

Deathless 226

Chapter 226 (I) Resolved

To all aspiring Pathbearers reading my words, I beg one thing of you and one thing alone: If you seek to embark on the quest of revenge, kill your enemies. Kill them. Kill every single one of them, without hesitation, without mercy, and if there are potential dangers, deal with them as well.

Some of you are uncomfortable with the idea of slaying children. That is good. Having a conscience will prevent you from making too many unnecessary enemies, but there are times when you will understand the treachery of mercy.

Warfare and bloodshed are not neat things. For every vile person you slay, there is someone that loves them, someone that might find themselves corrupted by the wounds they bear and the misery you inflicted. They may well come for you, and you might find yourself in a battle against someone you do not wish to slay. A grieving mother or a vengeful child is very different from a murderer or an oathbreaker, but even so, they have made their choice, and if you hesitate to make yours, then understand you may die a most bitter death.

Choosing to hesitate is an action. Doing nothing is an action. Being a Pathbearer is about committing to proper action. It is about facing the pain that comes with every action, and accepting that all things, even good intentions, may have black consequences.

And so, kill your enemies. I am not telling you to necessarily silence the children. I am telling you, however, that you must be prepared to fight another war if you don't find a way to conclude the one right in front of you.

My recommendation? Make the deaths quiet. Make the deaths sudden. Give them no trace to follow. No hint that it was your hand that performed the deed. Without a figure to direct their rage toward, the loss will become a scar in time, and they will live on, unburdened by the need for revenge.

Ignorance is a blessing. Give it freely.

But above all, decide. Decide. Decide. Or you will be decided upon.

-Valor Thann

226 (I)

Resolved

Clarissa Winters stared at Legend-Headmaster Hades Hymn as he loudly slurped his tea without any hint of grace.

Nearby, the flames of his fireplace crackled. It seemed homely enough, but behind the faint glints of Pyromancy was something, no, somewhere else, entirely. She could feel it, the billowing waves of Dimensionality connecting this place to not merely another place, but another realm, somewhere that didn't fully belong to the System's purview.

She wasn't a proper Seeker herself, but in the time she'd been alive, she had encountered those who dabbled in the eldritch. For a while, she was even raised by a Witch Unchained—a woman untethered from the System.

Clarissa had enjoyed a happy life during that time. She allowed herself to indulge in the fantasy that she, too, might become a Witch Unchained. But as with all things, the sweet days soured on the vine as her father's assassins first came for her.

That night, her adopted mother died protecting her, drawing too much on power not meant for mortal flesh. And as she turned into a grotesque monstrosity, imbued with the nature of an outsider but not the mind to contend with the mutations, the assassins died, and Clarissa was forced to administer the Heartless Mercy.

In the aftermath, she slowly made her way back to the capital. After the giants, after the wilderness, after the witch, and after a brief stay with a few slave runners, she'd had enough. She returned here to her so-called home to see grievances settled and to find the proper end or beginning of her life.

What she didn't expect, however, was to be recruited into Phoenix Academy by a chance encounter with an instructor out in the wilderness. She aided an ambushed caravan against raiding Jotuns, and as she tore apart her mother's people, shredding them in flesh and soul, ripping the frost that kept them alive from their bodies, she found herself regarded not as a half-bred monster or a shame to be covered up, but rather a hero by a recruiter.

And with that fortune came a place at the University. A place that was now disfigured by flame and ill intent.

Over forty other students had died, and it was her fault. Clarissa had closed her heart to pain and relationships many moons ago. But even so, there was a throbbing there that she struggled to endure. It was her fault. She should have gone for her father directly. Even if it had resulted in her death, she could have tried to expose him. She could have finally wounded him in some way, no matter how small.

Hymn interrupted her brooding by dumping the remaining dregs of his tea down his throat with a particularly loud slurp. He smacked his lips and loudly sighed with satisfaction. "You sure you don't want a cup?"

Clarissa just stared at him. The Legend-Headmaster acted in a manner unbefitting of his Tier or position. He didn't seem to care about much. There was a looseness to him that few possessed.

When he came for her, he dismissed his militia members, not through verbal orders, but simply teleporting them away, back to their stations. And then he teleported her as well. After that, they came to his office, where he offered her some snacks. And when she declined, he began the process of fixing himself some tea instead.

He explained the history of the tea leaves he had. Taken from another world, they were called Zulip leaves, and supposedly, consuming them regularly induced a permanent sense of calmness in someone's mind. If that was true was hard to tell, for the Headmaster seemed to be unburdened by all things, even when he explained how many assassins he killed after extracting her. Apparently, he'd noticed a good number of her father's reserve Interrogators coming for her, and he'd dispatched them quietly and subtly.

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However, he wasn't the only one guarding her from death.

"So, are you going to tell me about your mysterious guardian?" He grinned at her, and his cheekbones grew ever more pronounced as he smiled. His eyes glowed, one purple, the other translucent, as his overwhelming mana threatened to spill over from his body.

"My what?" Clarissa said, soundly confused.

"You have a mysterious guardian, girl," the headmaster declared with a roll of his eyes. "Come now, you don't need to pretend with me. I glimpsed him too. He did pretty good work. He managed to intercept a Chronomancer. I wouldn't have got there in time to spare you from that fate. You would have been dead without him."

Clarissa's heart skipped a beat.

"Yes, another one of your father's, the assassin. He managed to steal the attire of one of my academy militia. He was awfully brazen, but good at timing. He went for you when the temporal wards crossed over him. Unfortunately, he wasn't the only Chronomancer on campus—and was the lesser Chronomancer at that. Your friend got to him, and your friend decided to conduct a bit of an interrogation of his own before killing your would-be murderer. Very kind of him, wouldn't you agree?"

Clarissa blinked. She had no idea who Headmaster Hymn was talking about. She hadn't noticed any assassins, but she did feel something earlier, something coming from behind her. Was that the Chronomancer? she thought to herself. When her expression shifted, she remembered the boy, the one that supposedly saved her from the fire.

Her memory was a mess, littered with broken parts. Panic left her recollections scattered, but she distinctly recalled fleeing from someone who claimed to be her half-brother, someone who wielded fire and ash on a level she couldn't contend with. Her Cryomancy barely kept her alive, and desperate to survive, she retreated from her dorm room and fled to the basement. He followed thereafter, and when she managed to lose him in the chaos, he set the entire dorm on fire, twisting the magic infused in the mithril supports to further his rampage.

And then somewhere in that mess was that boy, the one who had the physical deformity...

"There was someone who found me in the fire..." she breathed.

"Ah, yes, our miraculous Marcus Unblood," Hymn said, lifting his hands high as if in mock prayer to the Ascendants. "Did you know that he mysteriously resurrected about a few hours ago?"

"What? He was dead?"

"Oh, supposedly near-dead," Hymn corrected. "It's really quite the thing. Apparently, the Jotun raiders who attacked him used a specific kind of poison meant to steal one's heart. Why they used that specific kind of poison on him when a spear to the throat works just fine on a mere Adept? Who knows? He is rather formidable for someone his age, but ultimately inconsequential to a giant from the north. Adepts litter the ground everywhere, all over this world, and so many others."

Clarissa didn't fully know what the Headmaster was getting at, but he clearly shared her suspicions about this Marcus Unblood.

Hymn sighed and rapped his desk with his finger. "Anyway, you're a very lucky girl."

"Am I?" Clarissa replied. It was hard to keep the bitterness out of her voice. "I think I'm just a good survivor."

"No, no." Headmaster Hymn shook his head. "You are definitely very lucky. There are things you can survive through grit and skill, and things that will see you dead despite them. What you experienced today should have seen you dead, but it seems that the System, or maybe pure fortune, intervened on your behalf. You have a new lease on life, unlike many of my students."

The Headmaster's voice grew low toward the end, and he let out a breath. "Unfortunate. So many promising pupils, well, at least some of them would have been promising pupils, cut down before their prime. It's going to be very annoying to placate those parents. All those years raising a child, making happy memories, lost in an instant because some maniac couldn't control themselves. Why?"

Clarissa pressed her lips together. She didn't know what the Headmaster wanted her to say, but thankfully, there was a sudden knock on the door. The Headmaster was momentarily distracted. He blinked three times in quick succession, and his Divination-infused eye grew brighter than the other.

"I thought I told them not to disturb me." Hymn tutted. "I tell you, girl, it's very hard to find proper help these days, and obedient help, that's even rarer. If you can find someone who can listen to and follow your instructions, do everything you can to keep them alive. You may never encounter someone like that again in your life otherwise."

Hymn rose from his chair. He sauntered across the room, passing by the mithril mantelpiece surrounding his fireplace. As Clarissa followed him, she found her gaze settled on the massive portrait hanging above his fireplace. There, an abstractly-stylized creature that resembled a massive palm littered with bright crimson eyes loomed. Somehow, the half-giant couldn't shake the feeling that she was being watched. When she looked away, the feeling faded, but her anxiety remained.

The large oak doors were flung open as Hymn flung both handles back with a dramatic flourish and leaned out to speak with whoever was interrupting them.

"Master Mary, I must say, as my secretary, following instructions is an essential— What?" His words became a series of whispers. Clarissa couldn't fully make out what they were saying, but she heard things about some kind of lord and how they were on campus begging, something about someone crying.

Clarissa got up and crept closer to the door, trying to eavesdrop on the conversation. She flinched back; the headmaster was suddenly facing her. She hadn't even seen a hint of movement.

Before she could open her mouth, he reached out and took her by the arm.

"Well, this has been a surprising turn of events," he muttered. He pulled her along as if she were a dog on a leash, and the girl was utterly unprepared for this sudden shift in momentum. As he dragged her out of his office, she found herself stumbling past the pale-faced secretary and into the following chamber, where a small army of campus militia and Prismatic Guardsmen were on standby.

"Sergeant Headmaster," a towering automaton with a cannon-shaped face greeted. "I am Master-Captain Vulcain. I must inform you of an incident happening at the base of your tower, the circumstances of which are most peculiar..."

"Well, good," Hymn said. "I do so enjoy peculiar circumstances. Mysteries are my favorite delight in life." He spun on his heel and backpedaled out of his office, pushing through the gathering of guards as if they weren't there. "Well, come along, girl. I don't think you want to miss this."

"What is even happening?" Clarissa asked. Her heart was beating faster and faster. Something was upon her. She could feel it. "What do I need to see?"

"Well, I think you're about to meet your father. Or so the Hero-Inquisitor claims." The Headmaster wiggled his thin eyebrows. "Alternatively, Hero-Inquisitor Simeon DeGraille has suffered a psychotic break, the extent of which is unprecedented on Academy Grounds, and is now trying to take responsibility for a fire he didn't actually set. Quite a stressful job, that, working in the Inquisition. He's out here screaming that he deserves to be punished. What a breakdown." Hymn smiled at her. "Let's go out and see what all the fuss is about, eh?"

Clarissa's mouth fell open. "He... what?"

Chapter 226 (II) Resolved

"My name is Hero-Inquisitor Simeon DeGraille! My bastard daughter... She lives within the Dragon Dorm... My fool of a son, he went there to slay her, to retain my favor! Children were burned! Students died because of my folly, my family's actions! This is all my fault, it was my doing, mine! I must be punished, I must be punished, please! Please, someone, punish me!"

The patriarch of House DeGraille and Hero-Inquisitor of the Yellowstone Republic wailed those words over and over again, right in front of the Headmaster's tower. The structure was a tall spire made from focus crystal, mithril, steel, and a series of exposed gears running along its length, making it appear like someone had forgotten to properly cover up a vast clockwork mechanism. Every few seconds, the gears would tick and clack, causing a massive pendulum set into the front of the tower to swing from side to side, while the hands of the clock face just below its peak spun in rhythmic beats. Why was it built like that and for what purpose? Shiv couldn't decipher. But it had a novel look about it. It was also surprisingly well hidden, nested around a concentric layer of libraries, laboratories, lecture halls, and a gymnasium.

Before the tower was a lovely yellow brick path flanked by blossoming black-petaled flowers Shiv didn't recognize. Kneeling upon the yellow path were two individuals. The first was the aforementioned Simeon DeGraille. He was stripped down to his underwear, snot and tears ran down his face, and he was on his knees begging for someone to deliver righteous retribution upon his deserving form.

Not far away, his middle son, Alec DeGraille, stumbled around making barely coherent noises. He walked in circles while holding himself, and every now and again, he would scream about how he "wouldn't do it again." Above that, though, he screamed of a monster, one that he couldn't recall, but one that he was sure was nearby.

A gathering of a few hundred students looked on in morbid fascination as the two nobles debased themselves. A certain Marcus Unblood stood among their number, and though he pretended to be as flabbergasted as his fellows at the academy, inside, it was all he could do to stop himself from scowling.

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The younger DeGraille wasn't wrong. The monster was nearby, and he was making sure this farce was destined for a proper end. The DeGrailles were fools. The younger for performing such a reckless and despicable attack on Phoenix Academy, and the elder for building a hidden teleportation anchor so close to his study. Shiv had suffered through lengthy dialogue with both father and son, and in their short time together, learned to despise the two DeGrailles.

Apparently, the dorm-burning wasn't the only atrocity committed by the Young Lord. He also had a habit of torching escorts. A few prostitutes from a brothel had been burned to death when the Young Lord got carried away, and it had taken considerable influence on the Hero-Inquisitor's part to make sure the event was covered up.

Simeon's story was more of a tragedy at first. During his younger years, he was apparently captured by the Jotun, and due to the prowess he displayed and how many giants it took to take him alive, they decided to honor him by stealing some of his blood and torturing him into compliance. From his blood, a daughter was molded into being by one of the giant's crones. How this all worked was beyond the elder DeGraille as well. But at some point, when the giants dropped their guard, he managed to escape, and he stole away his bastard half-daughter as well.

At the start, he was simply moving on reflex. He didn't know why he took her. When he managed to get out of Jotun territory, he considered murdering her. But due to a mix of trauma and a lack of viciousness, he simply abandoned her near a border village. But she never truly left his thoughts, and years later, as he achieved the position of Hero-Inquisitor, he began receiving more and more reports that a certain white-skinned girl was spotted near the wilderness. Apparently, the people he'd left her with had been raided by the Jotun and slain. The girl had been taken back by her mother's people, and that was when the Hero-Inquisitor began making plans to see his unwanted daughter dead.

He sent a number of assassins after her, but many of them died due to unlucky circumstances. At some point, she broke free of the Jotun and vanished for a while. Then she was spotted near some hermit woman's cabin, and the hunt was back on thereafter. He wasn't certain how Clarissa ended up at Phoenix Academy, only that she arrived under the same conditions that applied to Marcus Unblood. The Wild Card Program granted her a place here, but it also placed a target on the back of her head.

At this point, Shiv wondered why the girl came to the Capitol at all. She must have known that someone was trying to kill her, and if she survived her father's previous assassins, she probably had a good guess as to whom. Despite that, she still came to the Academy. She still attended as a student, and as such, she was meant to be silenced quietly by one of her father's more established assassins.

Unfortunately, his middle son found out, and thinking this was a good opportunity to right his recent shame, he came to the academy in the dead of night, seeking to burn the half-giant girl to death in her bed.

Things went awry from there. Her Cryomancy, though not on par with her half-brother's Pyromancy, proved enough to give her a stay of immediate execution, and she fled. The resulting chase between the two of them caused the Dragon Dorm to be burned down. The Young Lord had corroborated that information with a bit more prompting from Helix, involving insects being hatched within his arteries, among other things.

And that brought everything back to the present, with both DeGrailles shouting their misdeeds for all to hear. There were signed confessions on wooden boards swinging from their necks like necklaces as well. The only thing missing from them was specific memories, namely, the memories that had anything to do with Shiv, Adam, or the others that had interrogated them.

It was as Shiv had said, he wasn't that skilled of a Psychomancer, but when you could absolutely shred someone's Magical Resistance, they had no means of holding you back from ripping into their minds. The process was messy and arduous, but Shiv had managed, though it was not nearly as clean as a more skilled mage could have achieved. Still, he destroyed mostly just the bits of memory connected to his identity, and now justice would see itself done in one fashion or the other.

Well, I suppose the Inquisition could come and pick both the DeGrailles up, Shiv thought to himself. If they do that, and they try to put their minds back together with an in-house Psychomancer, I'll just have to keep a close eye on them.

He'd imprinted the Elder DeGraille with a temporal echo, and so, even if the Inquisition hid the Hero-Inquisitor away, Shiv would be able to reach him.

As the scene played on, the front doors to the Headmaster's tower were flung wide open, and Hades Hymn strode out with the pale-skinned girl in tow. Clarissa looked like a rabbit caught in a trap. Her eyes were wide, and she reeked of fear.

While Hymn's strides were long and carefree, she practically stumbled toward her father. The Headmaster looked around, and, for a brief moment, his gaze fell on Shiv. The Deathless felt the pinprick of something brush against his mind, but just as soon as it came, it faded. Even so, his instincts told him to mind Hades Hymn. The Headmaster probably knew a lot more than he let on. As long as you don't go digging into my identity, we won't have a problem, Shiv thought to himself. Mind yourself, Hymn.

"Hero-Inquisitor DeGraille," Hymn said, clapping his hands together.

He walked over to the kneeling inquisitor and tried to pull him back to his feet, but Simeon DeGraille simply let out a shriek and flinched away. "Don't touch—no, no, he's watching, he's watching, he wants me to be punished, punish me please, don't let him take me again, don't let him take me again!"

"Let who take you again?" the headmaster asked evenly, without any hint of confusion or suspicion, and that just made Shiv narrow his eyes some more.

Yeah, definitely knows a lot more than he lets on.

"Monster, monster, monster, monster!" Simeon repeated, and soon his son began to weep as well. Both the DeGrailles were in a wretched state, and Shiv could practically hear the howling laughter coming from the orcs hidden within his cape.

"You know, for a couple of torturers, they really didn't stand up to being tortured very good," Mortar chocked out between giggles.

"And here you were worried that the Insul was getting boring," Whisper commented snidely.

At this point, Simeon's eyes fell on his unwanted daughter, and he let out a ragged yell as he crawled toward her on all fours. She backed away in fright, but he scrambled like a dog with its eyes locked on a treat. He threw himself at her feet and cried aloud, "I miss—I miss—I deserve this! I did it. I sent all those people after you. I sent them. I didn't want you. I should have killed you. It was not—All those years ago, I should have killed you when I first held you. But I couldn't. I couldn't. And now I suffer. And now I suffer. And now I suffer!"

The girl was beginning to hyperventilate. Her Cryomancy billowed around her. But it was Hymn that intervened. He reached out and teleported the broken Hero-Inquisitor away with a wink. A second later, he snapped his finger. And the younger DeGraille vanished as well.

He looked down at Clarissa. "So, was that a madman or your father?"

She stared up at him, wide-eyed, with her mouth hanging open. "I... I..." She looked at the gathered students, and she almost caught sight of Shiv. But he ducked behind a few tall automata, hiding his presence.

"I don't know," she said. Her voice was barely higher than a whisper. "I don't think I have a father."

"Well, then this was all an unfortunate incident," the Headmaster declared. "I think we will leave this to the guard. Come along, Clarissa."

He patted her on the back and guided her back into the tower. At this point, the Prismatic Guard appeared—and Hymn casually teleported them away with a gesture as well, ignoring their protest. "We will finish our interview post-haste. But in light of what we have discovered, I think we can eliminate you or anyone associated with you as perpetrators of this vile act."

And Shiv realized what the Headmaster was doing. He was effectively severing the girl from the Hero-Inquisitor. He gave her a choice to reveal their connection or to hide herself entirely. And right now, she chose to hide. Well, perhaps that was all she could decide. The shock was too much, and Shiv thought it a bit cruel on Hymn's part to expose her to this directly. But then again, Hymn didn't seem to be the

type to give much of a shit about anything. And aside from that, this made the entire affair a settled matter.

All that starts shit ends as... well, mostly shit still, Shiv thought. Well, at least we put an end to that for now. Adam will have to keep an eye on the rest of the family, but there should be nothing that traces back to us. Helix scrubbed our biological remains, and I made sure not to break anything inside his study. Adam snatched that weird Divination box on his table as well, so there can't be anything that gives us away.

With that, Shiv turned and slipped through the crowd. The surrounding students were loudly murmuring about what had just transpired, unaware that the perpetrator behind the capture and breaking of both the DeGrailles was walking away from them.

As Shiv approached the first ringed building surrounding the Headmaster's clocktower, a familiar presence settled beside him.

"Quite productive," Irons commented dryly.

Shiv bade himself not to flinch and simply smiled wryly. He couldn't tell if the captain was pleased or not. So he just shrugged in return. "I don't really ask to be involved in these problems, but they just seem to come my way. I only make sure they don't turn into lasting problems."

"And you are certain that this won't be a lasting problem?" Irons grunted.

The Deathless shook his head. "Yeah, pretty certain. Not much linking him back to me or anyone else I know. And if he tries to do anything else, well, sometimes life gets too much for a Pathbearer. And being

a Hero-Inquisitor exposes you to a lot of nasty shit, doesn't it?" He made eye contact with the captain. And, for the first time, he detected a hint of unease on the other Pathbearer's face.

Irons looked away first, and he nodded. "I see. Do you know why it happened? The fire."

"Adam didn't tell you?" Shiv asked.

"He gave me a rundown. But he told me to ask you if I want to hear the entire story."

"Well, we'll explain it to you sometime when we all get together. But you'll be either pleased or pissed to find out it has nothing to do with how favored I am." A humorless laugh escaped Shiv. "I think I stumbled fist-first into someone else's story. You saw that pale-skinned girl there, the one with the Headmaster?"

"The half-giant?"

Shiv did a double-take. "Does everyone know what a half-Jotun is?"

"Unlikely," the captain replied. "I, however, have encountered the unformed of the shattered court. They are not regarded as full giants, more like shock troops. It is most common for a Jotun to mingle their essence with that of a monster. For them to sculpt a child in the image of an enemy Pathbearer, especially a human, is an insult and a form of respect in equal measure."

And that got Shiv thinking about Sullain's special project: the Undying Tarrasque that wore Shiv's face. "Great. Felling hate the frost giants already. I still don't fully get the girl's deal, if she's evil at all, but it seems like Simeon was just a victim at the start that decided to turn into a bit more of a bastard when he went about keeping his position and hiding his shame."

"So, he burned down the dorm?" Irons asked in a hushed tone.

"Ha, no, that was his idiot middle child, who's also a prostitute burner."

"A prostitute burner?" Irons said, surprised. "Then, wait, the brothel... I know something about this."

"Yeah, so you know what kind of freaks we're dealing with," Shiv said with a derisive scoff. "Anyway, he's the one who decided to take a direct approach. By direct approach, I mean that he tried jumping his own half-sister in the middle of the night inside her room. And when he screwed up trying to kill her, and she managed to get away, he tapped into the mana surrounding the structure. You know the rest."

Irons grimaced at that. But the expression was a fleeting one. "I see," he said again. "And so, all this was for the sake of conspiracy. A shameful birth."

"Yeah, seems to be. It really is kind of... underwhelming that over 40 kids had to die for that. But who the hells knows what's going on in the minds of the nobility? Anyway, I've had enough of this shit. I need to get my first class in order."

Irons grunted, rolling with Shiv's mood without suffering any whiplash. "What is your first class?"

"A Culinary elective. I'm going to be volunteering at a restaurant somewhere across the city. After that, I'm going to move on and take part in my first medical course. Biomancy-related, but it's mostly about helping people who are sick and injured. I might take up a more basic Biomancy course if I still need the additional support, but I think I want to move at a higher pace than most students. Wanna be hands-on."

"I see. You're taking Van Erren's Medic 301 course, then. You're going to be serving as an assistant resident. Respectable."

"Something like that. Got a taste for it earlier during the volunteering session right outside the Dragon Dorm."

"I heard," Irons replied. "Some of the militia spoke highly of you."

"And by some, do you mean Maxime Van Stormhalt?" Shiv asked.

Irons grunted. "She's also in the Tac-Strat class."

"Ah," the Deathless said flatly. He didn't know how he felt about being in such close proximity to a member of House Stormhalt. But from what he'd gleaned earlier, Maxime didn't sound fully overjoyed about her family either.

"Be mindful about the impression you leave," Irons said.

"Trying not to seem like too much of a bastard," Shiv said.

"That's not what I'm worried about," Irons replied. "I'm worried about how memorable you become." He briefly leveled a stare at Shiv. "Remember, Marcus Unblood is dead. You are wearing his skin. You bear his name. But there will come a time when you have to shed him. He is ephemeral. And there is something sacred in that. Be mindful of what you do. Be mindful when using him as your facade."

And with that, the captain walked away, leaving Shiv alone with his thoughts on the way to his first course.

Chapter 227 (I) Borrow

All Pathbearers should expand their horizons, try different things every day, volunteer, and experience life in someone else's shoes. You are more than your Path; you are more than your skills. Just because you're a Vanguard doesn't stop you from obtaining a Cooking skill, a Sewing skill, or even Medical skills, longer though than others bearing different Paths doing so may take.

And for those of you who think that diversifying your knowledge and spending your time learning new things will diminish your dedicated skills, I ask of you, are you truly training every single hour of the day to advance your Sword Proficiency, your Shield Proficiency, your Tactics, your Awareness? How often have you leveled in the past month?

After a certain point, the usual amount of strain isn't enough. So many bottlenecks take too long to break through. What you need, then, is something novel, something refreshing. Advancing your Path requires shocks to your mind-body connection, and it is in novelty that you nourish the mind. There is only so much you can push yourself in training before you get diminishing returns from normalcy.

This is not a scattering of your efforts, but a seeding of them. Maybe you will find yourself an enjoyer of a certain sport, and though you're not a Rider as a Shadow, you can still find satisfaction racing your fellow amateurs on the back of a griffin. And who knows, perhaps the creature's sheer speed might fill you with inspiration, give you ideas on how to develop your Reflexes.

So I tell you again, students, give yourself to the world and drink from it. Drink deep from the world's wells and find yourself enriched beyond your peers, who are too scared to step past the walls they've made for themselves.

Let yourself be surprised by the Pathbearer you will become. Don't succumb to rigidity, for the hardest things are sometimes the most brittle things as well.

-Hero-Biomancer Javelina Van Erren

227 (I)

Borrow

With the DeGraille distraction handled, Shiv moved on with the rest of his day. A great deal had happened in a few short hours, but now the System saw fit to give him a brief reprieve, and he was going to take full advantage of it.

The first stop he made was at the library. There were over twelve grand libraries on campus, and all of them had an assortment of tomes, both mundane and magical. For Shiv's first course, however, he wasn't going to get a textbook, but a cookbook, one filled with recipes, titled A Traveler's Guide to Wondrous Flavors and Wonderful Places. Functionally, it was written like a travelogue, but instead of

introducing different locales across Integrated Earth, it was all about their local cuisine, or so the book claimed.

The other book he intended to check out was a magical tome called the Essentials of Meta-Anatomy and Gene Crafting. Supposedly, it was the most common Biomancy text in the Republic, but Helix described it as "Sub-Vampire drivel that gives eye cancer to the blind by way of gouging."

This motivated Shiv to obtain the book even more.

And thus, Shiv went to the Pentax Hold Library to retrieve his books. The Pentax Hold was a mobile tower that traveled across campus. It was mainly known as the place where the on-campus magi tested new and experimental spells in special containment laboratories. One could also borrow restricted texts or tomes if they had the proper permission from their instructors. Why most of the on-campus cooking materials were assigned to the Pentax Hold as well was beyond Shiv, but he suspected it had something to do with how most miscellaneous courses were listed as a sub-magic category as well.

That annoyed Shiv, and he wasn't the only one. He overheard more than a few students complaining, stating that Phoenix Academy didn't treat their dedicated field of study seriously, considering they were regarded as side notes to the greater magical lores. As with all things, the System favored strife and practical demonstrations of power. Magic, to some extent, was a bit more like engineering than poetry. Yes, there was an artistic component to it, but ultimately, your spells had an effect; they needed to serve some tangible end.

"And cooking really doesn't matter that much," a passing automaton commented.

Phoenix Academy would never know how much strength it took Shiv to control himself.

As he went to the Pentax Hold, he found himself passing by Miriam Hall once more. The streets of the campus were flooded with students today, even this early in the morning. The sun hadn't been out for an hour, and already, a small army of pupils dressed in their robes and carrying heavy tomes was marching about. Some rushed desperately to reach their next class on time. Others gathered in congregations, debating lightly about their theories and achievements.

He found himself moving with the massive caravan headed for the Pentax Hold. He stood among countless dedicated magi, looking over the pointed hats most preferred to wear. Thankfully, most of them were so absorbed in their own affairs that they didn't even notice him, but he made a note to diversify his wardrobe at Phoenix Academy when he could. He thought hard about what Irons had said about leaving an impression. Blending in would be useful, especially with Hymn's eye on him already.

Pentax Hold was a magnificently constructed building. The body of the structure was oval-shaped and the size of a small mountain. A vast array of frescoed glass windows depicted two mages decorated the right and left of the front of Pentax Hold. The red-robed mage on the left side cast a stream of flame while his counterpart, a blue-robed mage, channeled a beam of frost at his opposite.

The clashing of their spells formed a glowing symbol over the mithril gates of the library, and there, lodged into the front of the door, was the face of what seemed to be a griffin wearing a jester's hat. Two Divination gems were socketed into its eyes, and the construct giggled at students as they came in, mocking them for their lacking wards, telling them that they needed to improve their Magical Resistance or expand their mana fields.

If you discover this narrative on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the violation.

Shiv eyed the strange griffin with amusement and weariness as he approached, but from above, there came a loud sound. The air shook with a thunderclap, and when Shiv looked upward, he saw two curving mithril archways wrapped around a towering spire. A beam of light shot high in the sky, and it was connected to a magma chain that led back toward Flamecrown Castle.

At this distance, he could feel the residue of overflowing mana leaking out from above. There was a distinct hue of incandescence—Divine mana pressing against his being. Shiv scoffed. The Ascendants had their fingers in all things, and they made sure to remind the entire city just who they were subject to.

As Shiv filtered himself through the front door, marching with another group of students in the line, the griffin jester regarded him and let out a loud hum. "Well, a proper mystery is among us. Finally, a non-mage. But what are you? A dedicated Biomancer? No. No, wait. I can't quite tell. Well, either you're an absolutely abysmal Pathbearer, or you're an enigma. Let's just go with the latter, just to be polite."

The jester of a griffin let out a high-pitched shriek of laughter, and a few other students briefly turned, trying to figure out who it was talking about. But after a moment's regard, they looked away from him, now uninterested. He found himself thankful he'd picked Marcus as his Perfect Semblance. Even though the boy came with his own drama, he was as unimpressive and unassuming as one could get in public, beneficial for a certain Deathless with an incomparable price on his head.

Walking into Pentex Hold was like entering a grand cavern, reminding him of some of the smaller hollows back down in the Abyss. Chandeliers swayed from above, and to Shiv's surprise, giggling fairies jumped from light to light. These were the same kind he'd seen in Veronica's office, and a few of them winked at him, as if they knew who he was. That assumption became almost certain as some of them made themselves flash brightly, much akin to what happened to him when his World Quest notification loaded, while others held up fingers in front of their lips, shushing their mischievous companions.

What the hells is up with the fae? he thought to himself. He barely knew what Cullywier's deal was, and then there are these little ones with wings. Maybe I should read up on what to expect from the

Fairwoods with how my life's going. I'm probably going to have to kill some fairies at some point or something. Wonder if they have any books about that in the library.

The rest of the library in question was no less impressive. At the center of the room was a raised dais, woven with walls of magic. Manifested atop that stage was a figure composed of mithril, flowing ink, and Divination mana. This dimensional was one of the oddest that Shiv had ever seen, and it had a book for a face instead of a proper head.

Instead of speaking to it at length, students called out the books they were looking for, and the dimensional simply flicked strands of mercury-colored out from its body. The glistening streams were shaped from mithril and ink, and they undulated through the air as if serpents swimming through a river. The students followed their specific strands, heading deeper into Pentax Hold's interior.

Right now, Shiv was in the unrestricted section. That was most of the first level, which meant that every book here could be borrowed without making a special request to the library administration. It was the floors above where things got a bit tricky. After the first level, the enchantments restricting viewing the magical tomes became evident, and some even passed as dangerous weapons with the mana fields they were imbued with.

Shiv suspected that he was carrying one such book with him now. He didn't know if the Republic had knowledge of the Odes of Blood and Flesh, but he suspected that the Inquisition probably did, and he doubted that they would want the vampiric arts of flesh sculpting to be disseminated among the public.

Now, let's see how you compare to the library I went to in Weave, Shiv said to himself. As he walked by the library's book dimensional, he called out the name of his textbooks, and it obliged him by sending two strings of mercury out into the air. One curled around him, and the other sped ahead. Shiv realized he was supposed to follow the first string before the second one would activate. Huh, neat.

As he passed through several open halls, he realized he had been walking for quite a while and reached out into the air to confirm a suspicion. There was a slight grinding sensation against his Shapeless Tides, and Shiv guessed there was some kind of Dimensionality Spell active in this whole area, making it much larger on the inside.

"Really subtly cast, though," Shiv muttered. "Can barely feel it. Not bad. Not bad at all."

He thought the lobby of the library was surrounded by books, but as he got into the next section, his eyes widened. Before him was an intimidating sight. A series of statues lined the end of a mass of bookshelves, so tall they were the height of multi-story buildings. Rows of books extended behind them, and Shiv couldn't see any ladders leading up or down.

He wondered how students were to retrieve these books, but then he saw more dimensionals actively sailing through the air. These were more conventional dimensionals, elementals shaped from wind. They were carrying tomes down on gentle breezes, unlatching them from where they were wedged tight between their fellow texts.

And then there was a ceiling above. Massive constellations of stars glinted before him, and each flashing speck was imbued with a different kind of magic. Shiv followed the constellations, and he slowly realized the truth of the ingenious design on display here. The specks weren't just an artistic flourish. They also corresponded to what kind of books you might find within the shelves they loomed over.

Shiv found himself directed toward the Biomancy section. He noted how small Biomancy was compared to most others. Its space was practically a tenth of the size compared to Pyromancy. The only thing that Biomancy dwarfed was Psychomancy, and there was a good reason for that. Unlike Weave, Psychomancy was a heavily restricted and monitored art in the Republic, only trumped by Necromancy in terms of the scrutiny placed upon it, with the latter often being punished by death outright.

If anyone knew that Shiv possessed Psychomancy... Well, it would be among the least of his worries. There were a great deal of things to worry about when facing the Deathless, and your mind was likely the last thing he was going to take from you.

Shiv found his Biomancy textbook in little time at all. It was carried down by a wind elemental and deposited into his open hand. As soon as he received it, a notification popped up in his vision.

Book Borrowed: Essentials of Meta-Anatomy and Gene-Crafting

A Library Dimensional will be dispatched to retrieve the book in 4 months and 30 days if it is not returned before the allotted period.

It was around this time that Shiv realized he didn't have a bag or an obvious dimensional pocket. With his Perfect Semblance, his cape was hidden, and if he just made his textbook disappear, that might draw some unwanted attention.

Around him, most other students just chucked their borrowed books into their caps and hats

Well, that's kind of cute and clever, Shiv thought to himself. I don't know about my cape, but yeah. Wait, won't that just make the books fall out and hit them on the head? How does that work?

As he squinted at the people around him, he felt someone slam into him from behind. "O-out of the way, please," a short, red-haired girl stammered. Her pigtails whipped around as she looked over her shoulder, and she looked as if a hare fleeing from a wolf.

Shiv's instincts sharpened. He locked in on her immediately. He didn't have Adam's Awareness, but the nigh-constant combat he'd experienced the past months had given him an intuition that couldn't easily be taught. There was a flood of students moving between the bookshelves, but three among their number stood out from the others. They weren't trying to go with the flow. They weren't looking up at the wind dimensionals carrying books down. Instead, their gazes were locked straight ahead, like they were hunting something or someone.

Chapter 227 (II) Borrow

At the head of the trio was a blonde boy that seemed vaguely well-built for a mage. But his fists were clenched, and he had a snarl on his face. The other two with him were twin dark-haired, burly boys that reminded Shiv of bulldogs.

Shiv scoffed. Hired muscle looks the same, even on the campus of an academy.

As the three pursuers shoved other students aside, Shiv carefully slipped his Essentials of Anatomy textbook into his other hand as he tried to decide what he wanted to do. Meanwhile, the pigtailed girl squeezed through the crowd behind him, desperate to flee. Part of Shiv wanted to simply keep going, to avoid getting embroiled in someone else's matters. But another bit of him was curious, and frankly didn't like the way this was looking for the girl.

The trio of boys passed him by, and Shiv decided to stalk them. His other mercury strand went the other direction, slithering back toward the lobby to lead him toward his cookbook. Shiv wasn't going to follow it. Not until later. If he had to, he'd go back to the book dimensional and simply request directional aid once more. It wasn't a big deal. It wouldn't take that much of his time. But he had a feeling that if no one intervened for that girl up ahead, things might get pretty dire for her.

Me and my busybody ass. Shiv grimaced. Wonder if this counts as System-favored shenanigans or if this academy is simply a mess.

The pursuit went on for a while. The girl kept squeezing between other students, but the trio was closing fast. They shoved people aside without care, ignoring their cries of outrage. Shiv, meanwhile, lurked close behind.

After a few minutes of following along, he found himself leaving the first floor, following the trio up a set of long and wide stairs. Each step glinted with crystalline brilliance, and they were decorated with arrowheads as well. These steps told him that they were entering the second floor, where a few of the "practice and experimentation pock-dims" were. Shiv wasn't sure what one of the on-campus pocket dimensions looked like, so he might just be hitting two birds with one stone.

If he could test his magic here, he might just be spending a bit more time than expected at this library.

"Bah," Helix scoffed from within his cape. "You already have a homunculus, me, and all of the Tutorial. What good could a rudimentary child's playpen do for your Biomancy?"

"I don't know, so let's find out," Shiv replied. The second floor was quite unlike the first. It was far sparser, and though there were rooms filled with books, they were all gated behind magical wards and guarded by other book dimensionals. Suddenly, Shiv felt a lurching sensation in his gut, and he realized that the entire building was being uprooted. No, it was rising up in the air—flying.

Looks like we're airborne again. Probably repositions itself every few hours on campus, Shiv thought. Should take a closer look at its schedule, see if it lands near my dorm or wherever. Doesn't matter that much, considering how fast I can get around, but might draw a bit too much attention.

He ignored the gated rooms for now and continued tracking the trio. He'd lost track of them amidst a series of turns, but with how few students there were on this floor, and his Voidmantid's armor's pheromonal tracking abilities, they were out of sight, but not beyond the reach of his awareness. Shiv followed their scents. They reeked of ink, late-night incense, and, strangely, lavender. The cheap kind of lavender one smelled when passing by certain undignified establishments back on Blackedge—that kind that cost a week's wages and ended with you getting a funny patch on your genitals.

Farsight 83 > 84

As he finally navigated his way out of a mess of hallways, he found himself standing at the end of a long, wide hall with doors running along the side. But the doors weren't things sculpted from matter. Rather, they were dimensional portals, and the trail left by his quarry ended here, through the second doorway away from Shiv.

He walked through the veil of black static without a care.

As soon as he got to the other side, the cries of seagulls and the whistle of an ocean breeze washed over him. Blinking, Shiv found himself standing on golden sands surrounded by dense foliage, except for one part of the area. A path had been carved open to his right. The vegetation had been trampled, and there seemed to be a gap burned into the sides of a few trees, leaving semicircular wounds carved into the trunks.

"Someone used Pyromancy here," Shiv noted. And with that, his mind conjured images of a group of students launching fireballs at the fleeing girl. That changed things. That moved things a bit closer to attempted murder. Shiv hated murderers. Well, murderers who weren't him. He always had a good reason for killing all the people he did.

After scouting the area for a second, Shiv caught sight of his elusive targets. They glinted in the far left of his vision, faint life signatures flickering a few hundred meters away. He closed in on them, moving quietly through the air, carrying himself using his Shapeless Tides. Shiv didn't bother smashing through any more of the leaves or crunching any branches; he wanted to observe and eavesdrop before deciding what he wanted to do.

As he got to the edge of the tropical foliage, he peered out between two large, looping petals and found the three students quartering the pigtailed girl. A wall of turbulent water was being elevated behind her. She tried to flee past the surf into the ocean itself, but one of the trio called upon their Hydromancy and blockaded her from escaping. This place is probably for Hydromancers to test their magic. Worked against the girl here.

He used his Farsight to examine the scene, and his heart skipped a beat. He realized one of them was carrying a book—the exact cookbook he had abandoned to involve himself in this business. A Traveler's Guide to Wondrous Flavors and Wonderful Places.

The System smiles upon the Deathless today, Shiv thought. There came a sudden whipping noise in the air, and Shiv realized the pigtail girl was swinging a small pocket knife around. It looked like it was for peeling fruit rather than any kind of combat, and the way she waved it about spoke much of her combat prowess as well. The tall, blonde boy laughed at her, and Shiv strained his hearing, trying to pick things up as the winds kicked up again.

"I warned you," the blonde boy said. "Didn't I warn you?" He looked to his two companions and gestured at the girl. "I told you that if you kept our secrets, we could be friends. I could make things worth your while. I also told you that if you were going to be a fucking snitch, then terrible things might happen. You snitched, and now look where we are. Unwise, Vanessa. Very unwise."

He shook his head, and the girl clenched her teeth. "It was my invention! Why do you even want it? You're already from a noble household. You don't need the money!"

"It was a group project, Vanessa." The noble boy sighed. "So much me, me, me. Besides, who gave you the funding for the materials?"

"And who did all the work?" the girl almost screamed. "I didn't need your help. In fact, you were n-no help at all! I could have finished it on my own! It would have taken longer, but at least I wouldn't have to deal with you. You didn't do anything to help, so why should you get credit now?"

And suddenly, the blonde-haired boy didn't seem so amused anymore. He started clenching and unclenching his fists. "I... didn't do anything. I see. Well, Vanessa, to me it looks like I'm doing something right now." He took a step forward, and then another. "Tell you what, Vanessa, I think I'm going to take that knife from you, and THEN I'M GONNA FUCKING—"

Shiv heard enough. This was a waste of time. And that boy was a waste of skin. Not curious anymore, System. Just annoyed. At least they left me a prize.

The Deathless stopped time. And to his satisfaction, there was no temporal warding here. The academy's protections didn't extend into these pockets. That's good to know, Shiv thought to himself. If I have to fight someone again, a pocket dimension like this could be perfect. Oh, the Forest of Alloy might work too. Maybe I should see if I can get the Crafters to set up some kind of pocket arena inside my cape. Maybe I can throw it on the ground, yank an enemy in, and keep the damage contained. That's a cool idea.

Inspiration came from the weirdest places.

First thing Shiv did was snatch the cooking book away from one of the blonde boy's minions. He threw it in his cape as he considered how badly he wanted to hurt these shits. Just beating the piss out of them probably won't do anything for long. I might put them in the hospital for a while, but that just means I might end up treating them later tonight when I check in for my first Medic-301 class.

He regarded the pigtail girl once more, seeing the desperate, scared look on her face. Yeah, main point is to get them to stop bothering her. So, we escalate. We make sure they know the consequences of doing anything stupid.

Psycho-Cartography hummed in agreement.

Shiv lashed out with his mana hydra and wrapped both of the goons. He cracked their paltry Magical Resistance and then pinched their necks until the blood stopped flowing. At the same time, he did the same to the ringleader of this stupid circus, blurring forward and putting him in a chokehold from behind. Three seconds passed. Shiv gave it two more seconds before he finally let go. His temporal shell cracked a bit, but rushing wasn't an option. Killing was easy; inducing unconsciousness required a gentle touch.

When he felt the time was right, he yanked each of his victims into his grasp and dragged them back through the bushes. He resumed time, and the last thing he saw of that pigtailed girl was her standing there, alone before a plunging wave. The water crashed down behind her, and she let out a surprised cry, whipping her head around in confusion.

Shiv shook his head. That one really needs to develop some kind of combat-related skill. Or make some strong friends.

He got back to the portal leading to this pocket dimension, and here, he decided to finish with the trio.

He threw all three of his new victims onto the sand. After that, he drew his Last Morsel and decided to leave a few messages on their body. They let out groans of pain as he sliced into them, but he made sure

the markings weren't that deep. After that, he stripped them of all their belongings. Shiv was happy to find a heavy pouch filled with mithril coins carried by the blonde boy. The other two had a few coins each, but nothing more than that. He took all their potions, focus crystals, weapons, and satchels from them as well. Then, he seized their pointed hats—and the sword cane he found on one of the boys.

With that done, Shiv regarded his handiwork with a smirk. He carved a simple promise onto each one of the unconscious boys, one ominous and plain in intent: "Go for the pigtailed girl again, and I'll take something from you every night, starting with your cocks, and working my way up from there. Pieces will be returned in installments afterward."

"There," Shiv said, clapping his hands together. "If they do anything after this, they're genuinely stupid, and I'll have to hurt them more. And that'll be that... Hm. Something's missing. Ah, shit. I got it."

"AGHHH! AHHH! HELP! WHAT THE FUCK!" a boy of noble birth wailed in the lobby of Pentax Hold. He was sobbing, rubbing at the bloody text carved into his torso. His pupils were dilated, his eyes were wide with terror, and he looked like he was suffering from a psychotic break. The two boys with him weren't doing much better, covering their privates and whimpering as their fellow students gawked at them.

Some covered their faces and blushed at the sudden appearance of the bloodied, nude trio. Others called for Biomancers or school security to intervene. Everyone was looking at them, and few noticed the unassuming Marcus Unblood slip away, whistling a tune, indifferent to the carnage, two books hidden in his cape, and another good deed done.

"Someone call a Biomancer!" Shiv heard an elven mage shout as she sprinted past him.

The Deathless just chuckled. "Sorry, friend, my Medic-301 shift doesn't start until later."

As he pushed through the front door, he saw a few students landing nearby. They touched down with grace and were generally unaware of the shitshow they were about to walk into. One of them descended on a griffin, and in the next moment, the shed-sized beast quickly turned into a winged house cat.

"Damn," Shiv commented. "That's incredible."

"Thank you." The bot Rider giggled as it hit the ground gracefully. Its can-shaped head projected a smiley face at Shiv. "It took a lot of training for her to figure out how to do that."

Though the library was in flight, it projected a translucent set of descending stairs, and Shiv walked down, humming a jaunty tune to himself with all his library books in tow. He was getting a bit of a kick out of this, jumping unfortunate bastards who deserved it, and then ruining their day without them knowing why filled him with the kind of pleasure that bordered on the perverse.

"Right. Gotta go to office hours for Culin E-333 first after. But you know what, System? I think I can handle this. Throw more of these encounters at me. I'll feed you. I see what you're doing. Little chips of strife you're dragging into me, having me resolve. I'll do it. Just chipping away. I won't start a big bloody brawl if you don't."

As he spoke those words to the sky, he felt a shift in the air, and something told him he might just find a way to make it here without losing his cover for quite a while.

And then he started worrying if he was getting a bit too hopeful.

"You know, Insul," Helix said, "your penchant for heroics might leave you exposed to danger yourself someday. This was more of a trial than it needed to be."

"Not the way I'd see it," Shiv replied.

"Oh, and how would you see it?"

"Dominance," Shiv said plainly. "Some of these students and nobles do what they want, and then I do what I want in return. Might before philosophy, isn't that what your boss believes? Well. I believe in hurting bastards. I believe pieces of shit should eat shit. And I'm meaner than them. I'm stronger. And if they do something stupid, I'll be the consequence they never see coming. For no other reason other than I want to and because I can."

The orc fell silent after that, but then he gave an accepting huff. "Well, just be sure to guard yourself. It wouldn't do to find yourself inconvenienced by someone else's weakness."

"I'll inconvenience myself whenever I want," Shiv replied with a grin. "Why the fuck else be a Pathbearer?"

Chapter 228 (I) Volunteer [I]

We are "monsters."

The world is our enemy.

Everything that breathes, that moves, that can fight or feed is our enemy.

Reader. You are my enemy. But you are also the enemy of my enemies. And my enemies are your enemies as well.

You do not see it yet. The cold reality of the System. You are insulated. You are a child of a gentler time, hanging from the tangled umbilical of a golden age wrapped around your neck, choking at the top, but also unwilling to sever yourself from the grand delusion of what is wanted and what we are.

We are damned. We are doomed. There is no way out. There is no true victory. There is only the fight and the hunger, the blood and the now. Before I grew powerful enough to be cursed with sapience, I knew this. I knew it down to my very core.

The System wants us to kill. The System wants us to feed. The System wants us to grow. The System wants us to mutate, and it wants us to die in ways unimaginable to feed it. So it can grow larger.

We are inside something. Our struggles feed it. Our wars feed it. And it grows. Greater than any monster. Than any individual.

We are "monsters."

We are "individuals."

We are "enemies."

But I do not hate you.

I am finished with the System's ways. I am done being its lesser mirror. I will not feed it anymore.

But it cannot be warred against. How can you deny war itself its violence?

It cannot be done. Not unless you do the very thing that monsters cannot, that individuals refuse, that gnaws at your instinct and spirit.

Starve yourself. Fast your heart. Shivel your spirit. Grow no more in terms of Path nor Skills. Let entropy flow through you. And let entropy take the System. Give the leviathan no nutrition. Watch it shrivel from within.

Die with purpose.

In this, all of us can be more than "monsters," "individuals," and "Pathbearers."

In this, we gain the only true victory we will ever know.

Let the great beast starve.

-Lugh Silverclaw's Deep Atlantic Manifesto

228 (I)

Volunteer [I]

"Professor Matlock?" Shiv said, walking into the office of his Culin E-333 professor to officially introduce himself. It took him a while to find the right building—and by this point, Shiv was done grinning at the flying towers and just found them a gimmicky pain in the ass. Most of the tower he was currently in was devoid of people and used primarily for storage. The few members of the faculty Shiv encountered here had their doors shut and warded, with additional notes taped to the outside that they were not to be disturbed.

Only one room cast a light into the dusty halls. That one room also had a group of rat people clad in tiny plate armor and livery, dragging out what looked to be the statue of a dog with a pipe in its mouth.

"Coming to see Matlock, are ye?" One of the Rat-Knights said with a thick accent.

"Uh, yeah," Shiv said, still not entirely used to dealing with talking rats.

The five Rat-Knights all spat on the ground at once, and one squeaked something that was almost certainly a slur. "He's a liar, a coward, a cretin, and a cad. If you need his aid in facing the frog-kin, know that he is not to be counted upon. I spit upon him, and I spit upon those of his blood; brace yourself to do the same."

The Deathless was briefly speechless. "I, uh... Shit, sounds rough, you know. Sorry about whatever he did."

"Your sympathies are accepted, peasant human," the first lead Rat-Knight said. "And if you are seeking a better grade, forget it. The man despises you almost as much as he despises keeping his word."

"Huh. Why does he hate me?"

"Because you are a filthy student, and he would much rather be planning his next vacation. You are warned, and we are away. Squires! Be us away! Death to the frog-kin."

And once more, the rats spat in unison and continued hauling the stone dog away right after.

"The hells was that?" Shiv said, watching them go as he prepared to enter the office of one Hero-Instructor Garrick Matlock.

A moment later, he was speechless. The room could best be described as a nightmarish mess. The ground was littered with different maps, some half-drawn, others badly disfigured by flames or ink-

spills. Then, there were the discarded compasses, books, and boxes scattered atop these maps. Shiv faintly felt pulses of Dimensionality coming from each of the maps, and he narrowed his eyes—

"Don't step on them!" a wheezing voice came from the back of the room. Shiv's gaze snapped to attention, and instead of a desk, the instructor here seemed to have a crate they used to conduct all their business. And eating. And performed nail clippings. Then, there was that glass jar filled with questionable contents.

Good felling shit, is that a jar of piss? It smells like piss. Shiv did what he could to not grimace.

With a loud hum, Matlock popped up from behind his crate, holding what seemed to be a gem-encrusted lobster. He then accidentally knocked his jar of piss over, and it shattered and splashed on one of the maps draped across the ground. Yet, rather than staining the map, the fluids vanished. "Oh, damn. That's headed for Onalulula. Some poor seagull is probably going to get a splash of piss-esophagus in the eyes. Dimensional maps, boy. They're dangerous. One wrong step, and you might be lost to the Summer Court in the Fairwoods."

"Uh," Shiv stammered.

"They won't take you for a love-slave, at least." Matlock squinted at him. "Not pretty enough."

Shiv pushed through his discomfort so he could get signed up for a restaurant shift as soon as possible. "Is this not a good time, Professor?"

"It's never a good time. It's office hours. Office hours are meant to torture us into submission." Matlock ran the gem-crusted lobster through his luscious black hair as if it were a comb. "But enough about me. Come, come."

Shiv entered the office proper, trying not to step on any of the maps. He took in the instructor with a growing feeling of uncertainty. Matlock had the look of someone that belonged in an illustration somewhere. The man was unusually pretty. His silver, shoulder-length hair seemed to shine like moonlight, his skin practically sparkled, his eyelashes were long and curled, and he had a set of twinkling earrings threaded through his left lobe. His chin was sharp—the kind of sharp that actually seemed pointed, but despite this, Shiv struggled against the overwhelming desire to tell this man his deepest secrets.

But this wasn't the first time Shiv encountered someone with a powerful Charm skill. He remembered Angelo, wondered how the rogue vampire was doing, but then Matlock spoke again, and the Deathless's thoughts nearly parted like smoke. Only the presence of his Psycho-Cartography kept him aware. Be careful with this guy, Shiv. He seems utterly uninterested in you. It's simply that powerful a passive skill.

"So, which is it? Are you going to beg for an extension? Because I don't give those. A thousand pages in three days is not a lot of reading, trust me. I got far more done when I was your age. In fact, I could do twice that much, and I was busy swashbuckling all across the Atlantic. I learned a technique that allowed me to read in my sleep. If you read my syllabus, you would have learned how to do it."

"Why, um, no, I'm, uh, I recently applied to Culinary E-333," Shiv began.

"Huh! Oh! Good! That! Perfect! Another minion!" And suddenly, the instructor's demeanor changed. A grin split his face ear to ear. "You applied for E-333? Oh, oh, oh, good, no." Matlock laughed, and he placed the lobster against his forehead. "I was so worried you were from my Counter-Dimensional Navigation course. Let me tell you, the students there just don't know how good they have it. Complaining! Always complaining. You have to be prepared when you want to venture out across the world. Integrated Earth is filled with a great many dangers, but everyone just reads about the treasures

and precious experiences. From the books, you have no idea how much effort it takes to have a beautiful moment."

"I might," Shiv said vaguely. "It took a hell of a lot for me to get here."

The instructor looked him up and down and nodded. "Oh, I suppose so. Far be it from me to discount the hardships of, oh, good, you're also not a noble. Bleh! That smell. Agh, but I can handle that. Nobility, bah, they're just the children of bygone warlords and proper Pathbearers past, am I right?"

Psycho-Cartography: Do not answer that question. He is trying to goad you right now. I think. I cannot actually tell with this one. Be careful.

"Can't say," Shiv replied. "Don't really know that many nobles. I don't make assumptions."

Matlock tilted his head and then winked at him. "Oh, you're a clever one, aren't you?"

And suddenly, Shiv felt the charm radiating off the man reach obscene levels. The Deathless bit back a groan as he did his best to ignore how much the man was glimmering. "Anyway, Professor, I got the cookbook—"

"Ignore the cookbook. It's useless. It's drivel. It's trash."

Shiv blinked, "But... It says here that you wrote it..."

"Then I wrote drivel, trash. It's useless. What you need to do right now is— Give me a second." He ducked back behind the crate again, and a series of objects, ranging from knives to glass cubes containing living insects, began flying through the air. A second later, the instructor rose, flinging a massive portrait that didn't seem like it could fit behind the narrow space behind the crate at the wall. It shattered, and its pieces vanished upon striking a map. After that, he finally pulled out a chart and placed it in front of his guest.

"What's this?" Shiv looked down.

"This is a series of restaurants you can volunteer at. These are the times they're open, and these are the positions they have available. Now, do you have any cooking experience?"

"Yes," Shiv said, almost absentmindedly. He caught himself and gulped. "I've... done a few things in a kitchen before."

"Done a few things?" Matlock asked. "What kind of things? Because sexual favors are things. We don't need those. The chefs, they good for many things, but they're terrible lays. I know from personal experience and the experience of a few previous students. Do you know what causes celibacy? Bad sex. It's like an anti-skill, boy, let me tell you about—"

Okay, I want to leave! Shiv screamed internally. He spoke over Matlock so they could get this class thing sorted and avoid the horrible chef-sex stories. "I know the general structure of a chicken, I can carve potatoes, prepare greens, and I know a few things about wine. I also know how to work most kitchen appliances. So, yeah."

Matlock suddenly glared at Shiv, and briefly, his irises glinted with mana as he used his Analyze Skill. "Interesting. You don't seem to have a very, hmm, yeah... Cooking's not great for you."

"Well, I wasn't cooking for pleasure. It's a thing of survival, especially up north."

And suddenly, the professor's demeanor changed once more. He winced. "Ah, sorry, the giant territory, is it? Old Brunswick?"

"Yeah," Shiv said. "How can you tell?"

"You have that look, that sad look, the kind that children develop when they aren't sure if they're prey or Pathbearer for much of their lives. Well, this might be an opportunity for you to find something beautiful to do. Have a gander. Pick a place that suits your heart's fancy. Tick the boxes when you are available, and I will assign credit if the restaurant is satisfied. You need to work at least a hundred hours for full credit, you understand?"

"Yeah," Shiv said. "I got that."

He looked down at the many restaurants, but he struggled not to frown. All he had to go on were a series of names, a few words about what their main courses might be, and the rest were open positions. There were quite a few spots already taken, but they were early in the day or pretty late into the evening.

Most of the other students volunteering were either aiming for roles as servers or front desk attendants. Only in a few rare cases were actual cooking roles taken, with the assistant grill station position proving especially coveted. However, the other preparatory spots were left open. As Shiv looked through the myriad different restaurants, he decided that he wanted to experience their operations in person before he decided to commit to a more dedicated role in the kitchen.

"Hero-Instructor," Shiv said, mulling over his choices, "what do you think is the roughest kitchen someone could volunteer at?"

"Roughest kitchen," Matlock said. He almost guffawed. "You're a brave boy, aren't you?"

"No, I just want to see what hard looks like before I decide to go easy."

"Oh, clever. That's the way to live, you know? Do the hard thing first and then enjoy the easy spoils after. Well then..." Matlock flipped the chart over and began mumbling to himself, and after a while, his finger fell upon one name with a decisive thud.

Shiv looked down and mouthed the words, "Monster Mystery Meat...."

"They're an odd bunch, you know, not a large operation, and practically no student who volunteered there has lasted more than a few days."

"Why's that?" Shiv said? "Hard work schedule? Shiv looked at Monster Mystery Meat's boxes and noted how all the boxes there were empty.

"It's not about the hours, it's about the demand. Eating at Monster Mystery Meat is an experience, the kind of experience you won't get anywhere else. Meat there is sourced directly from the most exotic beasts and the deepest dungeons. Even from the Abyss itself."

Shiv thought back to Courtney, his basilisks, and the Jealousy he'd cooked. "Is it, now? That sounds pretty interesting. And unique. I don't think I heard of anyone doing that before."

"That's because most chefs aren't very good martialists, and most martialists usually don't want to risk their lives trying to hunt the most exotic monsters for consumption purposes." Matlock spat onto a map, the globule vanishing to somewhere unknown. "Cowards, the lot of them. As such, Monster Mystery Meat is both a mercenary group and a restaurant. They go out, they find the oddest creatures they can fight, they slay them, and they bring them back, offering the flesh as fine meals. To eat there is at once an adventure and a triumph in the pioneering spirit of humanity. The flavors are unparalleled and unique." Matlock sighed, shaking his head as if he were reminiscing on better times. "However, sometimes the kitchen is chaotic. Sometimes the ingredients... they get free."

Now Shiv's interest was completely captured. "What do you mean, the ingredients get free?"

"I mean, sometimes it's hard to slay certain creatures for good. Have you ever tried killing a Legendary Lobster?" Matlock picked the lobster he'd been waving around earlier back up. "This one isn't dead. No, it teleported out of its shell. And while I was distracted, while I thought I'd claimed its life..." The instructor suddenly lifted his left leg and slammed it on the table. "...it came out of the sand behind me and hacked my limb off in a blink!"

Shiv's eyes widened. "A lobster did that to you?"

"Not just any lobster. The lobster. The single most feared duelist across the Atlantic and Pacific both. Silverclaw."

Shiv stared at the gem-encrusted lobster shell. "So, Silverclaw is, what, an Awakened Lobster?"

"Oh, he's far more than merely awakened. He's more cunning than most men can ever dream of being. He's quicker and deadlier than a Hero of Swordsmanship. And to top it all off, he was never meant to be. Do you know what it takes for just a meager lobster to rise to the level of sapience, to survive the wrath of beasts the size of mountains—the kinds that can displace the ocean?" Matlock's gaze went somewhere distant. "My first encounter with Silverclaw was right near the port of High Harbor. For three nights and three days, me and the rest of the crew of the Whore Princess fired our cannons, launched our skills into the waters, and for three nights and three days, they bounced off the hide of the Ragged Ahab."

The professor realized Shiv didn't know what he was talking about and did a double-take. "The Ragged Ahab, the Piledriver of Ships, the Suplexer of Mountains, the kraken-whale-wyrm bastard with incredible abdominals? The Seducer of the Duchess of Minlo."

"What?" Shiv said, utterly lost.

"Ah, ah, you northern boys, always cut off from the rest of the Republic. It's a big whale that's also a part kraken, a part wyrm, a part elf. It's also the single greatest grappler you will ever face. And we almost had him. We bombarded him for days, but finally, as his strength was flagging, we were holding him down, preparing to cut his heart open and offer it back to the Ascendants as part of our return tribute, SILVERCLAW!" Matlock cried aloud, shaking the lobster in his hand. "He emerged. He came. He cccccccckkkkked us! Have you seen a lobster behead a monster the size of an island with one stroke?!"

"...No," Shiv whispered, unsure if Matlock was insane or just screwing with him.

"Well, Silverclaw did. He exploded out of the water and cut the Ragged Ahab in half. We were offended, of course, and we tried to strike him down. But he disarmed us. And then, he cut our clothes off and took our ship hostage."

"Why did he cut your clothes—"

"The lobster spoke his manifesto to us first, and I was the only one able to resist his charm. He took me as a true challenge, and he brought me down to the captain's quarters for personal interrogation." Matlock leaned in and sprayed spittle all over Shiv's face. "Sexual interrogation."

Shiv's breath hitched, and he took an involuntary step backward.

"I resisted valiantly, but his refractory period—"

"Professor, I think I'm going to just tick Monster Mystery Meat," Shiv quickly said, now absolutely certain he didn't want to deal with this man. "It's almost lunch, right? I'll do three hours right now to start. That sounds good, no?"

Matlock ignored him. "—was absurd. I was a veteran of both bed and battlefield, but, by the Ascendants, I was being worn down. I cried out to Longinus for support, and the Wanderer gave it to me. The tides of the struggle shifted! And just as I was about to assert my dominance over the lobster—"

Shiv stopped thinking or listening and just ticked three hours for lunch under the Commis role. "Yeah, so, here. I'll do this."

"—he cut my leg off to distract me! And then he used that to make me spill other fluids aside from blood."

Psycho-Cartography: There must be some combination of bleach and other poisons that will induce short-term memory failure. We can spend some time discovering that specific combination after we leave this place. Death is of no consequence, but there are some things that really shouldn't be known.

"So, uh, wait, didn't you say he took your leg off when you were trying to ambush him on a beach somewhere?" Shiv stammered, his intrusive thoughts getting the better of him before he could get the professor to confirm the schedule.

The instructor paused. "Well, no, that was the third time he took my leg. This was the first. But I bested him in lovemaking on the beach, I'll have you know. I grew wise to his ways, and there's a skill that makes you faster and more durable at—Oh, you chose Commis!" Matlock chuckled, lifting up the chart. "You're a brave one. You're entering dangerous territory. Student, harden yourself and remember to make sure the ingredients are dead. And if you find yourself in bed with a crustacean, remember to tug on their hind legs. It hurts at first, but they like it. You'll see."

Psycho-Cartography: What the fuck?

"Uh, uh, eh, uh," Shiv said, doing his best interpretation of a bear trying to pass a kidney stone while solving a math equation.

"Don't do that. Don't make those noises. It'll invigorate Silverclaw if he knows he has you."

"I—I—I," Shiv said in a loop, "I think I want to work now, Instructor! Work is good. I need to go—uh, directions and—"

"Just check your pin," Matlock said, waving his hand. He suddenly gripped Shiv by the collar of his uniform and pulled him close, his voice dropping three octaves as he whispered into his ear, "And remember: you wanted this."

He let Shiv go, who immediately took a step back again. And then another. Matlock chuckled. "But don't be ashamed if you need to tap out early. No students have died working at Monster Mystery Meat so far, but a few have been bitten in half by a dragon-sized duck. Surprisingly vicious when they're that large. Javelina was very unhappy about that, but the giant duck soup was quite unique."

"Giant duck soup," Shiv said, nodding as he rapidly backed away from Matlock, avoiding maps as he walked without showing the professor his back. "Got it. I'll be careful, and... avoid giant ducks... and stuff."

"And remember what I told you about Silverclaw," Matlock said, dead serious. "He goes to Monster Mystery Meat sometimes. He enjoys their Long Pig. Don't seem too unique, or you'll awaken his urges."

Psycho-Cartography: Leave the room. Seal the door. Set the tower on fire.

"I, yeah, I get—I have to go." Shiv threw himself out of the doorway just as a notification loaded.

Volunteer Hours Assigned: 11 AM - 1 PM

Directions Gained for: Monster Mystery Meat

Broken felling Moon, what kind of elective class did I pick for myself? Shiv lamented.

"Marcus!" Matlock said. "Close the door, if you don't mind. I don't need another student falling across the world again—especially now that it will get Harlock angry at me."