stared at a demon-summoning crystal in the distance, the prism flashing bright as more and more injured came in.

Shiv grimaced. Diverting the mana bomb’s blast was Harkness’s moment of glory, but plenty of other people paid for it.

“So,” the Young Lord said with a sigh, “care for a race?”

“A race?” Shiv asked. “What do you mean, a race?”

“I mean, you have Momentum Core now. Why do we need to take...” Adam gestured vaguely at the demons.

“The demons?” Shiv said casually.

“Don’t call them that. It bothers me.”

“That’s what they are,” Shiv answered. “But... I don’t think that’s possible. I don’t think I can use the core out here.”

“What do you mean, you don’t think it’s possible? You have Momentum Core. Why won’t you use it?” Adam pressed.

“You just want to see how fast I am,” Shiv replied, prodding at Adam for his deliberate attempt to see just how good Shiv’s new skill was.

The Young Lord folded his arms. “No, I’m just... How does it work, exactly? Does it absorb all momentum near you? Do you have to be close? Do you—”

Shiv shook his head. “Adam, I’m sorry. I’m not using it in public. Every time I use it, it’s like a bomb’s going off around me. Hell, if the Pyromancers hadn’t been there in the tunnels, I think I would have fried more than a few of the Umbrals. And you.”

Adam narrowed his eyes. “My armor would have protected me.”

“Would it protect your open face?”

The Young Lord’s scowl deepened. “I hate you. I despise you so much, Omenborn.”

“Yeah, I heard that before,” Shiv said with a dramatic sigh. “It’s... it’s really my curse, you know? The skill—it’s just too powerful, too strong. My muscles, too.” Shiv flexed his arms as hard as he could. Part of his medical shirt tore. Adam glared harder.

“Everything about me is growing too fast. This world...it’s becoming like glass. I feel bad for everyone who isn’t me.”

Adam bumped Shiv with his shoulder and started marching forward, muttering curses under his breath. Shiv laughed again as he followed.

“Hey, Adam! Adam, wait! Adam, you’re gonna need to carry me if you want to fly.”

“I am not carrying you. Find your own way back on one of those... *things*.”

“Well, I guess we’re not having fondue tonight.” NEW NOVEL CHAPTERS ARE PUBLISHED ON NovelFire

“...I will carry you. Do not ever mention this to anyone again. I’m also going to get to throw you—that’s part of the arrangement.”

“Sure, fine,” Shiv said. He didn’t mind being thrown. “It’s actually kind of fun. Actually, can we stop by the bookstore first?”

As they sailed through the air, Umbrals, Weaveresses, and countless other peoples pointed at them. To Shiv’s surprise, some cheered, waving and calling out to Honored Guests turned genuine heroes. Even Adam’s scowl softened for a moment.

Shiv noticed. “Oh, you’re enjoying the moment, aren’t you, Young Lord? You’re finally turning your reputation around.”

Adam’s scowl returned. “You disgust me. You *sicken* me. I hate you.”

“Say that to me after dinner,” Shiv shot back.

“Oh, I will,” Adam said. “You just... you wait. I will say it as many times as I—”

“I love you. I revere you. I worship you. Please—may I *please* have another plate?” Adam said mournfully, glaring daggers at Shiv all the while.

The Deathless grinned at him and nodded. “Oh, okay—you spoke loud enough. I was having a ringing in my ears earlier, so I couldn’t hear you.”

“I despise you,” Adam muttered under his breath.

After returning to the bookstore—scaring the same librarian working there again, claiming the books, and hearing Adam whine all the way back to the apartment—Shiv settled in briefly. Only to go right back out in hunt of cooking ingredients. He had a dinner date later tonight, and he didn’t intent to disappoint.

He made a girl a promise, after all.

The dish was clear to him: lobster Thermidor paired with asparagus, ending with fruit-dip fondue. The lobster was surprisingly easy to find and rather tender in quality. He managed to source a creamy sauce made from egg yolk, a Weave wine brand known as Deep Marrow, truffles, and some fine-smelling cheese. He also spent some of his Shards on a magical micro-oven and several other appliances needed for the process.

The narrative has been illicitly obtained; should you discover it on Amazon, report the violation.

After a few hours of preparation—with Adam complaining the entire time—Shiv finished with the lobster and moved on to the fondue. That was easier: high-quality chocolate (a mixture of dark and milk), some sea salt, heavy cream, and a drip of brandy. Afterward, he cut up strawberries, bananas, pineapples, and cherries to offer a sweet end to the night.

After a hard day of stopping a terrorist attack, suffering *incredibly painful* deaths, brutal combat, and a bit of learning near the end, Shiv finally got to relax—pairing his high excitement with deep focus and genuine pleasure.

“It makes no sense,” Adam said, ripping another chunk of meat from his personal lobster—Shiv accounted for the Young Lord’s own needs, after all. Its shell was a brilliant, smooth perfection—almost golden in its radiance—and it was fortified by truffles.

“How high is your Cooking?” Adam asked.

“Twenty-Three.”

“But how is it only that high?” Adam frowned. “It makes no sense. I’ve eaten from better chefs. They should be—”

“They didn’t have Georges to show them what they were doing wrong,” Shiv answered.

It was true: many chefs had higher potential in terms of their Cooking Skill, but that was just a number. His Cooking Skill was, in a sense, like his Biomancy—it made them faster, more efficient, more powerful within the kitchen, but it didn’t make them more meticulous. It didn’t make them notice mistakes as often—at least not the Initiate version of the skill. And that’s why Georges wanted him—because he was always reliable, in spite of his Cooking Skill and not because.

For the third time that day, Shiv looked at the door and scanned his surroundings with his Biomancy field. He couldn’t feel anyone except the neighbors next door. This was a bit invasive: with his magical skill growing, he could peer into other people’s lives.

I might need to get a change of location anyway, Shiv thought, He couldn’t imagine staying here long, knowing everyone’s business. *Maybe some place with wards...*

“Worried that a certain someone might not show?” Adam asked.

Shiv stared back at the Young Lord before he shrugged. “I hope she does. She said she will. She hasn’t given me any reason to doubt her, but...”

“But she almost died, straining herself to the very limit to keep us all alive. And you’d understand if she’s currently lying in bed, trying to sleep off the worst headache known to man?” Adam finished.

“You’re pretty astute when you don’t talk much. Especially about yourself.” Shiv smiled.

Adam scowled. It was becoming a routine between them. “And you are always a bastard, Shiv.”

“Thanks for using the right name again this time,” Shiv said. “Now, as a reward...” He reached into his cloak and pulled out the other two prizes he got from the Quest. “Something to cheer you up after a day of complaining.”

The Young Lord scowled harder. “I did not complain that—oh, that cape seems useful.”

The Cloak of Midnight’s Kindred was surprisingly easy to use. It gave him a faint sense of spatial magic around him—just enough to secure any specific item stored within its minor dimensional pocket. Paired with the cloak’s Shadowsense enchantment, most spots of darkness weren’t so dark anymore.

Despite offering no true offensive power, Shiv found himself enjoying the cloak more and more. *I carried the books and all the cooking ingredients and appliances back easy with this. It adds to the weight, but I can take it. Damn useful. And I can use it to avoid attacks too, like with the rapier...*

He placed the Mask of False Paths on the table next to Adam’s plate, then held up the rapier—the blade that Lady Harkness had used to kill him so many times—as a means to bribe the Young Lord’s pride. Shiv didn’t have a chance to examine the items either, so he was looking forward to this.

Adam stared briefly at the mask before he did a double take at the sword. His eyes shot wide.

“Shiv—that’s not a Master-Tier weapon. That’s a *Heroic* one!”

Equipment Obtained: [Rapier of the Myriad Selves]

Tier: Heroic

Condition: Perfect

Composition: Stellarite

Enchantments > User-Duplication; Pyromancy 50; Self-Sharpening; Self-Mending; Self-Shaping; Speed Amplification; Temporal Warding; Spatial Warding

“Well, that’s going to be useful,” Shiv replied, stunned by how many enchantments were infused in this blade. This thing was likely absurdly expensive.

“I’m no sword genius, but I know how to use a blade,” Adam muttered. “Imagine six of me firing my bows, attacking from all angles...Or six of me calling you a bastard at once.”

“Only six?” Shiv replied, deadpan.

Adam’s features cracked into a reluctant smile. “You are a bastard, Shiv.”

“Thank you, Adam.”

"You're welcome," Adam said. "Now, what about the mask?" He eyed the Mask of False Path and frowned. "Huh."

Equipment Obtained: [Mask of False Paths]

Tier: Heroic

Condition: Damaged

Composition: Bronze

Enchantments > Perfect Semblance; Adept-Skill Thief (0/1); Initiate-Skill Thief (0/2); Heroic Mind-Shield

"I don't think I've seen any of those enchantments before," Adam muttered. "Other than Skill Thief. That one's impressive enough on its own."

"Semblance might be taking on someone else's appearance, I guess," Shiv said. "Mind-Shield's what I'm looking at."

"Lady Harkness?" Adam said, guessing the reason for Shiv's interest in mind protection.

"Yeah," Shiv said. "You want the mask? Or the sword?"

"Hm. We should test them out in a practical situation before deciding."

"Wise. I'll put them back in the cloak for now."

"How attached are you to the cloak?" Adam asked, eyeing the swirling mass of darkness around Shiv.

"It's equipped. It's not coming off."

The Young Lord wrinkled his nose. "Fine. I'll find a better dimensional storage anyway."

"Sure you will. It just won't look as good."

Adam sneered.

Adam flicked a piece of lobster shell at Shiv. The Deathless caught it. "No littering."

"*Shiv? Adam?*" a voice called out. Valor had been silent for a while, ever since they departed Cradle. *"I want you to understand something. To receive this much attention from the System—these many Quests in these few days—is not entirely a good thing."*

"I know," Adam said. "I nearly died more times in the past day than I have my entire life."

“Exactly,” Valor replied. “And that will likely grow more common. You, too, are what some in the Necrotech Legions call the Favored—favored by the System.”

“When you took that rapier from Harkness,” Valor continued, “understand that it was also a declaration—a declaration of making a great enemy. This Quest might be over, but your battle against her is far from done.”

Adam grit his teeth. Shiv sported a vicious grin. “Next time—next time I’ll kill her for good.”

“Next time?” Adam said. “I hope I never see that woman again for the rest of my life. It was horrible. I fired like ten thousand arrows at her—didn’t do anything. Bullshit...”

“Yeah, that’s because you didn’t have Momentum Core,” Shiv pointed out.

Adam flung another piece of shell. Shiv caught it, draining the momentum out of it. “Don’t litter,” Shiv said, more forcefully this time.

“Don’t mock me,” Adam shot back, heat in his voice. Shiv decided to back off. The Young Lord seemed genuinely incensed by the memory of his inability.

“Fine. You might not want to meet her, but I will. She... she achieved that Legendary Skill Evolution because of me, and I’m going to test just how Legendary it is next time I see her.”

“Or she’ll flatten you, fold your arms, and break your mind for good,” Adam murmured.

“Does she scare you, Adam?” Shiv couldn’t resist the taunt.

“Yes,” Adam said honestly, without a hint of shame. “She terrifies me, because she is a Psychomancer sadist who tried to pull us apart with her mind. She terrifies me because we couldn’t harm her, not a small army of Umbrals and spider-folk paired with you and me. She terrifies me because I watched her kill you brutally over and over again. Do you know what that was like, Shiv? Watching you come apart time and time again, watching her advance on us afterward? How aren’t you bothered? You’re the one she killed the most.”

Shiv shrugged. “Comes with the territory—was learning her ways.”

“Yes, and she was learning how to butcher you better each time. I don’t know...” Adam swallowed. “I don’t know how you do it.” It took a lot for Young Lord to admit that. “I don’t know how you die over and over without feeling something.”

“Well, I get skills out of it. It doesn’t matter,” Shiv said.

"It doesn't matter? You're dying! You're dying horribly! You're being tortured to death! The Umbrals... They told me what you did to save Uva and the others... Does that not bother you at all? Are you just *insane*?"

"Not insane." Shiv shook his head. "I think I see things clearly. I just take things as they come."

"This is not taking things as they come," Adam said. "This is not feeling what you're supposed to feel when damage is inflicted." The Young Lord stared at Shiv, and the Deathless saw something on his face that wasn't there before: Terror. "I don't... You know, I don't like fighting. I like firing my bow. I like sparring and training with people. I like protecting people. I like living up to being a Pathbearer, advancing my skills—but I don't enjoy killing people, and I certainly don't enjoy getting tortured."

A silence followed.

"I'm not like you," Adam admitted. "I see you die time and time again—these ugly, painful deaths. I see her rip into your mind. You just keep going after her, like you don't care, like you even enjoy it, like none of this bothers you."

"It doesn't," Shiv replied. "I mean, the mind-slaving thing is disgusting, and I'll kill her for that alone. But, you know, the fight's the fight. It's good excitement—maybe a little too much excitement today. That's why I'm cooking right now."

"People don't just cook and then de-stress after bloodshed and violence and end up fine."

"Why not?" Shiv asked. Himself, almost.

"I just... what? You know what? It's not my problem. It's your problem. You're the weird one. You're the freak."

Adam folded his arms. Shiv studied the Young Lord. He wanted to mock him, but maybe Adam was right in some way—maybe there was something else, too.

"Do you think it's the ritual that did this?" Shiv ventured.

Adam's face grew expressionless. "I thought about that, and I don't know," Adam said, a slither of anger creeping in. "It's possible. Maybe you're just born messed up that way—who knows, considering who your parents are and what they did? But all I know is that you are not like them, even though you're born because of them—because of what they did to me, to my family, to my entire town. And now, despite all that, you've turned out to be... Well, you're still a bastard, but you seem to care about people and try to do the right thing. Yet you're *rewarded* so much for what your parents did—all the bloodshed they unleashed. All they took from father and me..."

Shiv nodded in understanding. “All I can do,” he said, “is play my hand. Life gave me a set—gave you a set, too. And before, I would have been envious of your set. I would have loved to be Adam Arrow.”

“But right now...the shoe’s on the other foot. Is that what you’re getting at?” Adam sneered.

“No,” Shiv replied firmly. “Right now, I don’t care. I just want to be me, finally. I can’t live in the past. I can’t ask you to surrender the past. I’m going to fight for what I have now—and ultimately for the people on Blackedge I care about. But I’m no slave to what happened. And I won’t bow to what someone else did. Even if that’s why I’m the way I am. I’ll just use it to do better.”

Adam stared at him. “You genuinely mean that? That you wish to protect Blackedge?”

“I do,” Shiv said. “I wouldn’t lie to you.”

Adam shook his head. “I still... I try not to hate you, but it’s hard. I don’t think I would blame you if you just wanted to stay. You seem to like it here.”

“I like adventuring,” Shiv said. “I like going places. I like doing things, and—a bit—like you. I like helping people. I just don’t like being in a cage. That doesn’t mean I’m going to abandon Georges and the others.”

“Blackedge was your cage,” Adam said.

“No,” Shiv countered. “Roland Arrow was my cage.”

Adam flinched at Shiv’s words.

“But you aren’t,” Shiv added softly. “I don’t think I fully like you yet, Young Lord, but you’re growing on me... like a fungal infection.”

Adam flipped a piece of lobster shell at Shiv; it crashed into his arm and fell onto the floor. “You missed that one,” he said.

“I’ll let you have it.” Shiv grinned. Then he breathed in deeply. “I’m sorry about your mother. And sister. If I could go back and make things different, I would. If I could have made your pain better I would. But you’re a good man—and I’m glad you learned about spatial magic at the academy because I have no idea how you resolved things at the end.”

For a few moments, they stared at each other in silence. Shiv didn’t know if Adam liked him, but something had shifted between them. Then the Young Lord tilted his head and smirked.

“Ah, Shiv.” Adam smiled. “You should, uh, go get the door.”

“Why? What are you—?”

And then Shiv felt her. She entered the periphery of his mana field—his Biomancy sensing the architecture of her body, mapping the contours of her curves.

Shiv blinked. “How did you—?”

“Awareness,” Adam smirked. “Very, very high Awareness. Go get the door, oh esteemed chef. Don’t keep your lady waiting.

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

28 (I) Hunger

Absolutely horrific. It’s like a nightmare that won’t end. I can still... I can still feel them opening me up and pulling me apart and...

Well, it’s also the only reason I passed my Biomancy examination to become a Novice Practitioner. The pain is immense, and the tortures are cruel and unusual, but the instructions... the detail... the focused tutoring you won’t find anywhere else. No other book marries the practical and theoretical so well...

It’s also... kind of exciting when you get used to it.

8/10.

-Review of “Odes of Blood and Flesh”

28 (I)

Hunger

“Sister Uva,” Shiv said, leaning against the door frame. He’d been waiting there for a few seconds, considering different poses. Ultimately, he settled on nonchalant—after all, that was how he wanted to feel. *However, I really, really hope she likes the food. I really, really do*, Shiv thought to himself.

As Uva came into sight, his worry dissolved into something else entirely. She was dressed for an occasion far more sophisticated than a dinner date at an apartment. The

dark silk dress she wore—deepest blue, almost black—was sculpted to her form. Shiv studied her battle-hardened physique beneath the fabric, and regarded her with his Biomancy as well. One quick glance was all he allowed himself, though; it was impolite to stare once she noticed.

But she seemed too busy admiring his form as well. There was amusement in her eyes as she regarded his ensemble: a hospital shirt with a shadowy cloak. “What is *this*?”

“I’m trying a new look,” he said, holding up his arms to give her a better view. “What do you think?”

She eyed him for a moment, her gaze lingering too long on the parts of his torso that weren’t covered by his shirt. “I think I can make improvements. Later.”

Shiv nodded. “I’d like that. I really, really like the dress.”

“The dress is... It’s mine,” she said with a bit of stiffness. “I made it.” She had also altered her hair—shorter than before, freshly cut. Shiv wondered if necessity had driven the change. She bled a great deal from her orifices earlier, and she still bore a faint bloodshot look in her eyes and a lingering heat in her skull.

“Thank you for coming,” he said, expression dimming slightly. “If you’re feeling tired—”

Uva walked past him and gently pushed him aside, tracing the tip of her finger down his exposed sternum.

“I came for dinner,” she said, resolve firm. “I’m going to get dinner.”

Shiv couldn’t help but laugh. “Fine. Let’s get you seated.” He had everything prepared: chair, plate, utensils, food, all neatly arranged. Adam eyed them from his couch and then retreated, offering a semblance of privacy. Shiv couldn’t blame him—where else was the Young Lord to go? Outside, perhaps, but the thought made Shiv cringe; he didn’t want to imagine what trouble Adam might get into among the Abyssals and spiderfolk especially.

He is getting better, though, Shiv considered.

The Deathless adopted the air of a professional, introducing Uva to the appetizer and main dish—and hiding dessert for later. He spoke little, simply observing her, and then brushed a stray lock of hair from her face. She, too, kept her mind to herself—oddly restrained despite their earlier mental conversations.

I wonder what she’s thinking, he mused. Despite how much he appreciated her company, he realized he didn’t truly know her well, nor was he good at reading her. Of all the Umbrals—and even compared to some Weaveresses—Uva remained a mystery.

Shiv supposed the same went for him. He hid plenty of things as well. Until recently.

When introductions were over, she carefully lifted the utensils and began to eat. He watched her features, searching for any hint of approval. But she remained an inscrutable wall, betraying nothing. Shiv's anxiety returned, climbing steadily. *Well, I don't know if this is the best meal she's ever had... There's still dessert, though. She can still have her mind blown by that.* Shiv comforted himself, recalling the first time he cooked for Georges. That was the first time he discovered how fast the older chef could curse. *I wonder what Georges would do right now.*

After she finished the asparagus, she moved on to the lobster—and finally revealed something: a look of curiosity. She asked how he made it, about the ingredients and the golden crust. He explained the heat he used, the exact steps of his recipe, even how he judged the necessary heat with his Biomancy.

"Oh, that's a rare use for magic," she said, smiling slightly. Shiv felt a bit of his worry dissipate.

Well, that's something. Still not sure if it's the best dinner ever—but...

She began pulling the lobster apart and savoring each bit. By the time she was done, she said only one thing—not praise, not criticism. "I'm still hungry." There was a huskiness to her voice that made him swallow. Swallow like a dehydrated man trying to get water from his own spit.

As Shiv unveiled the fondue, Adam reappeared as if summoned through a dimensional rift. The Young Lord took a seat next to Uva, uncaring of the moment and ignoring the death glare Shiv shot him. He clasped his hands together and looked at Shiv with wide, innocent, sky-blue eyes.

"Sister Uva," Adam greeted congenially, "how are you this fine evening? Oh—I forgot to thank you for your noble and valiant efforts earlier."

Uva rubbed her eyes, blinking with slight exhaustion. "Adept Adam," she began with none of her usual rancor, "thank you for resolving matters. I heard you saved many of my sisters' lives." Then she smiled at him—actually smiled.

Both Shiv and Adam were stunned.

"I—it's just my duty as Pathbearer," Adam sputtered. And because he was uncomfortable, he forced the topic to change. "Shiv, the fondue, please." Adam clapped.

"Aye, Young Lord," Shiv muttered under his breath. "I will bring it right away." He set before them the fondue and its assortment of fruits.

Both Uva and Adam took on mutual expressions of subtle delight. The Young Lord stopped himself from devouring everything and offered to let Uva go first.

She picked a cherry, dipped it in, and slowly, after carefully covering the fruit with chocolate, put it in her mouth. Shiv stared at her lips, perhaps a moment too long. He looked away when she caught him. But he continued focusing on her using his other senses. She smelled of... of that post-rain scent. *Gods, she's... fresh.*

Awareness > 7

The author's content has been appropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

In the meantime, Adam started demolishing banana after banana, utterly uncaring of the chemistry unfolding beside him.

After another half hour of mostly silent eating—mostly silent because Adam apparently had a Curse that seemed to cause him physical pain if he didn't comment or talk every few minutes—Sister Uva finished the last of the fruit and said something that shook Shiv to his core: "I'm still hungry."

After a beat, Adam agreed. "I'm still hungry too," the Young Lord said. But Shiv wasn't looking at him at all anymore. In fact, Adam might as well not have existed at all to Shiv in that moment.

The Deathless found himself staring at his own reflection in Uva's dark-blue eyes. The way she looked at him made him feel like he was in *desirable danger*, made his legs shake—but it also woke something inside him. *Still hungry*, he thought. *Hungry for what?* He didn't finish that thought before she rose from her seat.

Adam watched her, then glanced at Shiv, then down at his empty dessert plate. "It's very good," he said. "The dessert's... very nice. I think I'm going to sit here for a while and think about... breakfast."

Neither of them was listening. Uva strode past Adam and grabbed Shiv by the arm. "Come on," she said, pulling him toward his bedroom. "I need to see your measurements."

"Measurements?" he replied. "But you're still hungry?"

"Yes. So *hurry*." Uva spoke with such feverish intensity that Shiv practically ran into the bedroom. She didn't say anything else until she'd pushed him into the room and closed the door behind them.

Outside, Adam coughed loudly enough for Shiv to hear. "I would go out, but *I don't know where the key is*. Shiv... *Shiv?*"

He hurriedly placed Valor on a nearby cabinet—the dagger sputtered and tried to say something, but Shiv was too distracted to pay attention.

“So, measurements,” Uva said, waving at his hospital shirt. “We need to do something about this. I can’t have you constantly losing clothing and running around in tatters, and you can’t always be wearing your own bones as armor, either.”

“I can’t?” Shiv asked, confused as to why.

“I said I can’t have it.” Her voice dropped a register as she took a step closer. Shiv’s heart skipped a beat. “Get that *thing* off. I want a better look.”

Shiv obeyed, but in his haste the shirt split down the middle. “Oops,” he muttered as the two halves fell to the floor. “It’s really quite fragile.”

Uva stared at him, her expression growing tense. The hunger in her gaze was becoming increasingly evident. She extended a tendril of her mind magic into his consciousness like a snake lashing out from the bushes.

Shiv’s heart hammered in his chest like a war drum, and his Biomancy told him hers was racing just as fast. For a few moments, she simply traced a finger along his torso—shoulder to navel—until her palm rested on his chest. To his surprise, he could feel it: the sensations of her touch projected into his mind.

Slowly, he reciprocated, reaching out with his own nascent mind magic. She bound her thoughts to his, and they grew tight together, like a cord. The sensations intensified until he was fully aware of how she felt.

Shiv let out a gasp. “You... you are hungry,” he breathed. And he realized he had the same kind of hunger she did.

“I’m starved,” she admitted. A flutter, a flame in her stomach—he felt that fire ignite within himself.

He placed his hand over her hand and leaned down closer—well into her personal space. “Was dessert not to your liking?”

“It was sweet,” she said. “And dinner was filling... A true exploration of taste.” Her lips curved in a small smile.

He couldn’t stop watching her mouth. He couldn’t stop hearing the *pump, pump, pump* of her heart.

“But you’re still hungry,” Shiv murmured, his voice low and husky. “Hungry for something sweeter than dessert. I think I have... just the thing...” He brushed against

her scarred lips with his own, tasting the lingering sweetness they shared—before pulling back. Teasing her. Provoking her.

Her eyes flared in outrage. She practically hissed. “*You...*”

Shiv ran a hand along her cheek, traced her lips, and gently cradled the back of her head. As he leaned in, her self-control shattered like a rusted chain: she slammed into him and bit down on his bottom lip with a bestial snarl. He could still taste the fondue’s chocolate, but it paled before all the flavors he experienced afterward.

The fondue was sweet, but Uva... she was *sublime*.

Might of Mass > 70

Psychomancy > 5

Sometime later, after their breaths slowed enough for coherent speech and their minds could focus on something other than wild lust, Shiv found himself shaking his head at what remained of the bed. Now, he and Uva were against a cool wall—the only one that wasn’t somewhat cracked.

“By the Composer.” She sighed—it was something she said often. The grin on Shiv’s face in that instant made him seem like an intoxicated fool.

“We really destroyed that thing,” Shiv said, chuckling under his breath. The bed was practically embedded in the floor; the ground was cracked and almost excavated. Fissures ran along the walls. One of the cabinets was nothing but dust, and the light above had broken at some point. Yet all this destruction felt meaningless, irrelevant, and feeble before the peace nesting between them.

He held her close, pressing her body tighter against his. He enjoyed the sensation, she felt his enjoyment, and the mental bond they sustained looped that pleasure back around in an ouroboros of bliss. Shiv felt a flutter of fear—he might grow addicted to this feeling.

Uva released a soft breath against his neck and looked up. Shiv leaned down to kiss her again before leaning his skull against hers. “Again?” he asked.

She smiled and remained silent for a moment. “I think I’m content right here, just for now.”

“Finally not so hungry anymore?” he teased. She ran a hand across his chest, and Shiv bit back a groan.

“Only for now,” she said, her eyes glowing dark again.

Broken Moon, Shiv thought with a shudder. Bound tight in the web of want, he found himself counting their heartbeats. One thousand and thirty-three spent in afterglow and tranquility. Until her thoughts shifted.

A memory intruded: she was thinking of the last time her face was this close to his, their heads pressed together—trapped within the teleportation anchor. When she had witnessed the first of his deaths. It was gruesome, and from her end, he felt a scar lining her mind.

As he brushed against the scar, terror, horror, disbelief, and relief flowed out from her. Relief was the strongest emotion remaining, for he returned, like a miracle delivered by the Composer. He looked down into her eyes and tasted her once more, trying to soothe her worries. But the moment lingered—and when her eyes opened again, she let out a sigh, not of contentment or pleasure, but of lingering dread. Follow current novels on Novel-Fire.net

“I saw you die,” she said.

“Yeah,” he replied. “That is what happened.”

She stared, searching his features for pain. When none appeared, her frown deepened. “It does not bother you? Death?”

He considered her question. “Well, it doesn’t feel good. It’s more of a lesson to me. I gain skills from it. It makes me stronger to make up for whatever way I’m found lacking, it makes up for it. That’s why I grow so fast—how I went from little more than Pathless a week ago to who I am now.”

She pushed off him, and he felt a pang of disappointment. His disappointment drifted through their link, and she settled back-first against him with a gentle smile. He suddenly wasn’t so disappointed anymore.

He felt her reach through his mind, running her fingers through certain thoughts and memories, and he let her. Strange. He was still wary of mind mages—especially after Harkness—but after what they went through, he *trusted* Uva. It felt strange, trusting a mind mage.

Wait. I’m a damned mind mage too now.

“The scar faded,” she said.

“Hm?” he asked.

“The scar from the mind weaver. You had one before—you were afraid. Now it’s gone. In less than two days...”

Shiv blinked. “You could feel that?”

“Yes.” She mentally pulled him closer to her mind and allowed him to experience certain memories: watching him burn, his features twisting in anguish and agony, the light going out behind his eyes. He still felt an echo of her pain—like being torn apart from the inside. Nothing she wanted to experience again, nor see someone else endure.

Shiv winced. “Sorry about dying. Maybe if I were smarter, I’d have a better plan—”

“Shh,” Uva whispered as she turned, sliding up herself up along his torso. All semblance of *coherent* thought was lost to him.

Moments after, they started a conversation that *mostly* didn’t involve their mouths.

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

28 (II) Hunger

28 (II)

Hunger

“I know about your mother,” Shiv said suddenly, breaking the silence. He didn’t know an easy way to start, so he got it out: blunt, direct, honest.

Uva stared up at him as she lay against his chest. She hummed. “I saw in your thoughts. You have a skill for that—Foreshadowing.”

“Yeah.” Shiv chuckled. He turned to face her as they rested. “It’s like the System wants me to be a voyeur. But maybe it also wants me to survive.” He shook his head, remembering Marikos. “That damn dragon. I was just trying to get into Weave.” UPDATE FROM Novel[F]ire

She laughed. “Don’t curse him.”

“Why?” Shiv narrowed his eyes. “He burned me alive. That didn’t feel that good either,” he admitted. “It was a six out of ten.”

“Stop numbering your agonizing deaths. It’s strange. But also... if the Dragon-knight hadn’t slain you, we may have missed each other.”

Shiv thought she was right.

“Well, here’s to Marikos and his stupid tantrum.” Shiv raised an imaginary glass. “So that we can be here right now.”

He sighed in contentment and scratched Uva’s head. She made something of a pleased noise. A few days ago, life in the alcove had seemed great—it was an adventure. But this... this was something else. This might just be a per—

In the corner of his eye, he caught sight of something atop the sole remaining—only partially destroyed—cabinet. The bedroom light was destroyed, and without his new cloak, he couldn’t sense well in the dark. When he realized what it was, though, Shiv tensed and cursed. “Ah, shit. Ah, SHIT!”

“What?” Uva asked, lifting her head in alarm.

Shiv covered his face in shame as he pointed at the dagger he’d left on the table—and forgotten in the throes of lust. There, The Cage of Valor Thann lay, unguarded. Uva immediately recognized the dagger too, and her reaction was even more severe. “Oh, oh, Composer... Oh goddess... oh, no.”

She covered her face, and the dagger coughed. *“Apologies,”* Valor said. *“I was meditating as hard as I could to achieve an Absolute Invisibility Skill.”*

“No, no,” Shiv interrupted, shuffling awkwardly to his feet. “This is...” He looked at Uva; she hid her face in her hands. “Godsdammit.”

Valor sighed. *“Oh, don’t worry,”* the dagger replied, sounding genuinely unbothered. *“You’d be surprised how many times I’ve stabbed someone while they were occupied.”*

“Uh, that kinda sounds like a threat, Valor...”

“Ah. Apologies. I do have a habit of sounding that way when I am made to feel like a cuckold. It is one of my only personality flaws.”

Uva started coughing violently.

“But these things are natural,” Valor said nonchalantly, totally unoffended. *“It’s only a shame you forgot of my existence. That’s the only part that truly saddens me.”*

“I have no words to convey my shame,” Uva whispered.

Shiv did have words. “Uh... sorry.” And those were his words. “You want to go outside and sit with Adam for a while?” Shiv asked.

At the mention of his name, the Young Lord cried through the closed door, “if either of you come out holding that dagger, I will shoot you! You’ve already deprived me of a full night’s sleep—what is wrong with you two? I live here as well! Other people live here! I went out for a felling walk! A SIX-HOUR WALK! I came back and YOU WERE STILL GOING!”

“Maybe I should just pull the memories out of his mind,” Uva murmured.

“Elf! If you touch my mind, I will shoot you in the head!” Adam cried from outside.

Shiv blinked as he looked at Uva. “You can do that?”

“Well, people forget things all the time,” she replied.

Shiv smiled slowly. “Yeah. Yeah, they do, don’t they?”

They maintained eye contact for a while longer before both of them dropped the ruse.

“Yeah, I don’t think I really want to do anything in Adam’s mind,” Shiv admitted.

“Oh, good, how *noble* of you two!” Adam wailed. “If you can hear me—if you aren’t doing things to each other right now—I despise the two of you. And I think the rest of the building does as well.”

“He sounds genuinely upset,” Uva observed.

Shiv sighed. “He probably misses his fiancée. He’ll feel better when I make him breakfast in the morning.”

“It better be damn good breakfast!” Adam shouted. “It’s already morning, you monsters. You’re lucky I found that key! It is morning! What in the gods—”

“This is damn good breakfast,” Adam said, moaning as he took another bite of Shiv’s omelette. The Deathless yawned slightly as he observed the Young Lord’s satisfaction.

From nearby came soft snoring. Uva lay sleeping on the couch thanks to the *unforeseen disasters* that befell the bed and the bedroom. Her mana field was still strained, and at some point she’d simply drifted off. Shiv had made sure her food was covered and protected from Adam’s ravenous intentions.

Every few seconds, Adam eyed the guarded plate like a falcon spotting a rabbit in a meadow. “I still haven’t forgiven you,” he said to Shiv, trying to hint at his intent.

“That’s hers,” Shiv insisted. “I’ll make you a bigger lunch—”

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“I think I have... just the thing...” Adam mockingly murmured in a husky tone, doing Shiv’s voice.

“Wait—you heard that too?” Shiv asked.

Adam stared as if Shiv had brain damage. “Shiv, how many times do I have to tell you how high my Awareness Skill is? I can hear and sense what’s happening in practically every room on this level. I can sense it. And considering you were right next door—and you two have no inhibitions—”

“Okay, okay,” Shiv said hurriedly. “I’m sorry. Sorry I messed up your sleep, Young Lord. I’ll make it up to you later. Wait... Didn’t you go to an academy? There were a lot of people our age there too, right?”

“Yes. And It was hell as well. My Awareness has always been my highest skill, which means short of an insulated, well-warded room, I learn things that I don’t want to all the time.” Adam rubbed his temple. “God, I miss Isabella. I need to get home.”

“We’ll get back there,” Shiv said. “We just need the Composer to let us know where that gate is and how to use it to get back to the surface.”

Shiv then remembered something. “There was a failure condition in the Quest to stop Harkness from bombing Passage... The failure condition was the closing of a Compact gate. I think that’s the one we’re taking back up to the surface.”

“A Compact gate?” Adam looked puzzled. “What’s Compact?”

“I think they’re one of the four Abyssal nations,” Shiv said, trying to recall. “The faction focused on dimensionals and demons, apparently.”

“Demons?” Adam flinched. He openly invoked the protection of the Auroral Council.

“I wouldn’t worry yet,” Shiv said. “I don’t know the situation surrounding this gate or Compact as a whole. Maybe we can use it without subterfuge or open conflict.”

“Maybe... And maybe the heavens will open up and bestow upon us Blessings of infinite favor and absolute power,” Adam scoffed.

Shiv considered the Young Lord's flippancy. "I wouldn't say I quite got that, but I think my odds are good if that's our standard."

Adam was about to declare his hate again before swallowing the last bite of his omelette. "So—what's our plan in the meantime, until the Composer calls us? I expect a parade in our honor and a formal ceremony declaring us heroes."

"It's more likely she'll play a song for you," Valor said, *"and bestow upon you both a Blessing."*

"A Blessing?" Adam sounded intrigued and worried. "A blessing from an Abyssal goddess? I suppose... even if she's a spider-woman-thing, she seems nice enough. She hasn't tried to eat us yet."

"Yeah," Shiv agreed, hiding a wince. He thought back to how the Composer casually mentioned killing Adam if he threatened any of her subjects. "She's nice enough—as long as you talk to her well and don't lie. Don't lie to her. She gets mad."

"I will keep that in mind," Adam said. "So. Your plans?"

"Well, I think I'm going to do some reading in a while," Shiv said, "then go out—see the city, maybe stop by Cradle again, maybe try some restaurants tonight. Training. Practice. I think that's what I'm going to go for. What about you?"

Adam hesitated. "I was thinking I'd leverage my newfound respect and find a patrol to go on."

"A patrol?" Shiv asked.

"Yeah," Adam said. "I don't like being cooped up in the city. There's a lot of noise and chaos. I think I'd be more useful outside..."

"Because you want to scout the Abyss? Find the gate or some other way up? Can't blame you." Shiv sighed. "But we go together. Do not run off on your own."

Adam's tone hardened. "While we enjoy our lives as heroes of the Abyssal Faith, our people are dying."

Shiv's voice matched his. "I have people there, too. I'm not giving up on them. But if we rush back blindly, we'll just die. Well. *You'll* just die."

He was about to emphasize how he couldn't convey how dangerous the actual Abyss was, but his recent intimate education with Uva taught him a few simple truths. "Trust me," he began—then, without warning, formed a spell of intent and reached into Adam's mind. He warded his recent experiences away, so Adam wouldn't be overwhelmed, but

fed him a few of his own deaths: at the hands of the weavers in the Umbral Wilderness, at the flames of Marikos, against the high vampire.

As each moment flashed through Adam's mind, he flinched until he nearly fell from his chair. "Stop! Stop making me experience your deaths—gods!"

Shiv ended the visions. "Sorry. I just wanted to show you."

"Show me the enemy—don't show me you dying." Adam gasped. "I told you yesterday, I don't enjoy watching you die. Why would you give me that firsthand?"

"But you understand now," Shiv said quietly. "I don't want you to go out on your own—you don't get a second chance. With people like Marikos flying around... I don't think Harkness would be running openly without a care in the world."

"Well, she does have a Legendary Skill capable of blunting a god's attacks," Adam said, "and I could see her trying to mentally enslave a dragon."

"Shit, you're right," Shiv muttered.

"But I need to do *something*," Adam insisted. "I need to be of use."

"To be of use, you must improve," Valor said, drawing both men's eyes to the dagger beside them. *"When we next speak to the Composer, she will return a few things to me and loosen the tightness of this cage. I think it's time for me to take some new disciples..."*

"That's good for you," Adam said, "but I've already been to an academy. More education isn't what I need—I need practical experience."

"Yes," Valor said without offense. *"And Shiv has an edge you do not, so that goes for you doubly."*

Adam frowned. "Thank you for reminding me."

"You're welcome," Valor replied. *"But if you wish to bring down Vicar Sullain, you must be precise, capable, and grow your skills as much as possible. If he's attacking the surface, the Curse remains in effect. He can endure light for a while, but no Abyssal can walk long under the sun. Night will be his time to strike. This will become a war of attrition—favoring him, but taking time. Time you should use wisely."*

"Alright," Adam said with a sigh. "So what do you have to teach?"

Valor laughed—a deep, arrogant laugh earned through power and pain. *"Anything you wish to learn. It's been some time since I took disciples... Shiv, I agree: you should begin the day with a bit of education. You lack it so far, no?"*

“Yeah,” Shiv said.

“Good. I was worried about your mental state before, but I think... I think you should start with the Odes.”

“The what?” Adam’s voice trembled. “You don’t mean that disgusting book bound in skin and layered with teeth, right?”

“Oh, yeah.” Shiv smirked. “I’ve been looking forward to that one for a while.”

“You’re... absolutely certain?” Adam pressed.

“Yeah,” Shiv said.

“You are insane,” Adam reiterated.

Shiv passed Uva on the couch and tucked her blanket around her. Then he pulled from under the table the largest, ugliest book he had bought—the *Odes of Blood and Flesh*. He stared at it; the foul eyes on the book stared back. With his Psychomancy field, he jabbed at the mind magic spell placed on the book and found himself overwhelmed by its complexity.

“Guess that explains why you’re so expensive,” he murmured.

Without further ado, he opened the pages—and felt himself drawn in mentally. When he surfaced next, he was strapped to a medical gurney, a group of vampires standing over him—their eyes blood-red, their clothing fine, but with pale, stained aprons around them.

“Now, my dear students,” a strangely elderly vampire said as he leaned close, “let us begin our first lesson on the mechanics and dynamics of circulation and the fundamentals of *blood*.”

Shiv regarded the vampires as they licked their fangs. That was threatening, but the topic also seemed very interesting. “Huh. That sounds kind of—”

And then one of the vampires lost control and sank their bladed teeth into his supple neck. Pain flared. Shiv choked. The next thing he knew, he was in another body being wheeled to replace the last person he occupied while the elder vampire chided his student for losing control during a class.

“—cool,” Shiv finished. *Yeah. This’ll be an experience.*

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

29 (I) City

Well, dear reader, it seems the surfacers have brought interesting times upon us aplenty. Merely days after foiling a terrorist attack on Passage, the once-unknown surfer now known as honored guest Shiv has continued his streak of auspicious and heroic actions.

The second was talking down his fellow surfer who held several members of Cradle's staff hostage while suffering from a mental breakdown. Then, both surfacers defined themselves in a moment of even greater glory, stopping the destruction of Passage itself. A bombing attempt that, if internal sources are to be believed, would have crippled the city's teleportation network and potentially plunged us into a crisis beyond what words could describe.

The damage dealt to Passage was severe, leaving hundreds dead and many more wounded. However, we must offer our thanks and keep our attentions focused on these surfacers, for despite the need to remain ever vigilant against outsider forces, it appears that we have two genuine heroes among us for once. And if additional rumors prove to be correct, their actions might have earned favor from even the Composer herself...

-Vibrations, Weave Tabloid

29 (I)

City

The *Odes of Blood and Flesh* was a disgusting book. Vile on so many levels. It was a document of torture and agony inflicted directly into the minds of its readers. And Shiv absolutely loved it. It was everything mentioned above, but also extremely educational, mainly because the elderly vampire he had learned was called Sculptor Ekkihurst was so detailed and meticulous in his teachings.

As Shiv jumped from body to body, experiencing death time and time again, he learned the finer nuances of the circulatory system first. What followed was the importance of the heart, the general layout of blood vessels, and how veins and arteries both mattered for specific reasons. He also learned about vampirism.

One of the vampire students opened their chest casually, cutting themselves open and exposing their heart. Though the organ pumped, Sculptor Ekkihurst next opened Shiv's heart and made a comparison.

“As you see,” the Sculptor began, “this is a pure organ. It is an organism of matter. It is essential for their vitality, but more like an anchor, a vessel. This”—he gestured to the other vampire’s exposed heart—“this is the Lineage Core. This is why we can use our bodies the way we do. We are part of a collective whole, and we are family for each other, eternally, and expand our power with our growing lines.”

Shiv blinked. Something about the vampire’s words made Shiv recall a thing Georges complained about before. *“Multi-level marketing bastards calling me family! When the felling shit was I your family, you mother—”*

Ekkihurst continued. “It connects me to you, and especially connects you to your sire. That is why we grow stronger with every new member we bring into our fold, and why we can draw on the powers of blood even without a spell component nearby.”

A component, as Shiv realized, was flesh or blood—anything organic, really. Biomancy didn’t work without something to affect—that was the entire meaning behind the name: biology, and *mancy* for manipulation. Apparently, all vampires had a small micro-dimension inside themselves, or something like that, and from there they could draw more things out of themselves, recomposing their bodies. It also connected them to their elders in ways Shiv didn’t grasp yet.

And to make matters even more peculiar, it seemed that vampire ichor was smart enough to do a lot of the work itself. The way Ekkihurst described things, it was as if the ichor flowing through their veins was intelligent, rather than their brains. “Not quite so for humans,” Ekkihurst continued to explain. He examined Shiv in detail, flaying him open over and over again, having his students kill him repeatedly, and through it all Shiv learned as well.

This was documented material specifically to enhance a vampire’s knowledge of how to manipulate and even heal their victims. For despite the way the vampires treated other people like cattle, cattle still had worth, and vampires, despite everything, abhorred waste.

For what felt like hours, Shiv experienced various modifications made to his body. Most of them ended with him dead—either suffering a brutal stroke, his heart popping, or his veins simply pulling apart, leaving him internally hemorrhaging and perishing soon after. But all this allowed him insight into the nuances of his biology. His Biomancy did not grow, but his basic understanding of Practical Metabiology leapt forward by two levels—a remarkable gain from simply reading a single chapter from a book.

Practical Metabiology > 3

To Shiv’s surprise and disappointment, he made it to the end of the entire chapter and found Sculptor Ekkihurst declaring the class over. As a final “thank you” for the students in attendance, he gestured for them to indulge, “for this final subject won’t last very long

anyway.” And then they descended on Shiv, and he discovered just how annoying it was to be sucked dry without learning anything.

As everything faded to black once more, Shiv expected to appear in a new body for the second chapter. However, he found himself in a cage, staring directly at Ekkihurst, who was standing on a bridge made from solidified blood. Below, there were hundreds of other cages, pitiful moaning noises escaping them, and what seemed to be wires—no, tubes filled with blood—connected to the cages. Shiv looked at his own arm and, to his fascination, found something threaded through his veins. He also noticed his hand: the prisoner he inhabited right now was atrophied and fragile. His bones were brittle, the skin was sallow, and there was some kind of infectious growth spreading along his surface.

Ekkihurst stared through the bars, observing Shiv with fascination. “You’ve done well. This is a special chapter, one where I give my personal congratulations.”

Shiv looked at the vampire in wonder. “Is it?” he asked, trying to see if he Sculptor would respond.

The vampire didn’t respond. “Don’t try to speak to me right now. This is not actually a conversation. I am not here. I wrote this book mainly to spread knowledge and expand our collective understanding of the organism. All organisms. Now, some might say my ways are macabre and brutal. I cannot disagree, but once again, my bloodline has made me a predator above all. And I see no problem with that. However, this is not about me right now. It’s about you.”

Shiv nodded along, even though the vampire couldn’t take note of that.

“Do you know how few people finish the first chapter without stopping? The book records that, you know. The book records a great many things. Most stop after the first death. They close the book. They turn away. Cowards. Well, no, not cowards, but you understand my point. Those who don’t have the rigor don’t have the desire. But you have something more than rigor and desire. You are interested. No, you are in love. You’re in love with Biomancy. You’re in love with the organism. Well, I thank you. I thank you for sharing my love. Despite potentially being adversaries—perhaps even if you want to kill me someday—I thank you for being in love. And I ask that you continue holding this love. For someday, we will make something truly novel.”

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Ekkihurst closed his fist, and his hand turned into flowers, then some kind of crystalline shell, then back to claws. “Look at this,” Ekkihurst said, sneering at his shifting flesh in disgust. “I can do this with Biomancy. Other vampires? They ooh and ahh. But that’s nothing. We have not made anything new. We copy each other. We move traits together. But this is like children slamming blocks together.” The elderly vampire spat off the side of the ledge on which he stood. The spit hit one of the cages below—Shiv could

hear weeping. “But someday, someday, we will make something truly, truly novel. I believe it. I hope you believe it, too.”

And then the chapter ended, and Shiv found himself staring at an open page, one depicting incomprehensible scribbles scrawled in blood with a glowing spell pattern at its core. A question pulled at his mind, asking if he wanted to read the chapter again. Shiv let out a breath. Though he was curious, he decided to stop for a while and potentially ask another Biomancer—a proper Master. Everything he learned, everything he did, would shape his next evolution. He wasn’t sure if he wanted an exact evolution tied to a vampire, and considering Shiv created very little and mostly just used his skill to harm, he suspected that he wouldn’t be growing any novel organisms. More likely, he would get something that would allow him to injure or destroy organic tissue.

I wonder if there's any Master-Tier evolution that allows someone to offensively use cancers, Shiv thought, or maybe bones. I like bones. They make for good armor. Maybe I can be some kind of... Sovereign of Bones.

Just then, he felt slender arms wrap around his torso as Uva placed her chin on his shoulder. He gave her a smile, but she was looking at his book with both eyebrows raised. A frown etched itself onto her face. “What is that horrible thing you’re reading?” she asked.

“That’s what I said,” Adam groaned off by the side. “He’s just been staring at it for the past bloody hour, just shaking and grunting from time to time.”

“Adam,” Shiv said, sensing the Young Lord reaching for Uva’s plate with his Biomancy field, “if you touch that, I will show you what I just learned.”

“I’m hungry,” Adam complained.

“I will fix that in a moment. Don’t touch the plate. That’s for you,” Shiv said, looking at Uva, his tone turning gentle.

Her frown flattened into a smile. “That’s very sweet of you.”

“Shiv, hurry,” Adam said, his voice flat with disdain. “I need to eat something before I retch from listening to you two.”

“And leave me with the Young Lord this time, if you two decide to have another spontaneous conversation,” Valor declared with vehemence. Shiv coughed. His mistake from earlier still haunted him a bit, but done was done, and he *really* enjoyed what was done. Shiv closed the *Odes of Blood and Flesh* for now, then stowed it in his cloak.

“It’s not a bad book,” Shiv added. “There *is* a lot of torturing and suffering and death inflicted on the reader, but...”

Uva shook her head. "It sounds like a terrible book."

"...it's very educational," Shiv finished.

She sighed. "You are just..." She brushed his face. "Your mind is like a piece of metal."

"Should I be offended?" Shiv replied.

"You should be many things right now," Uva said, "but I'm glad you are none of them. I suppose it takes fortitude to survive being favored by fate."

Shiv chuckled. "Yes, well, I would more describe myself as being a darling of disaster."

"Fortunately for you"—she pecked him on the cheek—"I think I quite like disasters. And speaking of disaster"—she looked down at him, taking in his bare torso and hospital attire aside from his cloak, and at Adam, who was sitting at the kitchen table in his armor—"you two need some proper clothes. A proper wardrobe."

"But you were so happy about my lack of clothes before," Shiv said.

"I don't want anyone else to be," Uva hissed, her eyes growing dark.

Shiv felt a shiver run through him. *System, she might be possessive*, he thought.

She rose from his body and stretched. "Come on, both of you, let's go out."

"Where are we going?" Adam asked, narrowing his eyes. "And are you sure that you two just don't want to go together?"

"Oh, Adept Adam come now," she said, chiding him as if he was a small child. "You need to be dressed, too. And with something better than"—she wrinkled her nose—"that horrible outfit you were wearing the other day."

"Why are you judging me?" Adam snapped. "You're the one who gave me the outfit." Follow current novels on Nove1Fire

"Yes, but you decided to wear it anyway," Uva replied. "Did I make you do that?"

"I..." Adam sputtered. "How is this my fault?"

Shiv laughed.

After an awkward encounter in the elevator—in which the small Umbral child they'd run into multiple times over the past few days pointed at Adam and asked if he was the one making all those noises all night—they departed for another section of Weave.

This time, they were going to a place colloquially called Culture Valley. It was nestled between two major residential districts and was the beginning of its own principality. There were apparently thirteen principalities in Weave, each focused on a dedicated industry or function for the city.

Thus far, Shiv had only been at the Symposium Principality, the core of everything—where important operations ran, where the government and the Composer decided on the agenda for Weave, and where Passage, the main means of transport between this dimension and the rest of Integrated Earth, was anchored.

Weave was an interesting place. The more Shiv studied its layout, the more the buildings seemed like large insects caught in a web. There were many, many people moving between places, across bridges, and massive nets served as a safety measure in case someone fell.

To his increasing surprise, he noticed a few other things. There was a higher concentration of Umbrals than Weaveresses, and there were also far more of the smaller, male weavers than Weaveresses. He'd barely seen any of those in the Symposium Principality, so he was rather surprised at that. When he asked Uva why that was, she explained that weavers were mostly relegated to the lower-importance jobs in the city and held lower social standings. As for the former point; it took a long time for the spiderfolk to reproduce—requiring a gestation period within a final host body after they'd finished being feral larvae, otherwise they would be born feral. It had resulted in a demographic problem: not enough people were dying anymore. With the city's advancements and more people reaching Adept Tier for Physicality early in life, deaths by natural causes or disease had flattened substantially.

Shiv could see why that was a problem, so he started to speak, then stopped himself.

"Yes, it's about how it sounds," Uva said. "The Composer did not choose her form exactly. She has always been honest about this. However, she is not a cruel goddess, and she does not want to force the breeding on anyone."

Uva fell silent. "Thus, we have a demographic issue. Projections show far more feral weavers in the next few years, and not that many Weaveresses or non-feral weavers."

"What about feral Weaveresses?" Shiv asked.

"If you become feral, you don't become a Weaveress. Their biology doesn't express itself that way."

They landed in Culture Valley a short while later, and Shiv found himself walking down a thoroughfare filled with musicians, hawkers, advertisers, swindlers, people peddling wares, and more. Once again, every day down here felt like the Festival of the Eclipse back on Blackedge. But to the people, it seemed like they were going about their everyday lives.

“So much noise,” Shiv said. He managed to keep his hands from shaking this time, but then he noticed something about Adam. The Young Lord was practically flinching every few seconds—*his Awareness*, Shiv realized. *This must be hell on him.*

“You all right?” Shiv asked Adam.

The Young Lord clenched his teeth. “I’ve been to the capital. I’ve endured that. I can endure this.”

Despite his words, Shiv’s Psychomancy picked up an imprint of strain, stress, and also strength. Adam Arrow could be sour, could be mean, could be a grudge-bearer, but Adam Arrow was a Pathbearer, and he had pride in himself—a positive pride in being noble and decent.

More than I can say for a lot of people, Shiv thought.

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29 (II) City

29 (II)

City

As they passed by shop after shop, Shiv saw that many Umbral outfitters also had a weaver section, and it seemed like there were groups everywhere on the streets—many Umbrals walking in groups, mostly all female, sometimes several females with one male. There was also almost always a Weaveress with the group; sometimes weavers trailed behind her. Most of the weavers seemed to be doing laborer duties—attaching things to buildings, cleaning walls.

Shiv found this odd. Automata usually got the harder, more manual tasks back on Blackedge. Things were different here. An oddity in the social dynamic he hadn’t grasped yet. Because she had a tendril of magic resting in his thoughts, Uva started to

explain. “Umbrals are created,” she said. “We were made by the Court of the First Blood.”

Shiv blinked in surprise. “The vampires?”

“Yes. Our pigmentation and our dimorphism are a reflection of that.”

“Your dimorphism?”

“Our females are... I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but they tend to be bigger than the males, or around the same size. This is to preserve our capacity for reproduction while also maintaining labor and other services. There are also more female offspring on average, because it only takes a single Umbral male to achieve continuation.”

The way she spoke revealed cultural wounds—little wonder why Nomos hated the bloodspawn so much.

“The Weaveresses seem to be the opposite,” Shiv said. “Not a lot of them in general, and far more weavers.”

“Yes,” Uva said. “I think that’s a matter of their biology as well, but I can’t speak to that for certain. This is for the Composer to know. She is the creator, not us.”

Shiv noticed a reverence in her voice, but also a level of suspicion she let slip—she wondered why the Composer simply didn’t change the nature of her Weaveresses to adapt their biology and end the strange breeding requirements. But she often chided herself mentally for such thoughts and let Shiv know as much. Because what was the place of an Umbral to criticize their savior goddess?

“Ah, we’re here,” Uva said, gesturing at a storefront. Shiv saw a squarish building made of black marble, brightly lit inside. He reached into his cloak to pull out his reading glasses. A second later, a translation of the store’s name appeared before him: Fel’s Cuts.

Before they could enter, Adam reached out, catching both of them by the shoulder. Uva paused and reflectively stepped away from the Young Lord, but Shiv turned and saw something in Adam’s expression. The Young Lord was focused—there was no sneer, just eyes closed in concentration. He was listening, sensing.

“What? What’s wrong?” Shiv asked.

“Shh!” Adam said. “I’m trying to push through the crowd. There’s... there’s something... There!” He pointed.

A few steps away, Shiv found what he was indicating. A weaver stumbled among the crowd—his body shaking. Shiv focused his Biomancy field on the creature; the weaver was heating up and starting to lash out at the people around...

"Oh no," Uva said. She let out a sigh and projected her thoughts: *"Sleep."* Her will and magic crashed down on the weaver, just as he reared his head back and let out a silent scream. A second later, the weaver collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut.

"Everyone, clear out," she declared mentally. Everyone on the street stopped, turned, and stared at her. *"I am a member of the Arachnae Order, and under the authority of the Order, consider this place sealed for all weavers and Weaveresses. A Plague-Bearer has been found."*

At that, people cleared out of the vicinity in record time.

"Plague-Bearer?" Shiv thought.

"The feral plague," Uva said. *"Another gift the First Blood left us. A common sickness that causes even weavers who are intelligent to irreversibly devolve into a bestial state, and inflicts severe dementia on Weaveresses."*

Shiv blinked.

"As I told you before, a Weaveress cannot be feral. So they suffer another way." Uva shuddered, then looked Adam up and down with a slight smile. "Good work, Adept Adam. These things happen, but responses are rarely this timely." The rightful source is NovelFire

"Yes, well." The Young Lord peacocked with pride. "I told you, I'm used to the capital. This is nothing. This is nothing," he repeated.

Shiv patted Adam on the arm. The Young Lord scowled at the spot Shiv touched.

A few minutes later, a Plague-Cager team arrived—a group from the Order specifically focused on extracting the sick and establishing quarantine measures for the infected. They had a few Biomancers with them, but those seemed focused on sterilizing all the small moving biological particulates in the air.

I wonder if they need a Biomancy Skill Evolution to do that, Shiv thought as they went into the store.

Heads turned to regard them—Umbral, Weaveress, and otherwise. However, Shiv found himself noticing a specific individual in particular. Behind the desk was a woman with much longer hair, who looked somewhat like Uva. He approached, and Uva and the other Umbral shared a moment of eye contact: indifferent expressions, façades of stony silence. Inside, though, connected to her mind, Shiv felt a little warmth.

“So, these are the surfacers,” the woman behind the desk said.

“They are,” Uva replied, looking first at Adam and then at Shiv. “Blue for the smaller one. Do you have something dark red and durable for the other?”

“Hmm,” the woman intoned. “I will check.” She gave Shiv a final look, then tilted her head back to Uva. “Oh, I see.”

Uva’s mind reeled in surprise, but she betrayed none of it on her face. The Umbral behind the desk, meanwhile, was smirking. “Ah, finally. I can’t believe it. And I can’t believe you.”

“Save it,” Uva said, her voice thin. “Go get what I told you to.”

“Yes, *mother*.” The woman rolled her eyes before departing, telling them to wait a moment.

“So, who’s that?” Shiv asked.

“My sister,” Uva replied.

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“Your sister?”

“I have many sisters,” Uva said. “She and I used to be the closest.”

“Used to be?” Shiv pressed.

“Now I’m closest with my work,” Uva finished. “Or so she complains every time we see each other.”

“She didn’t complain this time,” Shiv noted.

“That is because she has ammunition against me this time—an article of mockery, finally, against Uva,” Uva drawled, wrinkling her nose. She looked slightly annoyed, but there was pride underneath.

Seconds later—far sooner than Shiv expected—Uva’s sister returned with two full bags of clothing. Shiv blinked as he sifted through them: dark brown, hardened leather for him, sky-blue silks for Adam.

“You’re not even going to bother to fit us?” the Young Lord asked.

“I did that the moment you walked in,” Uva’s sister said, leaning back.

“Ah,” Adam murmured. “You must be quite skilled.”

“Oh, that’s not skill.” Uva’s sister shook her head. “Perhaps if you hang around longer, I might show you what *skill* is, surfacer.”

She grinned at Adam, then looked at Shiv, lifting an eyebrow. “Hm. Quite the flavorful surfacer you picked. I can see why...”

Uva stepped between them. “Thank you, Fel. We are finished here.”

Shiv placed the bags in his cloak, and Adam tried not to seethe at the convenience on display.

“Oh, running away so soon? Back to your work? Or something else? Maybe *someone* else?” Fel taunted.

“Come on, boys,” Uva said, turning away.

“Someone else it is, then,” Fel—apparently—called after her. “I will be talking about this when we all gather this weekend.”

Uva practically shoved Shiv and Adam out of the store. “I hope you catch the plague,” she called back. “I will see you then.”

After a few more stops for shoes, gloves, and accessories, they found themselves seated on the outside porch of a barbecue restaurant—one that specialized in bugs. Shiv knew some cultures ate fried insects, spiders and all, but he’d never tried them. Georges had said anything could be fine food if the ingredients and taste aligned.

As Shiv stared at the roasted beetle before him, he inhaled its scent, intrigued but unsure. He readied his fork and knife. “Well, let’s find out,” he growled, challenging the beetle with his gaze.

Uva was already eating slices. Adam, meanwhile, hadn’t touched anything.

“Are you sure this is fine?” Adam said, leering at the food.

“I’m eating it, aren’t I?” Uva said.

Adam was still reluctant. “Your stomach might be different from ours.”

Shiv bit into his beetle with a loud crunch. “And this one can’t die,” Adam complained.

“I might actually kill myself if you keep whining,” Shiv said, chewing as he spoke.

“Well, that’s the exact wrong thing to say to me now, isn’t it?” Adam snarled, clenching his teeth.

Shiv paused and glared at Adam. “Oh, what would be the right thing to say? That you’re a coward—that I have no problem eating this, but you—despite attending a fancy academy and being Roland Arrow’s son—can’t?”

Adam’s scowl returned. He gripped his knife like he meant to stab Shiv, his fork poised to carve into his throat, then unleashed his hatred on the beetle.

“Well, that was disappointing,” Shiv said, frowning down at his half-eaten insect. “Meat’s underdone. Seasonings worse than shit and the appetizers might as well be literal shit.”

“What the hells are you talking about? It was great,” Adam said, rubbing his stomach and groaning as he leaned back.

Uva stared between them, and ever so slightly, she chuckled.

At the end of lunch, Adam declared he wanted to scout more of the city himself—to fly free without being held down. Shiv suspected Adam simply didn’t want to be cooped up in a crowd that overwhelmed his Awareness. It made sense. It also made sense when Valor asked Shiv to hand him over to Adam for a while.

The two still didn’t seem to like each other, but after last night’s incident, they shared a mutual purpose: to avoid Shiv and Uva after dark. Shiv handed Adam his keys and the Young Lord departed with Valor, soaring on fiery wings.

Meanwhile, Shiv and Uva made their way to Cradle.

Shiv intended to see a Master Biomancer about their arrangement; Uva was due for a checkup. She was on medical leave for lingering mana strain and recently-treated hemorrhaging. Shiv headed to Dven Falseflesh’s office while Uva visited a general practitioner, promising to find him again afterward. When Shiv asked how she’d know when Dven was free, Uva simply smiled and brushed his mind with her Psychomancy.

In Dven’s office, the automaton learned of his brief encounter with the Sculptor—and found itself impressed.

“So, you made it through the first chapter without stopping. You must have strong tastes—or an absence of morality,” it said.

Shiv shrugged. “I think I’m more interested in the study.”

“That is good,” Dven said. “Let me show you where we keep the specimens.”

“The *specimens*?” Shiv echoed, uncertain.

Moments later, Dven led him down many winding staircases, down to the very bottom of Cradle. There, living beings were placed in warded cages: chimeras—engineered life forms developed for the city’s benefit; experimental specimens—mice, ape-like insects, even Plague-Bearers—feral weavers in minor fungal ecosystems behind reinforced glass; and finally, vampires.

Shiv felt his stomach churn at a host of mind-hollowed vampires strapped in dense manacles, moaning for blood as armored Weaveresses and Umbrals extracted fluid ichor from their hearts.

Dven hummed. “Since you finished the first chapter, you now know somewhat how a vampire’s heart works,” Dven hummed.

“Doesn’t seem right,” Shiv said.

Dven regarded him. “Odd. I did not expect you to have compunctions about this.”

“I don’t have compunctions about killing with my Biomancy or opening myself in battle. This just seems like torture.”

“We are not torturing them.” Dven shook its head. “That is a byproduct of our attempts for discovery.”

“Discovering what?”

“Discovering the plagues they’ve inflicted on us, and their foul techniques. Their Biomancy develops so differently from ours—brutal yet intimate, like a scalpel cutting deeper than most are willing to go.”

“And you think I can Skill-Evolve in that manner?” Shiv asked.

“Yes,” Dven replied without hesitation.

“Well, at least you’re honest,” Shiv said. “But I don’t think I’ll evolve into whatever the Sculptor had. He manipulates blood on a fine level and creates things from it. I mostly just leave wounds, broken bones, and cancer.”

“Whatever the case, you still hold the potential to reach deeper and match them. Attain a parallel skill, at least.” The automaton paused. “Perhaps there is something in the Sculptor’s talk of novel design, but that’s a long-term project.”

It then asked him to demonstrate his new learnings on a mouse. He did—only he used himself instead. He peeled away parts of his skin and, amid immense pain, pointed out vessels and the heart’s function.

Dven studied him with its head tilted. Shiv, too, found himself surprised by the automaton, but mainly because he noticed something about it: his Psychomancy reached only flashes of numbers and electrostatic impulses when he brushed its mind—nothing like the memories he accessed from Uva or Adam.

“You’re willing to open yourself, inflict such pain so casually—yet you refuse to touch the mice,” it said, fascinated.

He looked at the mice, their little eyes and white fur. Shiv shrugged. “I don’t see why they deserve it—or why they’re more expendable than me. Frankly, I’m mostly renewable, and as a Master Biomancer, you could probably prevent my death.”

“Prevent you from dying? Perhaps. But if you mishandle your heart, you could die instantly. I am no Necromancer.”

“That might be to my benefit.”

Dven observed him and craned its Umbral-like visage. “Is that true? So the Umbrals—the survivors from the tunnel incident—weren’t lying. You possess the Dichotomous Soul.”

Shiv considered full honesty, then chose to withhold some truths. “Not exactly, but close enough. Let’s just say death isn’t permanent for me.”

“Wonderful. This is... better than I expected. Well then,” it said, “do continue. Also, you seem to have confused an artery for a vein. You’re also pinching it too hard, the blood flow there is about to...”

A vessel burst. Shiv suffered a stroke while Dven was mid-sentence.

A few moments later, he returned from the dead after draining vitality from a high vampire. He disliked Dven’s methods, but since the vampires were already comatose—and he despised them more than the mice—they proved a better option. Shiv always played the best hand he was dealt.

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

29 (III) City

29 (III)

City

Practical Metabiology > 4

Though Shiv spent a few hours twisting, adjusting, dying, and modifying his own biology, he didn't gain any new Biomancy levels. Despite this, his education shot up substantially, and Dven proved to be a patient and insightful instructor. It advised that, since he had the fortitude, he should finish the book as soon as he could, work through all the chapters, and repeat them until he was truly familiar with the process.

Supposedly, it would give him a great edge in understanding the practical nuances of the body. Shiv looked forward to it—he was even curious what other tortures or horrific torments Ekkihurst and the other vampires might dream up.

Despite his eagerness, Shiv realized another truth: it was a nightmare advancing levels when he couldn't rely on his Unique Feat. *He Who Rises From Ash Eternal* had hyper-accelerated his growth—shortened what should have taken decades for a supposed genius to mere days—but only under the prerequisite that he die.

Many times, he died because his Biomancy wasn't sophisticated enough, because he made a mistake, because he simply wasn't strong enough. Those low-hanging Biomancy-death “fruit” had run dry. No longer could he casually kill himself; failures now had to be more severe, more specific, and—Shiv surmised—actual failures rather than self-intent.

He reflected on Momentum Core, the skill that had truly been necessary. For the longest time, he'd been the underdog in Reflexes—slower in movement, slower to react. Momentum Core let him match someone stronger by draining and redirecting kinetic energy, turning himself into an accelerating calamity. The same principle had to apply for his Biomancy. If all he did was kill himself repeatedly, what real skill would that impart? It wasn't proper experience; it was mere repetition without nuance.

Then, there was the question of his Unique Feat itself. Most Pathbearers lacked Feats and desperately sought them—through great deeds or divine bestowal—often valuing Feats equal to or above their Paths. Shiv wondered if he could improve his Feat or even get more somehow. He shook his head. He wished Valor were there to bear these questions, but the dagger understandably wanted distance—Shiv would be spending dinner and the hours after that with Uva.

Night had fallen by the time he left Cradle. The far-away orbs that served as suns in Weave grew dimmer, and faint peals of music traveled through the city—the Composer playing a slow piece that brought harmony to Shiv's mind. He was increasingly fond of Weave; it had its problems, but here, there was hope he'd never felt on Blackedge.

“Well, that took a while,” Uva said to him telepathically. Shiv turned to find Uva staring at him. She'd changed again, wearing a long, dark, flowing coat with bright, brass buttons.

“You have quite the wardrobe,” he commented.

“You haven’t seen my wardrobe yet,” Uva replied, her voice filled with implication. “I’ll show you later.”

“Oh. I look forward to it,” Shiv said—though he was looking forward to other things more, he admitted.

They called Adam through Uva’s brooch, but the Young Lord surprised them again. *“Ah, you two should enjoy dinner on your own. I’m occupied.”* In the background, they could hear festive noise—cheering, loud music, something about a bride.

“I’m at a wedding,” Adam explained.

Shiv glanced at Uva; she was equally confused. “Why are you at a wedding, Adam?” she asked.

“I might have overheard something between the bride and the groom. There was a misconception, I stopped the groom from running, explained things... and now I’m a guest of honor.”

“I’m a guest of honor, too,” they heard Valor declare in the background. *“I was the one who taught this young fool how to talk. He nearly made things worse.”*

“Silence, dagger,” Adam snapped. *“I was the one who overheard. Don’t steal this moment from me!”*

Both Shiv and Uva snorted simultaneously. *“Was that a snort? Are you two mocking me?”*

“No, Young Lord,” Shiv said. “Just... I’m actually kind of proud of you. You’ve got quite the personality—so long as you’re not near me.”

“Yes, it does wonders when you’re not here,” Adam sneered. *“Imagine that. Ah. I need to go now—they’re asking me to dance. I must show them what I’ve learned at the Capital.”*

Then he was gone, and Shiv bent over with laughter.

“He’s not nearly as bad as you described,” Uva said, struggling to keep her smirk in check.

“I meant what I said,” Shiv replied between chuckles. “He’s much better when he’s not with me.”

Uva's expression softened as she stared at him. "What your family did to his—the ritual—it's not..."

"I know," Shiv interrupted. "But there's something about that ritual. Responsibility—that's what Roland Arrow talked to me about. He said he didn't want me to have a Path. But it wasn't his responsibility. It's mine—because it's all I can do now. So I live well despite what my parents did."

"That is an honorable way of seeing things," Uva said with a smile.

Shiv sensed an opportunity. "You want to know what would be more honorable?"

"What?"

"If you'd let me cook you dinner again. To see if we can top yesterday."

She laughed. "Fine. But today we use a proper kitchen—mine."

Shiv grinned and stared at the summoning crystal—then his grin faltered. "You know, I'm kind of jealous of Adam right now."

"Oh?" Uva cocked her head. "How so? And jealous why?"

"I kind of want his Skill Evolution for Reflexes. With him, he could fly around with burning wings. I'm just a missile and a bomb powered by momentum."

"And why is being a missile and a bomb bad, oh Master Pathbearer?" she teased.

"Technically," Shiv said. "I'm still not in the level threshold yet."

"It is a Skill Evolution. It counts."

"Yeah," Shiv agreed, "but it won't let me carry you and fly across the city. Improvements to be made."

Silver Tongue > 4

She blushed, exactly as he'd hoped.

They ended up flying over the city on the back of a demon. Summoning one was relatively easy: focus intent on the crystal, and its own mana field pulled in a demon from another world. The prisms acted as gates, and as the demon crossed over, it made small talk in their minds. Shiv found them surprisingly conversational—apparently, demons had a deal with the Composer: natural gas mined by Weave in exchange for transportation services across dimensions.

The fluid orbs above the largest spires dimmed to near darkness as a melody of night played.

They steered closer to the Symposium, but then descended almost to the very bottom of Weave. In a secluded patch, they landed in a small courtyard filled with flat-topped, bunker-like houses. Shiv sensed a few organic signatures—most were Umbrals—and spotted a large group training despite the hour.

“This is one of the garrisons,” Uva said. “Many who wish to be Sisters dedicate their time here.”

“Did you grow up here?” Shiv asked.

“A place like this. I moved about as I grew up. I didn’t know my father well—he died early during a raid.”

Shiv grimaced. “Sorry.”

Uva nodded. “He was honorable. That’s what my mother said. I had her until I was fourteen—and then... your vision told you the rest.”

“Yeah,” Shiv said, nodding. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay—at least, I hope it’s okay.” She eyed him dangerously. “You’re not the surfacers who stabbed her, are you?”

“Absolutely not,” Shiv said.

“Good,” she replied, voice cold. “When I find the person, someday I will, I will do things to them—things I don’t understand even now.”

Just then, Shiv found her to be both a little scary and very desirable.

They entered one of the houses, only to find an elevator that descended several floors. At the next stop, a young Umbral boarded—the one whose leg had been broken by the raven automaton and who had laughed on Shiv’s first day here, earning Uva’s reprimand.

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Her eyes swung between Shiv and Uva, mouth dropping. “No!” she breathed to her sister in arms.

Uva pinched the bridge of her nose. “Sister, please.”

"No, you didn't..." the younger Umbral gasped. "Oh, you did! You finally did! I can't believe it!" She practically cheered, bouncing in place.

Uva refused to glance at her. Shiv, despite himself, smirked.

"So," the young Umbral said, bumping Uva with her elbow, "how was he?"

Uva's expression cracked into pure outrage. "Sister Ikki, I am doing everything I can to save you from a black fate."

"Is the black fate you?" Ikki asked.

"The black fate is me," Uva confirmed.

Ikki nodded. "Understood." She took on an impish smile, then leaned toward Shiv. "*How is she?*" she whispered. Uva yanked on Ikki's ear. "Ah! Answer the question! Quick, surfer! Let me hear a final song of delight before she rips it off!"

The elevator dinged, and Uva mercifully let go. Ikki grinned, rubbed her lobe, then—just before Uva stepped off—pushed past her sister and hugged Shiv.

"Thanks," Ikki muttered into his chest, "for saving us." Then she let go and pretended nothing happened.

Shiv chuckled. "It was my pleasure."

Ikki's face dimmed. "It didn't sound like it at the time," she said finally. Shiv winced. That bothered them more than it did him.

As they exited the elevator, Ikki ran down the hall. "Sister Uva, make sure your wards are stable... or don't be too loud. Shiv! Break her wards and rock her world!" she called back.

Uva hissed, "I'm going to kill that girl someday." Shiv simply wrapped an arm around her shoulder and led her onward.

To his satisfaction, most rooms were warded. He still vaguely sensed people with his Biomancy, but they were blunted—as if he'd need much stronger skill to break through. He could still feel crowd sizes, at least. "Seems a lot of people live here," he observed.

"Most Umbrals do," Uva sighed. "We live in communes—sisterhoods. Many together."

"Most Umbrals?" Shiv asked.

"I prefer my solitude," she replied. Then she regarded Shiv. "Or at least I used to."

They reached her home. As lights came on to the sound of her voice, Shiv was surprised by how many mannequins littered the living room—clothes half-finished draped over them, blades and armor scattered everywhere. Uva cleared her throat. “I might have left in a hurry yesterday. Forgot to clean up.”

“I don’t mind,” Shiv said. “I kind of like it—it looks passionate.”

She pressed her lips together, trying not to blush again. Shiv looked around at the low ceiling, veins of nightglass running through the concrete, casting an ethereal glow. Outside, a small fountain bubbled in what passed for her indoor balcony. A small magic flame dancing in the air, revealing a small garden.

Uva brushed her hand down his face, snapping his focus fully onto her—and only her. She smiled. “I’m going to get changed. You just wait here.”

Shiv nodded, words caught in his throat as she turned to pull off her coat and let it fall before him. She wore something of a vest underneath, but...

“Are you trying to provoke me?” he asked, feeling heat rise in his gut.

“Is it working?” she teased, she looked over her shoulder.

“Of course—damn you,” Shiv growled.

She laughed, loosening his self-control further. Then, something else pressed against him—Foreshadowing, he thought. It might be the dagger; he wondered where it was.

Not long after, she returned holding two wine glasses—wearing, *wearing*... Shiv’s focus faltered. She wasn’t wearing very much. “Would you like a drink?” she asked, offering him a glass.

He took it and licked his lips. “To start,” he said.

“And then Seymour cried, right in front of everyone?” Uva asked, her voice pitched high with disbelief and slight drunkenness. She put her hand over her mouth as she giggled. “Oh no, oh no, poor little goblin.”

“Yeah,” Shiv said, laughing at the memory. “I’m always surprised he stayed on. He practically cries every day he’s there, but he never leaves. Guess that makes Seymour a little braver than I thought—and a little stronger too. Crying’s one thing; running’s another.”

Uva let out a breath and leaned against him. “This Georges sounds terrible, but you... you adore him, don’t you?”

He sighed. "Shit personality, terrible anger, smokes like a chimney. And the only one who ever really gave a shit about me." Then he looked at Uva, lying next to him, her face close to his. "Until now."

She traced patterns along his chest with her finger, and his stomach fluttered. "I'm more used to being alone," Uva said. "More focused on my work."

"Alone," Shiv said. "I've been lonely before, but I don't think I've been that alone—even with people hating me, thanks to the kitchen."

In that moment, Shiv realized how much the kitchen had shaped his personality and spared him from social maladjustment. *Guess that's another thing to thank Georges for.*

"I have a lot of things I wanted to thank my mother for," Uva said. "Many things I'll never get to do." She let out a quiet breath. "You know how she was killed?"

"Surfacer dagger?" Shiv asked to confirm.

"Yes..." She looked at him. "I feel that weight pressing against you too—in your mind... Foreshadowing. Do you think you can sense something? Do you want to see it?"

"The dagger?" He held her closer.

"Yes," she said, swallowing. "I can show you."

Though momentarily uneasy, hope billowed inside her, but it carried a knot of hate. She wanted to know. She needed to know who did it. Now, she felt closer than ever to a lead.

She rose off the remarkably sturdy bed and retrieved a box from a nearby cabinet. With the press of her finger, she undid its sealing spell. She placed it on the bed next to him, and he rose to stare at it.

The odd feeling inside him grew—but more than that, he *recognized* the dagger.

"That's a Pattern Twenty-Two."

"What?"

"That's what the Slayers call it. I had one once as well. It was popularized during the Eclipse War..."

And then the vision hit him.

Foreshadowing: It had all gone to hell in an instant. It was just supposed to be a scouting assignment, but they got spotted by one of the Deep Elves. They were so close to finding this Composer for the Auroral Council.

His only comrade in this hell was dead. Run through by a nightglass spear. He killed the Deep Elf that performed the deed in retribution—but the Jump Point they were using was compromised. The spiders were closing in, and the soldier needed to run. Several warding spells slammed down around him, but he couldn't teleport anyway. His comrade was the Jump Mage, and now she wasn't anything at all.

No. He was going to make a run for the Compact gate. They were practically the only Abyssal Faith that would still deal with the Republic after the war. He would have to have them take him prisoner. He would then need to mention Roland Arrow by name.

The Town Lord wasn't going to like this.

Foreshadowing > 13

The vision faded, and Shiv found himself staring at Uva—connected to his mind. She witnessed what he just experienced as well.

"A soldier of the Republic," Shiv muttered, his mind racing. "And he knows Roland Arrow... Wait—this makes no sense. No soldier was supposed to have gone down into the Abyss. Not since the end of the Eclipse War. Only adventurers and Slayers looking for monsters to hunt in the upper parts."

"And he escaped," Uva said, her voice bitter and raw. "Back to the surface, probably. And now... now he is beyond me." Her jaw clenched; every word came out painfully. "Before, it was just bitter unknowing. I... I never learned. I couldn't find out. And now that I know, it hurts even more—because he's in a place beyond my reach. The light-curse..."

"But not beyond mine," Shiv said. Uva blinked in surprise. "I can go back up—I have to go back up. Roland Arrow knows something. He's in charge of Blackedge. The killer knew him as well. If we save the town, I can ask him, and he'll tell me." Shiv sniffed. "One way or another. I'll find out from him. Godsdammit. Adam isn't going to like this. No soldier is supposed to be down here..."

Uva's mouth opened, and she tried to speak—but he leaned in and silenced her in another way. When he pulled away, she let out a breath. "I demand too much of you. You give too much to me."

“No,” he said. “I want this. I want to know what’s happening just as much as you do. So far, most of what the Republic told me is a lie. I want to make things right—for everyone. And Roland owes me—and his son—more than a few answers by this point.”

She stared at him for a few heartbeats—bittersweet pain and affection blooming within. Then her body was against his again, and for a while the dagger was forgotten.

In that time, the world was wonderful.

Uva woke the next morning to a bell’s toll. She groaned as she tried to rise, but Shiv guided her head back down against the pillow. “Sleep,” he whispered into her ear as he got up. She mumbled something, but soon let out a slight snore.

Shiv didn’t do much sleeping. After he folded Uva’s bedframe back into shape, Uva drifted off, and he found his mind racing about all he just learned. He decided to read more of the Odes to occupy his time, and the second chapter proved to be a delight about the nature of the largest organ: *Skin*.

Practical Metabiology > 5

After locating and putting some of his new clothes back on, Shiv got to the peephole and found Sister Ikki waiting there on the other side. Slowly, he opened the door. The young Umbral almost squealed, her face reddening as she regarded him.

“Okay, so now that she isn’t here—”

“Sorry,” Shiv said, folding his arms. “No details. It’s rude to pry on another lady.”

“But it’s so *spicy*, though.” Ikki wasn’t ashamed at all—in fact, she seemed amused. Leaning in closer so her head passed the threshold of Uva’s home, she whispered, “Did you know everyone used to think Sister Uva was an automaton? A robot pretending to be an Umbral—always stone-faced. She’s always like: Ikki, remember your duty! And stop grinning at the prisoner! But then you showed up! And now we can all bully her about something too!”

Shiv felt his grin grow. Then he sensed something else: a surge of mind-mana parting around him and spearing into Ikki’s thoughts.

Ikki squealed “Ah! Sister Uva, no! Sorry! Don’t remind me of those memories—they’re embarrassing!”

Shiv couldn’t help it—he laughed.

“Ikki?” he heard Uva call from her bedroom, still half-asleep. “If you’re here to annoy us, I’ll come out and beat you to death using Shiv like a mace!”

Shiv tried to imagine how that would work. Uva wasn’t small, but... he was quite a bit larger than she was by now. It looked awkward in his mind. Maybe it sounded different in her sleep-addled mind.

“No, I’m not just here to annoy you. I’m... uh...” Ikki glanced around. “The Composer—she’s going to summon you soon. I heard the Weaveresses talking about it, so be ready... and don’t get ambushed when they arrive.”

Shiv blinked. “Wait—show up here? How do they know where we are?”

Ikki stared at him as if he were simple. “Shiv, you’re one of the few surfacers down here. A surfacers the size of a deep-ox. A surfacers running around with a Psychomancer of the Order all over the city... disregarding the Composer seeing everything, do you have any idea how much attention you draw?”

“I don’t think I noticed.” Shiv winced. He really needed to improve his Awareness.

“Well, you’ll find out soon. Vibrations might write a very, very saucy piece about you two—so be ready for that, too.”

Shiv wasn’t sure how he felt about that. *Well, I guess that’s life in the big city after pulling some desperate heroics. Well. At least the Composer won’t pry into my private affairs.* Shiv paused. *She won’t, right?* READ LATEST CHAPTERS AT Novel-Fire.net

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30 (I) Blessing

The Ascendants protect.

The Ascendants foresee.

The Ascendants bless.

As citizen of the Republic, you are to know no gods but the Ascendants, to accept no faith but the righteous faith of the truest light, and to smite all those who dare strike at our sanctity, culture, and harmony.

The world is a wilderness. The System demands bloodshed and strife. To face Integrated Earth alone is to call doom upon yourself. But the Auroral Ascendants bequeath strength to your Path and guidance for the lost. And they do so straining themselves, suffering agony to cross from the divine realm where they stand to the mortal dimension where the old races of old man deal in folly.

But should you rise to meet your struggles, should you walk your Path with dignity and honor, then mayhap the Ascendants will offer you something more: Their favor. Their Blessing. To elevate you as one of their Earthly representatives. To bestow upon you a fragment of the divine.

-Edict of the Auroral Ascendants, Yellowstone Republic

30 (I)

Blessing

“Honored Mothers, Beloved Sisters, Blessed Subjects, lend me your ears,” the Composer began. She plucked melodic notes from a harp today—a grand, gorgeous instrument lined with gems and strings spun from web, glistening like dew kissed by dawn. **“For today we mourn and revel. For today, Weave is safeguarded from the enemy, and our sanctuary is preserved. But at the cost of life and peace.”**

She plucked her first two notes at the same time. The heaviness of grief clashed with the lightness of victory, and twin moods seeped out from her divine music, altering the very atmosphere of her dimension. It was another level of bittersweet that came from her. The kind born of a mother proud of her children while grieving for many lost to bring such glory.

Shiv found himself standing on a large, sprawling balcony that reached into the Symposium. He was joined by the Speaker, Adam, Uva, and all those who participated in the tunnel raid. But they weren't alone in this hallowed place. There were many others as well—Honored Weaveresses and Cherished Sisters who held high positions in Weave. Families of the fallen. The Composer's innermost stronghold was more crowded than Shiv remembered it being, and somehow, the atmosphere fit.

Even Adam, who suffered when enmeshed in large crowds, seemed enchanted by the music.

As the initial assortment came to a close, the Composer sighed. **“And although this is a time to celebrate, it is also a time to rage. To rage against the surface for striking at us again. To rage against New Albion for its ill-ways, its ill-culture, its perverse need to infect and control. Rage!”** She struck her harp hard, and several strings shattered. Shiv felt a divine echo strike out, impacting everyone present with the snap. Yet, despite feeling the immensity of the blow, Shiv felt fortified instead of wounded.

Adam, meanwhile, swallowed. He was wearing a new sky-blue ensemble Uva got for him. “Shiv,” he breathed. “You didn’t tell me she would be so... *immense*.”

“She’s a goddess,” Shiv whispered. The source of this content is novelfire

“Yes, but is there a rule that they must be so... *big*?”

The Composer briefly eyed the Young Lord, and Shiv heard Adam suck in a harsh breath. “Not that there’s anything wrong with being big! Big is impressive! It is imposing!” Shiv clenched his jaw and held back a laugh.

The snapped string from her harp twirled through the air, gliding in a circular path and passing above all those standing on the attendance platforms. Then, as the echoing vibrations of rage passed, a softer series of notes followed, and the Composer’s expression turned somber. **“And mourn. For many lost their lives. And many were even lost to us without us knowing. Their lives not only taken, but their noble service and names besmirched by the enemy.”**

Clamors of anger sounded from the crowds. The air grew taut with anger, and the name of New Albion was invoked like one would a slur.

“But in our anger and sorrow, we must also take in another note. A note of hope. A note of heroism. A note of justice and optimism that defies the relationship norms we had with the surface.”

Suddenly, Shiv felt more and more eyes shift to him and Adam. The Young Lord handled it well, rounding his shoulders and adopting a resolved, stoic demeanor. But Shiv never knew attention like this to be positive. Every cell in his body screamed for him to run, to avoid the mob before it massed and buried him under thrown objects and snarled curses. He could see the expressions of those around him—though some held suspicion in their gazes, many more seemed grateful; some even star-struck.

But old instincts died hard, and Shiv gripped his left hand with his right to stop it from shaking. It wasn’t helping. The tremor was a bit worse. He needed to move. Maybe if he—

“*Calm*,” Uva’s voice echoed through his mind. She channeled the very emotion into him, and he felt his shaking start to dissipate. “*Calm. The Composer is here to honor you. I am here. No one wishes you harm.*”

Shiv replied with a thought of gratitude. “*Just not used to it, I guess.*”

“*Then, today is a new experience.*” He caught a slight smile on Uva’s face as he turned to stare at her. Ikki peered over her shoulder, sporting a huge grin. Shiv snorted a quiet laugh.

“I’ve been having a lot of new experiences.”

As the ceremony continued, the Composer gave a recounting of what had happened. She described the plot to bomb Passage, and to Shiv’s relief, viewed Yunni to be as much a victim as any of the fallen. The blackmailed Umbral’s son had been found and returned to her. And he wasn’t alone. A good fifty Umbral children and five unhatched Weaveress eggs were hidden in a warded chamber used by Aviary.

After a series of successful raids by a few Weaveress Shadow Cells, all the kidnapped children were recovered—and an Aviary Jump Mage was taken alive. Supposedly, they were meant to shuttle all the victims out when Passage fell and spatial magic became uninhibited. How New Albion intended to use the children was a question to the Composer, for the Curse of Light still afflicted every child of the Abyss. But the only one capable of answering this managed a near-impossible escape.

Lady Eileen Harkness. The owl. The woman in white. A Pathbearer now Legendary due to a moment of desperate valor. Shiv grinned at the Composer’s mention of the owl. Despite her cruelty and the threat she posed, she was a very good whetstone for his own progression. And he was getting closer. He couldn’t even wound her at first, but by the end, he made her bleed.

Next time, he would do more than that. It didn’t matter that she was a Legendary Pathbearer now. He was going to break her in battle, he was going to kill her, and then he was going to cook a feast to celebrate her passing from the world.

“I hope I am beside you when the day comes as well,” Uva said, mind twitching with scorn. Unlike him, all she felt against the enemy Psychomancer was a sense of cold hatred. Harkness had been too much for her this time—nearly leaving Uva dead in the struggle. But she intended to turn that around next time. However long it took. She owed it to her Esteemed Sisters and Honored Mothers.

And as the Composer’s notes began to slow, she turned her attention to Shiv and the other heroes of the day. **“I would like to recognize our foreign heroes: Adept Adam. Master Shiv.”**

“Godsdamn you, Shiv,” Adam hissed from the side of his mouth, keeping his expression otherwise controlled. Shiv just smirked. If the Young Lord was being honest, he wasn’t that far from a Master-Tier Skill either, he just needed a bit more time with his Awareness. Just a shame he couldn’t keep dying to improve like Shiv.

The Composer continued, flicking her many humanoid fingers across every string at once. Shiv could feel his soul shake from the sound. **“Though you came to us in unusual and... even initially hostile circumstances...”** She smiled at Adam. The Young Lord began blinking rapidly in response. **“You have proven yourselves gallant beyond words. Gallant beyond song. For it takes truly virtuous souls to ride to**

the aid of a people not your own and give your own blood and more to ensure their safety. I, and all of Weave, owe you a debt of gratitude.”

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A pause followed, and to Shiv’s surprise, it was Adam who bowed first—and he executed the gesture perfectly this time. He did it so promptly and well that all the Umbrals and Weaveresses looked on at him in surprise.

Well, he did go to the capital, Shiv remembered. That probably came with its own mess of rituals and decorum.

Shiv followed Adam’s example, though he did it slower. When they finished, a series of gasps sounded as the Composer returned the gesture to them as well. **“You honor me with your service.”**

“It is only right to repay a hostess for her hospitality,” Adam said, speaking the words as if he had done so countless times before. “And this is a deed well delivered. Should, the divines protect us, this moment come again, I will enter the fray once more, at whatever the cost.”

And now Adam practically sounded like his father. For a moment, Shiv thought he was looking at Roland Arrow. But then the parts of Adam’s mother seeped through, and Shiv found himself turning away.

The Composer laughed. **“You delight me, Adept Adam.”** She looked to Shiv, as if expecting him to say something too, but despite how comfortable Shiv felt in private conversation, he was a bit out of his element when surrounded by so many people. So, he defaulted to who he was.

“The Quest might be done, but my mission isn’t,” Shiv declared. “Lady Harkness is alive. But someday she won’t be. And I’ll make sure of that. For the people she killed, for the lives she hurt, and because the way she used her Psychomancy really pisses me off.”

“May more people bear your determination, Master Shiv.” But the Composer wasn’t done. Finished regarding the surfacers, she turned to look upon the surviving sisters and Weaveresses who emerged from the tunnels. **“And my children. My greatest, most beloved children. How much you have given for this home. How much you honor me.”**

Those behind Adam and Shiv saluted their goddess again. Some even wept openly at the honor bestowed upon them. Uva was filled with warmth—and also control. That was something which grew more and more apparent as Shiv spent time with her. Most

Umbrals were disciplined to some extent—but Uva was driven to master herself, and it took a substantial effort to make her show how she truly felt.

That, or just good cooking.

“As the ceremony concludes and Weave hears this decree, I wish for all of you to keep hatred, grief, joy, and triumph in your heart at once. To hold too strongly to any single note will make the symphony go awry, and to know them all will grant you the fullness of life, and prepare us for the trials ahead. Thus have I, your Composer, played for you this day.”

As she began playing a series of rising notes symbolizing the end of the event, she looked to Shiv and the others as her expression flickered. Shiv caught sight of something he didn’t expect: *Uncertainty*.

Can a goddess even feel uncertain?

“Honored Guests,” the Composer said, halting Shiv and Adam before they could leave. ***“You may stay a while. The ceremony might be over, but I have debts to pay and gifts to offer.”*** She looked to her subjects and smiled brightly. **“Sisters. Mothers. I will seek you out personally to grant my favor soon. Await my summons, and look upon yourselves with pride. Your deeds will be exalted among our people, and your rewards will be plenty. Though I daresay some among your number have already tasted novel delights in the aftermath...”**

Ikki’s grin turned absurd. She looked like she was about to choke. All the other Umbrals and Weaveresses—especially Uva’s team, regarded her with teasing stares. Uva’s left eye twitched. That was all she gave them. She gave Shiv a bit more. *“Help...”*

He winced. He sent her what calm he could, mirroring her support earlier. It seemed to do something for her control, but nothing for her embarrassment.

“They are going to be torturing me with this forever,” Uva groaned.

“Getting prodded is just part of life sometimes,” Shiv said, thinking back to the kitchen. *“For what it’s worth, I’m not embarrassed about how much I like you at all.”*

“Shiv. If you make me blush right now, I will never forgive you.”

Shiv backed off, despite feeling the desire to play with her further.

The inner Symposium emptied out. As Uva and the others departed, the pathway sealed behind them, leaving Shiv, Adam, and Valor with the Composer herself. Alone, Adam drew a deep breath and started talking before the Composer could. “When I made mention of your size, it was in astonishment and reverence. Also, your song—it

was very good, I almost wept several times. Do you know that you look extremely beautiful as well? And the incident at Cradle, you must understand—”

The Composer raised a hand to her mouth and began to giggle girlishly. Adam, not expecting this, flinched. “Shiv. *Shiv!* What’s happening?”

Shiv looked at him and shrugged as she laughed in the background. “She finds you funny, I guess. Good that someone does. Congratulations.”

“Oh, why did I even bother asking you,” the Young Lord spat under his breath.

As the Composer controlled herself, she leaned in closer, her massive face approaching them like a descending mountain. “Oh, Adept Adam. I am very glad that I exercised restraint during your little *mental mishap* at Cradle. And I appreciate Shiv asking me to hold back and allow him to speak with you first. It would have been a shame to deprive us of your company.”

Adam blinked several times, then looked at Shiv. “Wait, you asked her to...”

“What?” Shiv said. “I didn’t want them to kill you. Even if I did think you were an asshole.”

“*Did* think?”

“You’re still an asshole, Adam. Don’t get full of yourself just yet. You’re just... mostly an asshole to me. You’re fine with other people. Hells, the Composer here even finds you charming. Imagine that.”

Adam opened and closed his mouth several times, battling between an outraged comeback and genuine surprise. “I hate you... for possibly being the reason I’m still alive, I hate you for being so aggravating to talk to, and I hate you for your bullshit Path.”

“Well. Feel free to try and kill me, Young Lord.” Shiv grinned. “If you succeed, I might even hug you.”

“Ha! Find some other food to feed your abominable—” Adam trailed off and narrowed his eyes at Shiv. “Although... since you can’t stay dead... and you’re like a brick wall... Hmmm.”

“What? You wanna test some arrows?”

“Maybe. And maybe a few other things as well.”

“*And so it begins,*” Valor hummed. Shiv looked at the dagger, currently hanging off Adam’s belt. “*This shall be good.*”

"This shall be grand!" The Composer said, clapping her hands together. A shockwave formed from the impact. **"Ah!"** she cried out in alarm as a wave of force slammed into both Adam and Shiv. Before the former could be flung off his feet, the latter seized him by the arm and applied his Might of Mass while using Momentum Core to drink in some excess energy.

Core feels half full, Shiv thought. Probably need to go discharge at some point. Don't want to do that anywhere full of people... Shit, it's a great skill, but it's really inconvenient for daily life...

"Thank you," Adam grudgingly said as he readjusted his new jacket.

"Don't mention it. I told you in the tunnels: I'll make sure no one kidnaps you. Still applies now."

The Young Lord eyed him and huffed. But there wasn't so much heat in the act anymore.

"I... I am very sorry," the Composer said, holding her hands over her mouth. "I get excited sometimes."

"Don't worry, we can take it." Shiv paused. "Well, *I* can take it. I'll just have to take Adam's portion, too, since his child-sized body isn't strong enough to resist a strong gust of wind."

Adam growled.

And then the Composer snickered again. "Were you two always like this? It is quite the relationship."

Shiv and Adam shared a look. The Young Lord looked away, no longer interested in the conversation.

Shiv, meanwhile, never had much taste for turning from discomfort. "My parents murdered and sacrificed his mother and unborn sister in a horrific ritual when I was born. That ritual might be the reason why I have my Path. That's the bedrock of our relationship."

"I... uh..." It took a lot to make a goddess seem uncomfortable, but right then, Shiv managed.

"You didn't need to tell her that," Adam said, an undercurrent of true anger in his voice.

"I don't see the point of hiding and pretending about problems," Shiv replied. "She'd probably have found out eventually anyway."

The Young Lord wasn't even looking at him anymore. Shiv grimaced. *Couldn't be helped.* Maybe he should have thought about this a bit more. Considered if Adam wanted this information aired. "Sorry," Shiv said, using his mind magic. *"I'm just used to speaking for myself."*

Adam didn't respond, keeping his eyes on the goddess.

"I'm sorry if I caused this," the Composer said, seeming ashamed. It occurred to Shiv that she seemed very young most of the time. "I didn't mean to bring up such terrible wounds."

"It happened. We face it. We live." Shiv shrugged. "Now. What exactly did you want to talk with us about?"

The Composer let her gaze linger on Adam for a moment longer in concern, then spoke. "I wish to bestow upon the two of you my Blessing."

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- 30 (II) Blessing

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30 (II)

Blessing

Adam grimaced.

The Composer noticed, and her expression fell. She clearly hadn't expected that reaction. "Does that mean something else on the surface?" she asked.

Adam sputtered. "No, it's just... Shiv, why the hells are you so calm about this?"

"Because I don't really know what a Blessing is supposed to do?" Shiv admitted.

Both the goddess and the Young Lord stared at Shiv.

"But... how? You have gods, no?" she asked.

"We have an entire pantheon!" the Young Lord almost snarled. "What do you mean you don't know what a Blessing is supposed to do? Haven't you... attended..."

Now, it was Adam's turn to wilt under Shiv's glare. "Attended what. Finish the sentence."

"The... the sermons at the Auroral Church..." Adam winced.

"I might have. But when a War Priest and his congregation beats you within an inch of your life and leaves you bleeding and whimpering on the steps when you're barely ten, you get the message that you're not wanted by the gods."

"You should have reported that," Adam muttered. "My father—"

"Would've needed to hear it from one of his guards. And they were more likely to continue the beating than to help me."

The Young Lord was now borderline ashamed. "This isn't who we are. When we save Blackedge... there will be changes. My father—"

"Things have already changed," Shiv said, rolling his eyes. "I have a Path now. Composer, would you please explain what a Blessing does to me?"

"A Blessing is an infusion of divinity upon a soul," the Composer began, her fingers nervously fidgeting against her harp. "It allows one to call upon miraculous powers: powers that are beyond even the confines of the System."

"Beyond the confines of the System..." Shiv breathed. "That sounds... potent."

"Yes. And exhausting." The Composer sighed. "In your time here, you must have noticed some faults in my culture, in my city. I have yearned to do more. And even succeeded in some regard due to my unique nature. But the System is absolute. Though we are not fully born within its boundaries, we remain its conduits. Anything we do in these lesser dimensions strains against its might, and to push overmuch against its power often results in dire consequences. Even for the divine."

"That's why you can't just change things?" Shiv asked.

"Partially. The other reason is..." The Composer's lips quivered slightly. "Valor," she said, addressing the Legendary Pathbearer. "Do you find me an incompetent goddess? A blind one?"

"*What?*" Valor said.

Shiv and Adam looked at her in surprise.

"I failed. I did not notice the vermin living in my own web, feasting on my children—wearing their **VERY SKIN!**"

She shouted suddenly in a burst of anger. Shiv stepped in front of Adam again, blunting the effects once more.

The Composer flinched again. “Oh, I’m—”

Shiv held up a hand. “It’s fine, but if you have another moment like that, I need to ask that you contain me, because my Momentum Core’s almost full. I don’t want to go through all this trouble shielding Adam only to leave him a smear on the ground in the end.”

“That... might be merciful right now,” Adam said, wiping away the blood that was pouring out from his ears.

“Ah.” The Composer winced. She quickly played a few notes—melodies that washed through the Young Lord and bathed him with light. Adam’s expression quickly went from pained to relieved to euphoric. “Sorry. Sorry again. I am just... infuriated,” she continued. “About how they can just... break into my home and do this thing right in front of me! And how I failed my children! I was supposed to see! To know! And it took... took blind chance and the goodness of two literal strangers to come upon a Quest I had no knowledge of and halt the crisis.”

A long sigh escaped from the Composer. “I wish I was... wiser. I wish I was older, as old as my enemies. I wish I was stronger. I wish many things when my people pray to me. They think I am more mighty than I actually am. But at times...” She clutched her harp tighter to her chest. “At times, Valor, I feel more lost and fearful than they. I wish I had more resolve. I wish sometimes... I was more like you. You earned your Legend. But godhood is not a thing that is trained into you.”

Shiv considered her words for a moment. He looked at Adam—and thought back to the last day. He remembered all the times he envied others for traits or powers he didn’t possess, like Harkness’s monstrous power and endless abilities, but even just Adam’s ability to fly, and so many small reminders of his own inability before that.

“Neither is becoming a Legend, I fear,” Valor said. *“We are never enough. We can be powerful. Far more than someone else, even, and we can still be the wrong person for what’s needed.”* He paused. *“But you can be enough. You are enough for your people.”*

The Composer grimaced. “Am I? This entire ceremony, it felt like... like I was just playing to the crowd. It was a performance. And they didn’t even question me at all. They just accepted my words... Only my anger and my gratitude and my grief are genuine. And the owl... I should have struck her down.” Shiv opened his mouth to speak, but she continued. “It matters not that she is now a Legend. I am divine. She was in my home. I should have protected it.”

“We all should have done many things, Composer,” Valor said, addressing the goddess. His voice gave the clear impression that he had spoken similar words countless times

before. And that he personally understood them to be true. *“Right now, what you need to do is learn. And improve. A moment like this will return. The System demands we all struggle and war. Your worry and torment at present are good. It shows you the way. But do not drown in it. Without you, there would be no Weaveresses, no weavers sound of mind, no Umbrals free of shackles. Remember this. You have a Path you must walk as well.”*

The Composer’s lip curled slightly. She seemed melancholic, then. “Oh, Valor. If someone had told me four hundred years ago that I would one day be so comforted by your words, I would have laughed and tried to flay them with my lyre.”

“Ah. But things are different between people when they are not enemies, no? Circumstances change. We grow stronger. Or we prove the fool despite all and find ourselves sealed and cast into darkness by our own children. But enough of this for now. Young Master Shiv and Young Adept Adam should be rewarded for service. And I have chosen to take disciples.”

The goddess’s eyes widened. “You have...” She looked at Shiv and nodded. “This one... He definitely has passed your Trial of Death-Descending, but the other...”

“The other will,” Valor said. *“In due time. There is much he needs to learn—they both need to learn. But one has the potential. And the other might just have the mind.”*

Shiv nodded. “I think he just called you stupid, Adam.”

The Young Lord punched Shiv in the arm using a limb constructed from water magic. Shiv refused to budge. “That just means I have potential.”

“The potential to disappoint.”

The Composer eyed the two surfacers as their bantering resumed. A relief passed over her features. “Yes... I... Here. Witness my gratitude, oh—”

“Wait. Hold,” Adam said, his expression flickering. “I... I thank you, and am honored. But I cannot accept this.”

Shiv scowled. “You can’t?”

“Why not?” the Composer asked.

“Because I am a child of the Republic, goddess,” Adam said, decorum returning to him. “Though I understand now, after staying here for some time, that there have been... *misunderstandings* held by my people, and with what we know about the Abyss, I am still sworn to the Ascendants. They are the gods of my people, and my family is favored by Thaen, the Starhawk. To bear the divinity of another god within me is an affront to my gods. I humbly beg to be rewarded another way, if it does not offend.”

“Ah, I see,” the Composer said, her expression turning severe. “I feared there would be a matter such as this...”

“It is not a matter,” Valor scoffed. *“Boy. You can bear Blessings from multiple ‘gods’, provided that you have the strength. It will not break or taint your soul otherwise.”*

“That is not the issue. The issue is the declaration.” Adam’s posture was unyielding. “I am sworn to the Republic. Faults and all. And so I will not turn or spite our protectors. No matter the consequence.”

“Your Auroral Ascendants are not true gods,” Valor practically growled. *“I wished to tell you this in better times, but Thaen? The ‘Starhawk’? I knew of him in ages long past, when he was but a man, when the world was still—”*

“Valor.” The Composer’s statement was heavy but serene. “It is fine. I understand. And can honor this request. I will not force anything on you, Adept Adam. I will not force anything on anyone. That is not the kind of goddess I wish to be.” Shiv looked at the Composer, and read a slight bit of hurt from her features. But she bore it well. “As for another boon... Ah! I have just the thing.”

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Suddenly, the Composer dove, reaching into the silken threads that lined the walls and ground of her home. Every strand she touched gave an utterance of noise, and Adam regarded Shiv in the meantime.

“You will accept her Blessing?” Adam asked.

“Don’t see a reason why I shouldn’t.”

“It will be seen as heresy...”

Shiv sneered. “Oh. So nothing changes for the Omenborn. Adam. Let me make one more thing clear. I’m doing all this for you and the people in Blackedge. Georges. The ones who don’t have it coming. Your father. But the Republic and the Ascendants are nothing to me. Just as I was nothing to them. After this is done... I’m my own man for good. I’ll do what I want and go where I wish.”

The Young Lord studied Shiv for a moment longer. And gave a brief nod of acceptance.

“And here!” the Composer said. She bore a large grin as she held something clutched in her massive fingers. As she brought it closer to Adam, the Young Lord took a step behind the Deathless, hiding his body behind the Diamond-Shelled shield. “Oh, come now, don’t be scared. You’ll love it! I heard the sisters say you are practically a Master with a bow! That they haven’t seen someone shoot so fast, so quick, and so accurately all at once.”

Adam paused behind Shiv, then stepped out with his shoulders back and head held high. He took a step closer to the Composer, like a child drawn forth by praise. “Well. I am not even a Master of the bow yet. Not like my father. But the bow is in my blood. And name. We earned it. Did you know that? It became our name due to the deeds of my ancestors.”

“Well, then... I believe a heroic lineage deserves a Heroic weapon.” She brought a finger close, and Adam gasped. There, like a speck atop the Composer’s fingertip, was a finely made bow. Its body was shaped from nightglass, and it had an entire ensemble of strings, each shivering with mana. Shiv could feel Psychomancy, Biomancy, and Pyromancy fields expanding out. To his astonishment, each of the strings were Adept-Tier as well—nearly ten times the size of his Biomancy’s mana field right now. “Now, each string is infused with an Adept-Tier mana enchantment, so it took some time to assemble this weapon, but I have been told that you are versatile, wise, and have more than a few magical skills—eh, Adept Adam, are you crying?”

“No,” Adam said, coughing hard. “I just... An eyelash got in my eye.”

“And a tear is on your cheek,” Shiv muttered.

“You shut up,” Adam said, pointing at Shiv without looking at him. “Your lies and slander are not needed right now.”

The Composer’s grin turned smug. “It is okay. It flatters me to be so good at gift-giving.”

Adam looked up at her, and she nodded, allowing him to leap from their balcony onto her hand. “I will petition the Auroral Council to recognize you as a god of the Republic if I can,” Adam said, hiding a snuffle as a sneeze. “They will know of your boundless generosity and... and understand the kindness of spiders. I’ll make it illegal to step on them. I promise.”

“Oh, that’s very sweet of you! But we’re... not actually entirely spiders...”

“I don’t care. That’s how much this means to me.”

She smiled down at Adam.

When the Young Lord returned, Shiv saw that the bow was magnificently sculpted as well. It bore the shape of a Weaveress’s limb, and it had a lens on the side. As Adam looked through it, he sputtered. “Farseeing? This bow has *Farseeing?*”

“Well, your father is the Dread Horizon, so I thought...”

“I will build a temple in your honor in the Republic! Even if it takes centuries!”

Now the Composer was almost blushing. “Master Shiv...” she said, moving to him.

“Let’s see the Blessing. But... this won’t allow you to misshape my soul or anything, right?”

The Composer cringed. “That is... beyond both my desire and ability. It also sounds horrible. No, this is just a gift. An infusion of my favor and melody upon you. Here. Listen carefully.”

And she began to play, strumming specific notes on her harp as they pulsed through the world. Then, strings began to snap. One after another they soared through the air, snaking like winged serpents, until they circled around Shiv. Adam took a step back, stepping out from the enclosing strands as they coiled around and finally sank inside the Deathless. But even after the Composer stopped playing, Shiv could hear the melody inside himself—tense, frantic notes that drove his focus to new heights. Discover more novels at

Blessing Gained: 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.

As the song settled inside of Shiv, he called upon it, and it began to play aloud within his being once more. It was like the strings were in his very soul now, bound to him on some fundamental level. He found his attention sharpening with the notes, his mind focusing, pushing aside all sensation, all distraction.

This’ll make shaping spells much easier, Shiv thought. His spells had been broken more than a few times by him getting hit or dying in the middle of combat. This might just resolve that issue. What he found more fascinating was the Resonant Perimeter. It was like a musical web of vibrations mapped over the world. Judging from Adam’s blank expression as he followed Shiv’s gaze, the Deathless was the only one who could see the web. The perimeter seemed to expand as far as the song could travel, and it layered over everything worth noticing. More than that, he felt the movements and positions of various entities in his very soul.

Is this how the Composer perceives the world on some level? No wonder she can see so much. But it didn’t let her sense New Albion’s birds... It’s good, but it can be fooled. And it only extends as far as the song. After a minute of playing, Shiv also felt an extreme exhaustion pulling inside of him.

“You will need to let yourself recover after using a Blessing,” the Composer said. “It grows easier to channel a spark of the divine when you rise through the Tiers across multiple skills. But overchanneling can lead to some... ugly consequences.”

Shiv shrugged. “I’ve died before.”

“But can your soul reform from being shattered?” the Composer asked.

That made him pause. He stopped the song, but the strain still remained. “How long does it take to recover?”

“That also depends on your strength. Be wise and careful, and my song shall reveal to you all dangers, visible or hidden—and give you the vigilance to strike them down.”

“Thanks,” Shiv said, grinning despite the strain he felt inside. “I think I’m going to get a lot of use out of this one.”

“More than you think,” Valor finally said. *“Now. Composer. Our arrangement.”*

“Hm? Oh, yes? The soul fragments. Now, I said before, I only have a few—”

“Give me what you have on hand,” the dagger intoned. *“I need this cage loosened. Otherwise, I will not be able to render proper instruction to my pupils. We will reclaim the pieces that remain in time.”*

The goddess merely nodded, and descended again.

“I don’t know about you,” Adam said, still marveling at his new bow, “but I feel like I got a better deal.”

“We’ll find out soon, won’t we?” Shiv said.

Adam paused. “What are you implying?”

“I don’t imply. You wanna see if that bow can put a hole through me.”

The Young Lord’s eyes lit up with excitement. “I do not want to hear any blame if I slay you, Omenborn.”

“I’ll do my best to leave your limbs intact when I get my hands on you, Young Lord.”

“You will not be striking and beating each other like wild animals,” Valor declared, his voice stern. *“There will be a way to this thing.”*

Adam rolled his eyes. “I told you before, I am Academy-trained, dagger. If there’s anyone who needs instruction—”

“Here they are,” the Composer breathed. As she rose, Shiv felt a surge of *something* in the air. Something that was almost like the warmth of vitality. But it was changed. It was more. It felt almost like how he did when he was a Revenant. “Two vessels containing pieces of your soul. They took a while to fully stabilize, but you may bind with them now.”

She released something into the air. Both Shiv and Adam cocked their heads.

“Is that...” Adam began.

“A skeletal arm and a skull?” Shiv finished. “No... They’re shaped like it, but I can’t sense anything with my Biomancy.”

“That is because they are made from a substance yet unnamed, taken from a Gate connected to a dimension with far higher mana than ours,” Valor said, his voice lined with anticipation.

And then, Shiv felt a flow of power rush through the air. It surged, binding the skeletal arm to the skull and the dagger. Slowly, all three parts came in alignment, with the limb socketing under the skull to clutch the dagger in its hands. Shiv watched as a rippling spell of pure white flashed along the blade, and magical veins crept up, fusing all three vessels into one.

Immediately, a sphere of mana crashed into Shiv. He could feel a new presence now—one of Adept-Tier Pyromancy. Pyromancy that ignited twin fires within the skull’s sockets and let it hold itself aloft by constantly projecting a stream of propulsion from below. *“Ah...”* Valor’s voice rang out, heavy with relief, like a man waking up from a long nightmare. *“Finally. I can see... and move.”* Despite it all, Valor’s tone quickly composed itself, only letting on a muted satisfaction. The skull and arm bowed first to the Composer, and she returned the act with a cheerful smile.

Then, Valor regarded both Shiv and Adam. *“And finally, I lay eyes on you.”* Shiv watched as the magical flames with the skull crackled to a new intensity. *“Shiv... you are... larger than I expected.”*

“It’s kind of a newer development,” Shiv said.

“Hm. Not optimal. Too much strength before technique is learned will create bad habits. And the mass will affect balance. And you. Academy-trained-Adept. Show me what they taught you.”

Adam scowled at Valor. “What do you want me to do?”

“Shoot me, and I will call you my master instead.”

The Young Lord gave Shiv a look and shrugged. “Well. I was intending to try out this new bow on the Omenborn but—”

Valor’s eyes flashed. A burst of blinding brightness made both Shiv and Adam cry out. As the blindness cleared from Shiv’s eyes, he saw Valor clenching the strings of Adam’s new bow, with a dozen elemental arrows nocked and aimed at the Young Lord.

Adam blinked and growled with anger. “That—you—”

“Ambushed you? Blinded you with a trick and surprised you? What do you think this is? A duel? A sanctioned match? Who do you think I am? Would you expect mercy from someone who cares nothing for you? From the raven who broke your limbs and took you as a slave from your home, even with that great armor of yours?”

The Young Lord clenched his teeth. The Composer looked on at the scene with a hint of distaste.

Valor slowly let the strings go slack. *“No. Your problem is simple. You have lived a life that was too kind to you in practice and discipline. And that armor has made you careless. There are habits I must break in you. And a strength I must build. And we will do this in the dark. As I did when I was but a boy.”*

Valor dropped the bow back on Adam and turned to face the Composer. *“Exalted Composer. I have one final request. Tell us where the Compact gate is. I suspect it will take some training for them to be ready to cross. We will need to lay eyes on it in the wilderness in the meantime. And they must be honed in a place that is... less protective. Shiv?”*

“Yeah, Valor?” Shiv said.

“Are you ready to die?”

Shiv shrugged. “Sure. But I won’t make it easy if you’re going to try to kill me.”

Valor chuckled amiably. *“Good. Good. Go get what you need. Let us take a walk. And maybe... maybe bring the Psychomancer with you. She has experience of the wilderness beyond this dimension, but nothing of her enemy’s true nature. This will be good for her as well.”*

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