

Path of the Deathless (Book 2 Completed)

31 (I) Disciples

Among the Necrotechs, there is the tradition of the Prime Disciple. When one ascends to Master-Tier, they become a Pathbearer charged with a set of responsibilities to the very nation that allowed them to climb to such heights.

At the hands of Valor Thann, a formal tradition was born: Masters would take on students, guiding them and instructing them along their Paths—correcting mistakes in their thinking and perfecting their skills. Yet, despite being the progenitor of this custom, Valor Thann’s personal Prime Disciples remain few and far between.

By all accounts, Valor Thann is a master who seeks only the truly worthy. He does not simply lay eyes upon a candidate and bestow favor. Instead, Valor Thann waits. Valor Thann observes. Only after a student has demonstrated true merit—in intent, integrity, and resolve—does he deign to approach.

And even then, they are not embraced immediately, for Valor Thann demands one final thing of all his students. A simple request unreasonable for most.

His Prime Disciple must descend into death... and return unchanged. For his methods of learning demands that one survive expeditions into oblivion, over and over and over... Google search

-He Who Halts Eternity: Valor Thann

31 (I)

Disciples

Shiv drew in a breath and then peeked out from behind the giant mushroom. A lightning arrow instantly crashed into his skull-helmet, damaging the armor. Then the rest of the arrows struck his cover as well, each imbued with a different spell, detonating the base of the mushroom in a colorful sphere of destruction.

The Deathless drew whatever he could into his Momentum Core as his speed accelerated. His exoskeleton shuddered as microfractures lined its exterior, but he fused the broken parts back together with his Biomancy. He charged through the explosion, forcing his way through the shockwave with Might of Mass and crashing through spikes of jagged ice. He could endure the physical attacks. They still hurt if he let Adam bombard him enough, but Shiv didn’t consider pain to be the problem at hand.

The largest issue and most pressing was finding the Young Lord in the first place. This part of the wilderness was dense with vegetation and mega-fungi. To make matters worse, there were lifeforms everywhere, and even feral weavers that joined at random moments. Shiv's Biomancy warned him of those lesser threats—and allowed him to dispatch with them with a quick heart-stopping spell—but its field didn't expand far enough to detect Adam. It probably couldn't sense Adam even if Shiv was a Master of Biomancy right now, and Masters had fields that could span kilometers.

Not with Adam being capable of firing his new bow from leagues and leagues beyond.

The only warning Shiv got before the next wave of attacks fell was a shiver in the air and a flash of light through the foliage. Filling his core with momentum drained during his sprint, Shiv felt time slow to a near crawl just as a mind magic-infused arrow halted an inch away from his skull. How the Young Lord knew exactly where he was and proved so impossibly accurate with every shot was a mystery to Shiv—but it did make this entire exercise a real *thrill*.

Whatever issues he had with Shiv notwithstanding, Adam Arrow was a hell of a hunter. He was fast up close, inhumanly accurate from afar, and always moving—always repositioning. Adam's Awareness proved to be a monstrous boon in the wilderness, offering him borderline foresight about what was coming and where he was going. Shiv could barely be considered near-sighted by comparison.

But despite all of Adam's training and versatility, Shiv had a few extreme edges of his own. A big one was *Momentum Core*.

Shiv discharged the skill and exploded upward in a devastating detonation of velocity. With enough concentrated fire, Adam could blow through some vegetation, toppling the mega-fungi in half by compromising their base. But where Adam's efforts left pockmarks of damage across the land, Shiv painted his progress across the land in swaths. All around him, the vegetation combusted, the ground tore, sound cracked, and the world trembled.

This time, he used his core to launch himself higher, flaying the canopy above him clean of greenery and mushroom caps. His Reflexes were dropping back down to baseline, but as he sailed through the air with bone drill in hand and skeletal armor ablaze with friction-flame, he activated his **Song of the Vigilant** briefly while airborne.

It was a risk, exposing himself this way. He learned that earlier when he tried to sprint through a clearing. But his Resonant Perimeter was one of his few means of locating the Young Lord reliably—and even then, it couldn't stop Adam from simply flying off somewhere else. Momentum Core allowed Shiv to cover a massive amount of distance in an instant, but Adam wasn't an idiot and knew better than to just move in straight lines.

I might need to deforest this entire place before he runs out of elevated perches to hide. And even then, he'll probably just move somewhere else...There you are, bastard. The perimeter coated the wilds, highlighting hundreds of meters of crisscrossing fissures lining the land. Pulped mushrooms and collapsed trees littered the forest, but there, atop a lone mushroom cap, stood a humanoid figure outlined in vibrating webs.

The boost to his speed brought by Momentum Core was about to run out—and Adam was probably going to respond at any time. So Shiv distracted him. With the song sustaining his focus, Shiv quickly shaped a spell as he grasped his bone drill using his field and launched it as hard as he could over the distance. It sailed off with a crackle—but Shiv shattered it before it left his field, sending it out as jagged pieces of shrapnel. He didn't have anything close to Adam's accuracy, but quantity eventually became a sort of precision all on its own.

Sparks flashed across the Young Lord's armor, and Shiv watched him get flung off his feet. Grinning in delight, Shiv opened his armor and increased his Might of Mass—plunging down. As his decoy exoskeleton sailed toward Adam, Shiv used his Biomancy to reach into his cloak and pulled out three of the many *reserve corpses* he accumulated over the past few days, cackling to himself. *I have you now, Young Lord.*

He had gotten good at shaving the flesh off his corpses and extracting the bones using Biomancy. Thanks to his reading of the *Odes*, he knew which ligaments and tissues to unlatch before rupturing the skin along the spine. This time, he also made sure to dump all the organs and meat back inside his cloak. From there, he had three more *skin decoys* he could use momentarily, an actively-forming set of heavy skeletal armor that would keep him protected, and eight smaller bone drills pulled along by his field. The last thing Shiv saw of his old armor was a chain of arrows splashing against it before he fell through foliage again.

As he descended, he locked his new armor around himself and began draining momentum again. He heard a series of new blasts sounding from above. That was good. The plan was working. Adam hadn't moved yet—it took him time to stabilize himself before he could unleash stronger shots. Shiv wrapped the skin from his flayed corpses around himself and struggled to keep his laughter under control.

The first night at camp, after amassing around ten corpses to build up his skeletal armor stores and to serve as “experimental biomass,” Shiv decided to have some fun. He took the skin off of one of his old bodies and made a mask of it before asking Adam if there was something wrong with his face.

The Young Lord's cry of absolute terror was *hilarious*. So was the whole mess when Shiv threw the face away and feigned ignorance as Valor and Uva came to investigate.

Let's see how loud I can make him scream this time. Shiv's smile beneath his helmet could only be described as feral. But he needed to hurry. The Song of Vigilance was already beginning to strain his soul, and soon he would lose track of where Adam was.

If he let the Young Lord slip now, he wouldn't know how to begin tracking him down next time.

Shiv smashed through plant matter, nightglass crystals, and fungi as he tore forward. Slamming into something with Might of Mass did wonders to flood his Momentum Core, so he did it to as many things as he could. By now, Shiv sensed the Young Lord moving—saw his vibrating outline call upon his fiery wings to take flight.

But now Shiv was too close. And it was too late. Tearing out from the inside of another giant mushroom, Shiv felt the world grind to a lurching halt as he triggered another discharge. His bones rattled. His tendons jerked as a colossal force crashed against him. With the aid of Biomancy, Might of Mass, Diamond Shell, and his heavy exoskeleton, Shiv endured the cost of using his first Master-Tier Skill again.

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He shredded through trees and fungi at an angle, tearing through them like a blade passing through butter. The horizon zoomed toward Shiv, and along that horizon, the Deathless found himself on a path to intercept the Young Lord. He was off by a good few meters—but that's where the skin decoys were so useful. Shiv could wrap them around objects and use them as distractions—but with his skin also infused with Diamond Shell and wieldable via Biomancy, they served as a pretty good *lasso* too.

Adam might be versatile. Adam might be well-trained. Adam might be tactically minded. But Shiv learned his own way in the ruins of Lost Angeles.

He learned to be resourceful with what little he had, and he learned how to prepare.

Adam barely managed to turn when a skin noose hooked around his waist. Shiv felt Adam's face contort as the Young Lord discovered three of Shiv's "faces" flapping against his armor. Adam barely had a chance to scream before he was pulled along by Shiv, the Deathless's Momentum Core still discharging.

Intimidation > 10

To Adam's extreme credit, he adapted quickly. He tried getting a shot off with Spellstring—what he named his new bow. That failed, as one of Shiv's trailing bone drills smashed into his shoulder and sent the shot off course. But Adam never limited himself to just one bow up close. He sported more arms and shaped bows from water. He fired two streams of arrows. The first clashed against Shiv's back, the other began to chip at the skin decoys.

Shiv smashed his remaining bone drills against Adam, breaking the Young Lord's focus just as he started shaping a teleportation arrow spell—Shiv learned how annoying those were the first time he almost got close. Without an anchor, even a novice Jump Mage was a nightmare.

Then they were in the trees again. Shiv blasted through bark and plantmatter as he yanked on his *skin rope* and pulled Adam closer. The Young Lord slashed at him using blades made from surging water. They flowed so fast that they took entire chunks out from Shiv's exoskeleton.

They probably would have cut through the Deathless's initial armor, but Shiv learned to make his current sets much denser and thicker, exploiting his Diamond Shell to maximum effect.

With a final flex of focus before the Song of Vigilance became too painful to bear, Shiv wrapped his skin decoys around Adam's helmet—fusing his flayed faces around the opening of Adam's helmet. The Young Lord's snarled with more outrage than terror this time—the startlement wearing off.

Then, Adam surprised Shiv for a turn: He managed a Portomancy spell mid-fall just as Shiv seized him by the neck. Suddenly, the Deathless felt a pocket of pressure expand around his fingers as a spatial bubble collapsed around Adam. For a beat, Shiv lost track of his adversary, but Adam cast the spell while blind and desperate, so he ended up appearing and smashing head-first into a large, glowing plant of some kind. The Young Lord's body spasmed as he bounced off the plant. Shiv plunged halfway through the same plant, ripping through its innards and being covered in glowy, foul-smelling nectar before he rushed back out.

And almost caught a teleportation arrow to the jaw. Shiv's empty Momentum Core flared. He shifted—and drained just enough of the arrow's speed that he managed to duck out of the way of the teleportation arrows. But not all the others that followed. A flood of bright arrows exploded against him, cracking the outer layer of his armor—fracturing even deeper as Adam started launching heavy shots from his Spellstring as well.

Shiv crashed against the wave of attacks. Mass of Might helped him push forward. Momentum Core siphoned away the energy from the oncoming arrows. Biomancy boosted Shiv's strength while also allowing him to yank at the dense bundle of skin clutching Adam's face.

The Young Lord was ripped off his feet with a cry of dismay. Shiv laughed—then crashed face-first into the ground as he slipped on a patch of ice. *Godsdammit Adam, why do you have so many different skills!*

As Shiv launched himself over the frozen ground, he reached into his cloak again and projected a jetstream of blood and temporarily-stored tissue at Adam. The Young Lord—with the aid of a dozen Hydromancy-forged hands—managed to peel off the skin noose, only for a stream of crimson to crash into his face. Adam coughed, gagged, and then manifested his wings—only to crash into a nearby tree, cursing violently as he tumbled off. Despite this, he still managed to teleport. Right into another tree.

The sequence of events made Shiv almost double over laughing. Adam, meanwhile, wiped away all the blood and viscera covering his face and armor, his eyes wide with rage. “Enough! Stop! Stop!” Shiv came to a halt before the Young Lord practically choking, pointing at the other man’s expression. Disgust, horror, misery, and violent anger simmered on Adam’s face. “You think this is funny? You—you cover another man in your... your *gore and blood*, and you use your own flayed skin to bind him, and you think it’s funny?”

“Your... screams sure are,” Shiv said, gasping for breath.

“You are a *sick* man, Shiv. Sick! Broken Moon! I thought—I thought we were supposed to be training? That—that I was—”

“That you were going to put me in my place?” Shiv finished, staring at Adam.

“I did put you in your place. Several times.”

“When? Tell me when? Because it seems like I have you at my mercy.”

“Yes. Finally. After four bloody hours of wandering blind through the wilderness, getting hit by my arrows over and over, getting hit time and time again.”

Shiv waved him off. “Yeah. And I get hit by raindrops a lot too. Which was what your arrows were to me: raindrops.”

“Did you notice me not using the truly heavy spells I have? Did you not notice how I avoided striking you with massive bolts of lightning? Or—or mind-piercer arrows?”

“Oh, so you were just shooting at me for fun, then? Is having soft hands and no muscle a class at the academy?”

“No, but usually, we don’t deal with a demented maniac who throws his own blood and flesh at people and whose highest level skill is *Toughness* of all things. Hunting you is like trying to kill a Titan Boar. Except you’re much smaller, are capable of some *crippled, non-healing* variant of Biomancy, and you’re capable of competent planning. Damn you!”

Shiv wanted to continue the banter, but he paused. “Wait, did you just compliment me?”

“No! It’s an obvious observation. I loathe-loathe-*loathe* you, but the fact of the matter is that you’re not an idiot. And pretending you are isn’t going to help me.” Adam used his Hydromancy to blast all the blood and biomass off his armor as he scowled. Shiv felt him, pulling away the bits of mass stuck in crevices and gaps. “I hate the fact that you can plan! I hate your plans! I hate the very way you plan! And I hate your damned cape!”

“You could have asked me for the rapier,” Shiv said.

“Yes! I should have! Damn your smug, goading nature and damn my pride too!” As the last of Adam’s frustration left him, he folded his arms and sulked. But it was halfhearted. “Launching a set of armor at me. The thing you did back there. It was a good idea. I have a hard time telling if you’re inside the armor or not when you’re airborne.”

“Because my footsteps?”

“Yes. That, and I need to react. React before you can get close enough to use your Biomancy. Frankly, I shamed myself by letting you get close. If this wasn’t practice...” Adam shook his head. “It won’t happen again. Mainly because I would rather *die* than let you wrap... This! This!” He pointed at Shiv’s discarded skin decoys. Decoys Shiv untied and moved back into his cloak, drawing a disgusted sound from Adam. “That is *disgusting*.”

“It’s funny,” Shiv said. “I got you to waste some shots on them earlier. And they make good ropes, actually.”

“Only someone truly sick of the heart would enjoy using something like that.”

“I don’t really enjoy using it, but it does make my Intimidation go up. You just screamed and I thought that was—”

“Yes! Fine! It scares me! I don’t like dealing with your flayed bodies! I don’t like all the blood and gore! Are you happy?”

“I... I guess?” Shiv grunted. He stared at the fuming Adam and shrugged. “I had to come up with something. I couldn’t get close to you at all—could barely guess where you were at first. I tried using Stealth but...”

Adam shook his head, water droplets flying from his crimson hair. “If it was a skill you used before, it has not kept pace with your others.”

“No,” Shiv said. “All I could do was avoid the worst of your hits while taking and drinking momentum from the rest. Your Awareness is too high, so I can’t really ambush you. You can fly pretty well, so I can’t chase you in the air for long, even if I fling myself around using Biomancy. And that’s not getting your Portomancy and all the other magical skills you have at the same time. Why the hells do you have so many skills?”

“Because every situation calls for a different solution,” Adam said. “That, and I started my training early. Earlier than most.”

“Yeah. It shows. Momentum Core was the only way I could close with you. Everything else wasn’t working.”

“Every time you use that damned, monstrous skill, I fight the urge to spit blood,” Adam muttered, his expression distant. “I curse the owl for letting you achieve such an evolution. Every time you discharge, it’s like a small Dynamancy Bomb going off. I can’t even fly against the shockwaves. You flung me off my vantage point more than once.”

“I was just trying to cut down enough of the trees to find you. But you just kept moving.”

“I had to. It doesn’t matter that your weapon skills are lacking to nonexistent or that you make questionable tactical choices all the time. I said before, you’re built like a Titan Boar. More enduring, in fact, since you keep repairing your armor with those corpses you have stored.” Adam shivered with disgust. “All your deaths have shaped you into a nigh-unstoppable juggernaut for your skill threshold. At least physically. System, it sickens me more to imagine what might happen to your Toughness soon...”

“Oh, so I’ve graduated from being a meat-shield?” Shiv asked with a laugh.

“Yes,” Adam said through clenched teeth. “Do you want more praise?”

“Do you have more?”

The Young Lord let out a disgusted snort and walked away.

“Where are you going?” Shiv called.

“To clear my mind of you! And of the sensations of your skin latching around my face!”

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31 (II) Disciples

31 (II)

Disciples

“You can clear it back at camp,” Valor said, descending from some place above. *“I have seen enough today. Enough to know how to further your development.”*

“Ah, there you are,” Adam said, scowling at the floating skull. “You have us trek through the wilderness for days, do nothing to train us, and just watch us. And then when I ask if we’re any closer to the gate? What do we get? Not a clear reply from you. How are you going to teach us? No answer.” The Young Lord huffed as the skull just stared at him.

Adam's scowl collapsed as he bit his lip. "I... I apologize. I am just... my blood is high. I need a moment to... to reorient myself."

Valor continued to say nothing. The silence dragged long enough for Shiv to be uncomfortable. Only then, did Valor speak again.

"Do you know what am I doing right now?" Valor asked.

Adam looked to Shiv, but the Deathless didn't have an answer either. "I... being silent? Judging me?"

"No. I am observing you. And I am being patient. This is not doing nothing. This is the most essential thing any warrior—assassin or otherwise—must learn how to do. The environmental conditions were favorable to you. Your skills were many. Your experience far greater. And you did proceed with some caution and seriousness. You did watch him. But you were undone by something."

"His tactics?" Adam sighed.

"Your own pride. I told you two to spar with each other. Shiv was not to hurt you. You could kill him. But I said nothing about retreat. Or ambushes. Or anything else."

"So... I could have just left?" Adam said.

"You could have done many things. You could have teleported the moment his decoy armor closed in and avoided any chance of a confrontation. But you stayed to unleash your arrows because you felt challenged and slighted. Especially by him. And now you are conflicted about him."

Adam scoffed. "Oh, yes. Please, tell me more things I know."

"Certainly. Here is an uglier lesson: You understand better than I do your flaws, but you are not yet strong enough to decide against them. You do not have a technical problem, you have an emotional one. But that is just as well. I was far worse than you at your age. I did far worse than you. This is the consequence of life. But it is curable. You can be made stronger. But you must lose against your heart over and over and over. Until it makes you disgusted. And then finally you win. And the impossible thing you couldn't do before becomes just another decision."

The Young Lord stared at Valor and grimaced. "And... you can tell all this just by watching me?"

"You can tell a lot about someone by observing what they decide to do. Yes. This will be the first thing I teach you. You are right. Your academy has trained you. But your training is mostly incomplete. So. To start. You train him."

“What?” Adam said, blinking. He looked at Shiv? “Are you—are you serious? My training is to train *him*?”

“Yes. Show him what you learned at the academy. Make a competent soldier of him. A leader. He is a warrior now. But too much a brute. Too raw. There is power. But someone else always has much more. There is cunning. But it is the cunning of a scavenger and a stalker—of a spurned boy fortifying himself using scraps. Now, a fearless brawler remains instead of the boy, but his habits must be honed.”

“And why must *I* do this?” Adam asked.

“Because you cannot decide if you want to like him for who he is and the times he’s saved your life, or hate him because of what he is and the things his parents did to yours.”

Adam just looked at Valor, his eyes only managing a weak glare.

Valor continued. *“The moment you decide how you wish to treat him for good is when you start mastering yourself. I cannot blame you for your feelings. But you must be responsible for them. The world cares not for our wounds. And there is no one else but us who can reach inside to clean out the deep pain inside.”*

The Young Lord took on a contemplative and absent look, but ultimately said nothing in response.

“Shiv. Your challenges are just so inverted. I fear you may be the most resilient disciple I will take, in mind and flesh.”

“You fear?” Shiv said, unsure what Valor meant.

“Yes. Because it is hard to change someone who is unshakable. I will make my worries about you plain: you are not hardened by your life, you are almost unscratched by it. It took me years to process the bitterness and loathing I felt, even after murdering my own mother. It took me longer to become a proper person. For whatever reason, you are not this way. There is too little bitterness. So little it bothers me. It does not fit.”

Shiv shrugged. “I just deal with things, Valor. I don’t let them linger or dwell on them.”

“Yes. And that is part of the reason why you are blunt and raw. Life is pure arithmetic to you, isn’t it? Simple in many regards.”

The Deathless thought about that and nodded. “Yeah. I’d say so.”

Valor hummed a laugh. *“For the first time, I will have a student that has completed the final part of their training before all others.”*

“What part is that?”

“The descent and return from death.”

Shiv didn't think that was exactly fair. “My Path lets me do that. It's good for me. I don't think it's the same for those who have to do a ritual.”

“The technical aspects of the ritual are one thing,” Valor said, his tone hushed. *“But there is a price most pay for facing that dreaded place. For entering the embrace of the Great Enemy and returning. Death has broken many disciples I thought promising. It scarred them. It wounded their spirits and left them less than who they were. But the amount of times you have died... and the ways you have died... you stand unaffected. Even now.”*

“I mean, I got a lot of skill levels.”

Valor laughed. *“As I said: Arithmetic. But I fear the descent won't be so easy for the Young Lord. So. When the time comes, you must aid him as well. Give him whatever peace you can.”*

Adam didn't respond to this, so deep was he in his own thoughts. Shiv was getting a grasp on how Valor intended to shape them. The ancient Pathbearer was going to build them both from different foundations. Spiritually for Adam, technically for Shiv. It made sense to some extent, but Shiv still wasn't sure about being trained by Adam. There was still a lot of *wrongness* that rested between them, but maybe that was the point.

“You finished for the day. We go back. Preferably before the girl drags the rest of her scouting party to find us.” Valor paused. *“I blame you for this, Shiv.”*

“What? What did I do?”

“Cook.” Valor sounded practically miserable. *“Cook very well, apparently. The Umbrals seem addicted. The Young Lord keeps trying to steal more. Even the Weaveresses that pass through grab a bite. And I continue to lack a stomach or even a tongue. Maddening.”*

“Well, then I guess we should endeavor to find the fragment of you that has the fleshy bits next.”

The skull went still in the air. Then turned to Adam. *“Adept. I want you to understand that I absolutely have favorites among my pupils. And the favorite right now by far is him.”*

Adam finally emerged from his thoughts to narrow his eyes at the hovering skull. “Fine. Just so that you remember that I'm the one that gets to taste his cooking right now.”

Somehow, Valor managed an expression of abject misery with a flicker in his sockets and a twisting of his jaw.

Might of Mass > 71

Diamond Shell > 80

Momentum Core > 64

Parry > 31

Biomancy > 45

Pyromancy > 6

Psychomancy > 6

Awareness > 10

Intimidation > 10

Disease Resistance > 8

Practical Metabiology > 11

Vitality Drain > 9

Revenant > 5

“I really need to find something capable of killing me brutally,” Shiv muttered. Uva lightly elbowed him in the side before chiding him with her eyes. “What? My leveling’s slowed. I’ve only gained one or two levels for my skills over the past few days and deaths.” He frowned into the fish head soup he made. It was still piping hot—a benefit that even minor Pyromancy allowed—but looking at himself reminded him how slow his Cooking Skill was progressing as well. “Now I feel even worse. If only there was a way I could get killed because my cooking wasn’t good enough somehow...”

A silence dragged on for a while..Shiv continued staring at his own reflection in the soup. He scratched at his stubble. “I need a shave too...” It was then that the silence became unnatural. As he looked up, he realized that the entire camp was glaring at him. Including Uva.

“His leveling has slowed over the past few days, he says,” Adam grumbled, taking another bite out of his fish head. “You disgust me, Shiv. You disgust us all.”

Shiv coughed. "I'm just... I'm just used to dying and making things quicker. Running into that patch of diseased bushes did wonders for my Disease Resistance."

"Yes," Uva said, her voice thin with annoyance. "And then you kept running back into the same patch until it stopped killing you."

"I managed to isolate it with my Biomancy by the end," Shiv said. "Of course I might have... caused some kind of cell deficiency too. I think it's because I pulled all my infected cells together or something. I'll check the chapter again. I think Dven will like to examine my corpses too. Maybe it'll find something interesting there."

"And that's a sentence I never thought I'd hear in my life," Ikki said, swallowing a piece of lettuce. "You're really not bothered by dying at all, huh?"

"It's just efficient," Shiv said, shifting on his seat. Adam and Uva made eye contact then, and both of them shook their heads. "What?"

"Shiv. You can be very dear and very sweet. And considerate. But also sometimes casually disturbing. Sometimes all at the same time."

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"I'm just being efficient," Shiv repeated, feeling a little attacked. He felt like he'd been over this topic many times the last few days. "I think how fast I progress is based on how severe my deficiencies are when I die. But dying the same way to the same threat eventually erodes the effectiveness of my Feat. I need to... seek out new deaths too. Broaden my experiences."

"You're doing it again," Uva said, her tone flat. "You're doing it right now."

"Ah. Sorry."

Ikki drained her soup with a loud slurp, staring at Shiv over the edge of the bowl. "I think it's pretty weird but also kind of cool. Did Adam manage to kill you at all?"

"No," the Young Lord groaned loudly. "He's practically a giant cockroach by this point. A giant cockroach that can get very fast and who uses his dimensional cloak as a morgue for all his corpses so he can keep rebuilding his armor."

"Oh! So that's why you're harvesting your old bodies," Ikki said. "Wow. That's a lot better of a reason than I thought." Check latest chapters at [Novel_Fire\(.\)net](http://Novel_Fire(.)net)

"What did you think I was doing?" Shiv asked.

"I donno. Mad Biomancy stuff. Like trying to keep a heart beating in a dead body or fusing flesh together to create a monster."

Shiv started at her. "I might have done a bit of the former..."

"Eww." Ikki grimaced. "Did it work?"

"Yeah," Shiv said. "I even got the body to breathe again, but the mind wasn't working anymore. I think it has something to do with being without oxygen for too long. Or my soul not being inside it."

"Creepy. But cool."

Uva rubbed at her temple. "Mostly creepy for me. Sorry, Shiv."

Shiv shrugged. "Biomancy isn't everyone's thing."

"Neither is dying," Adam muttered off by the side. Shiv caught the other Umbrals nodding in agreement.

Shiv eyed Uva's nightglass field armor and considered something. "Actually... Do you guys want some armor?"

"Your skeleton?" Uva said, raising an eyebrow. She looked at the thick plates of Diamond Shelled bones presently fused around Shiv. She opened her mouth to say something in the negative, then paused. "It does seem rather durable, actually."

"It's also bloody dense and heavy. Like him sometimes." Adam breathed. "I would know because he hit me with some of his bones. And there's also another problem: Biomancy. Shiv, do you have an easy way for a Non-Biomancer to get in and out of your bone armor?"

Shiv paused. "Not yet?"

Adam put down his bowl and twirled his fingers as if to say, "*See? That's something you need to consider.*"

Uva, however, thought a bit further. "I think there might be potential here. Maybe not as a full ensemble but as additional layering for the chest and legs. Heavy armor for heavy combat."

Shiv looked at her nightglass armor again. "Yeah. The nightglass weapons are pretty sharp, but I found them to be pretty brittle, too."

"The armor is treated," Uva said. "And I wear my enchanted leathers beneath, so it's not likely to cut me even if it does break. But if we were suffering a bombardment and my outer protection got compromised... Shrapnel can prove quite deadly."

"And some bone plates might just patch things up."

Uva nodded. "That's what I was thinking."

"Oh, does someone want to wear their dead boyfriend?" Ikki teased.

"Ikki," Uva said, a hint of warning in her voice. This was not the "big sister mode, I'm going to pull your ear Uva," this was "recently promoted Cherished Sister operating in the field Uva." The young Umbral coughed, offered a formal apology, and then started maintaining her equipment.

"So," Adam said, staring at Valor. "We missed a few topics out there earlier. You made things clear about our training, but what about the gate?" The Young Lord looked to Uva. "Are we close? Far? Where are we? Can I ask for some details and get something more than just a non-reaction."

Shiv noticed Uva looking to Valor for permission, and the skull nodded. "We are a day's walk from reaching the Compact gate."

"A day's walk?" Adam said, blinking in surprise. Then, his expression hardened. "We can get there faster if we just teleported. Do we have a route scouted? Wards? I can fly there and back within a few hours. Chart a route. Secure a space for us to jump across."

"It must be traveled on foot," Uva said. "Heavy warding. More importantly, Compact has Rift Demons contracted to serve as their scouts. Thus far, we have not been able to get past them. Attempting to teleport in the vicinity of a Rift Demon is... a dangerous proposition."

"So, me and Shiv will eliminate the Rift Demons, then," Adam said. "He'll charge them from the front and smash them, while I strike with precision from afar. And then—"

"No," Uva said, her voice firm. "We are not risking combat. Come." She rose from where she sat. "Ikki. Legend Valor. Shall we show them?"

"Show us what?" Adam asked.

"Something to give you some perspective on the obstacles we face ahead," Valor said, his voice ending with a low growl of foreboding.

The Young Lord sneered as he gazed into the campfire. "I *will* get back home. No matter what it takes. No matter the struggle. The entire world can be against me, and it will make no difference."

A few meters away, Ikki snorted a laugh loud enough for everyone to hear.

"You doubt me, Sister Ikki?" Adam asked.

Ikki paused, looked over her shoulder, and nodded without hesitation. "Yeah. I do."

“This is... bullshit,” Adam breathed.

“That... is not quite the entire world, but it is a sizable *mass* of people,” Shiv took in the horizon and found himself startled and impressed.

“Dimensionals, mostly,” Uva said, her expression focused and intense. There was a quiet anger in her mind as well. And soon, Shiv understood why.

The scene before them was one of fire and industry. The group peered down at the distant horizon from a mountainous high point. Below, dense forests of mega-fungi and arching trees ran—until they suddenly ceased. Severed at the base by *adult-sized* cave biters with blades attached to their sides. True to Valor’s words, the angler fish-looking creature that killed Shiv so many times when he first fell into the Abyss could get much, *much* bigger. Most of them were the size of small hills, and on their backs seemed to be entire lumberyards run by shrouded figures and metallic dimensionals.

Then, the cave biters broke into song, their voices slow and deep, but definitely intelligible. **“WE CUT ONE FOREST, THEN WE CUT ONE MORE, AND THEN WE EAT THE LITTLE ONES, TILL THERE AIN’T ANY NO MORE...”**

And aside from the logger cave biters, there were also others carrying what seemed like golden cathedrals on their backs. Cathedrals stuffed full of treasure. They stomped forward on a vast, black-paved path, and chained to the cave biters were lines and lines of slaves. Shiv could see that a great many of them were Umbrals, but the bulk seemed to be *automata*. And poorly treated ones too. Many were in disrepair, leaking, their electronic voices moaning and crying out in despair.

The caravan of slave-driving, treasure-dealing cave biters passed numerous guard towers infused with glowing fire elementals—Shiv noted the burning orbs at their peak were of the same brightness and design as the skull of the elemental golem he faced back in Passage. “Those towers will fry us if we try a direct approach.”

“They aren’t the main threat,” Uva said, pointing up above. Thanks to his cloak, Shiv had a bit of Shadowsense, and he *perceived* what lurked in the darkness much better than he did before. What he saw were fast, moving shapes. They were like smaller dragons, but their bodies were sharp and jagged. Atop their backs were riders clad in ebony armor. And then there was an even larger shape looming in the back. Its form was colossal—even larger than the adult cave biters, and its outline reminded Shiv of an octopus. There was something about its single glowing eye, though...

“Don’t look at the eye too long,” Uva said. Shiv turned his gaze away. “It will sense you. It’s called a Jealousy, and it’s a Greater Demon—one contracted to guard the gate.”

“But where’s the gate?” Adam said. “I only see watchtowers, dimensionals, slaves, and people surrounding that large stone archway. Hmm. Maybe that’s a small fort off by the side, but still...”

At the end of the ebony road, the merchant cave biters walked toward a colossal, looming archway framing a set of old world ruins. The glowing eye stalks of the cave biters swayed—and fired every now and again, disintegrating slaves clever enough to slip their chains, but foolish enough to flee.

“Godsdamned monsters,” Adam spat.

Shiv agreed, but he was distracted by something else. He wondering how pieces of the old world could scatter so far, but then the archway activated, and a light splashed over all of them. A fiery, disturbing light. That’s when Shiv realized what he was truly looking at: the *gate*. The gate leading back to the surface, supposedly. But through the gate he glimpsed at the visage of another world. Another dimension.

This one looked like a vision from a nightmare, abstract but industrious, a world of metal and smoke. He heard the slaves wail as they were marched into the gate, their shrieks echoing across the lands. Soon, the shrieks became a constant, Umbral and automata voices becoming the bulk. Ikki’s expression hardened. Uva’s eyes went flat as she deadened her heart.

Beyond the gateway were other structures. Massive brass structures with magical sigils seared onto their surfaces. Off by the side, Shiv thought he glimpsed something that almost looked like a star, but it was black as ink and seemed to have chains latched into it. Massive chains connecting it to other edifices in the distance.

As the merchant cave biters passed through one after another, Shiv clenched his jaw in disgust. “Those cave biters. They’re running slaves?”

“Most of them are slaves too,” Ikki said. “They’re contracted to a master. The Compact of Babel is a people of laws and agreements. But not justice or ethics. They will deal in anything, and they seek to spread as far and take as much as they can. Including people.”

“Yeah, well, they’re going to need to change their habits real soon,” Shiv said, glaring at the scene before him. There must’ve been tens of thousands of slaves going in there... Just how many people were being transported? A slow, boiling hate churned inside Shiv. He hated slavers on principle. He hated slavers because they offended his every desire. He hated slavers because they existed.

And soon, he would show these slavers just how much he hated them, in every way he could.

“Is this... the only way back to the surface?” Adam whispered.

“Sure, you *can* also try navigating your way back up the Abyss,” Ikki said. “But good luck with that. You’ll be wandering for months if the Court doesn’t catch you, or Descenders don’t recruit you, or the Necrotechs don’t execute you for being a surfer.”

“We’re not just going through that gate,” Shiv declared. “We’re *taking* it from Compact.”

Uva stared at him and bit her lip. “That will be tantamount to war, Shiv. War between Weave and Compact. We have... *agreements* in place. That we won’t trespass on each other’s territory or take action against each other. At least not openly.”

“That’s fine. I don’t want to implicate you. Not the Composer. Not Weave. Not the Arachnae Order. You aren’t the ones that will be doing the taking. This is gonna be *my* gate.”

The Psychomancer’s mouth opened slightly. “That’s...”

“Suicide?” Shiv asked, grinning. “Madness? Maybe. But it just sounds like a good time to me. Guess the System heard my prayers earlier.”

“They’ll have mind mages. Powerful ones.”

“Then, I better get to practicing more.”

Uva eyed him, and nodded. “I suppose we should.”

“You see now why the Composer was reluctant about this place,” Valor said. The fire in his eyes burned dim as he watched the trail of atrocity. *“The Compact of Babel is a stain among the Faiths. Even more than the First Court. They traded everything once decent about themselves for power, and now to fill the hollowness of their culture, they create great citadels in the Abyss and across dimensions. Citadels filled with suffering and commerce. And they call that industry. And they call that civilization. And they proclaim themselves to be the true inheritors of the old world.”*

The skull turned, regarding Shiv and Adam. *“Shiv. Your declaration. Do you mean it?”*

“Yeah. I look forward to killing every last one of the slavers. Even if it kills me. Broken Moon, I hope they can kill me.”

“Good. Adam? Are you still driven to reach your town in time to save it.”

The Young Lord’s stare hardened. “Never doubt me. If he can do it, I can.”

Uva looked at Adam and then Shiv. *“It seems like a running theme between us Pathbearers.”*

“Just the ones that love the climb,” Shiv said, earning a slight smile from her.

“Still...” Adam sighed. “How the bloody hells are we going to get in? Even if we could by some miracle—”

“Hello,” Shiv said. “Did you just say my name?”

“—*Shut. Up.* By some miracle... defeat that small army of... giant monsters guarding the gate, how are we going to get in without them just shutting it off?”

Everyone pondered that question for a moment. Except for Valor. He just observed. Not the gate, but Shiv and Adam.

“I might have a few angles of approach,” Uva said. “Some Shadow Cells have conducted raids on the flesh caravans to liberate their victims. Furthermore, we have contacts in the Compact garrison. Defectors and spies of our own...”

“I might have an idea,” Shiv said. And from within his cloak, he pulled out his other recent Quest reward. The fused bronze face born of countless aviary helmets melting together during the mana bomb felt almost like a feather in Shiv’s hands, but he regarded its Enchantments once more.

Equipment: [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

“Is that the mask you got from the Quest?” Adam asked.

“Yeah,” Shiv said, eyeing the rest of the group. “We said we wanted a field test. Well. Let’s find out what *Perfect Semblance* lets me do.”

And thus, he placed the mask on his face, and felt a dense barrier immediately sever his Psychomancy from the outside world.

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32 (I) Ambush

After the Great One fell, at first, there were three.

First were the Necrotechs, intellectuals and engineers who survived the black age of Post-Integration, and built a shelter near the Great One's pulsing heart, painting their souls deep with its mana.

Then there were the Descenders—savage warrior tribes united by a new purpose, and rising from the Abyssal ruins, forging their knightly orders along the length of the Great One's bones.

And from them came those who needed more, those who gazed into the Great One's veins and drank deep when they were destitute or desperate, the divine ichor twisting their mortal shells to be chalices of eternal blood.

But they were not the only ones that were nested in the deep. For the Great One brought two outsiders with their descent.

The first was a daughter, born from the Great One's parted flesh. By song and grace she trailed the world, taking the needy and small, guarding them in a web of light.

And the second was a great gate—a gate unleashed by the Great One's mind as they dream during this brief interlude of death. And with their dreams they touched countless dimensions beyond, countless worlds aside, and for the first time, pilgrims from across arrived to these gates, seeking what lay beyond.

But it was the Followers of the Blind Maiden that finally laid claim to the Dreaming Gate and built their pandimensional city-states within the Great One's mind. And they did it through the invisible chains of the old world, now bestowed by the System's might.

Contracts were made. Demons were bound and made to give proper service. In return, blood was offered.

Blood and treasure and desire and life and memories and more.

And as more sought the gate, the number of contracts and cities grew and grew, until something greater needed to bind them together in the face of the other Faiths. And so, for the first time, the Lords of Law convened to forge a grand agreement that would birth a new kingdom, the likes of which Integrated Earth had never seen. And after a full century of toil, machinations, deceit, betrayal, war, marriage, and exhaustion, four signatures graced the page of the Compact. And hence, a Fifth Faith of Law and Unseen Chains was born...

Ambush

“Shiv?” Uva said, looking upon him with a faint glint of concern in her eyes. “What just happened? Why can’t I sense you?” Her Psychomancy field pressed against Shiv’s mask, but like a dam, the waves of her mana found no point of entry.

It was true the other way around as well. Shiv’s own mind mana was contained—bottled in place against an equally impenetrable barrier. He pressed against it with all his strength, but it didn’t yield. He could feel it shake slightly as Uva tried harder, but ultimately, it endured. “I think this might be the Heroic Mind-Shield enchantment. You might need to have a Heroic Skill Evolution to get through this. Or maybe fully be in the threshold.”

“Threshold is my guess,” Uva said, retracting her mana. She pressed her lips together and considered Shiv with unease. “It is a good item, but I have seen others like it. Helmets and accessories meant to shield someone’s mind against a Psychomancer. They usually only offer resistance, though. Or detection. This is a layer of true separation.”

“You want to try it on?” Shiv asked. IF YOU WANT TO READ MORE CHAPTERS, PLEASE VISIT [novelFire](#)

She considered it for a moment. “When we get back to Weave. There might be someone I know who would be interested in examining such a mask. If you’re willing to show them. It is your Quest reward, after all.”

“Sure,” Shiv said. “The more I learn about this thing, the better. Speaking of which, let’s see if I can figure out this thing’s Perfect Semblance enchantment. It sounds like it might let them pretend to be someone, but...” Shiv trailed off as the mask vibrated. He stared at Uva for a moment, and a notification appeared before his eyes.

Kill her and take her face to claim her semblance and steal a skill.

“Absolutely felling not!” Shiv cursed. The idea of murdering Uva and *taking* her face made his stomach churn slightly. “Well, I guess that’s how that works... Broken Moon, that’s kind of felling dark.”

“What?” Adam said, squinting at Shiv’s mask. “You found out how it works?”

Shiv tested it on Adam. The same type of notification appeared. “Yeah,” Shiv said. “If you stare at someone’s face long enough, you get a notification telling you to kill them

and take their face to claim their semblance. It also says something about stealing a skill.”

“Well, I suppose I should have expected such charm from the identity-snatchers of Aviary,” Uva said, her voice flat and scornful. “You said this mask was formed by the mana bomb? Of all the raven and crow helmets melting together.”

“Some other helmets with them as well,” Shiv muttered. “But yeah. It fits. This is a mask fit for an assassin. Wonder why the System decided to offer me this as a reward. Or how it ensured its creation in the first place.”

“Because the System wants you to strive toward strife,” Valor explained. The skull floated closer to Shiv, drifting around him, considering the mask. *“Hm. Yes. Very much the visage of an assassin. But quite useful for us right now... Quite useful indeed. True to its Tier, it allows you to ape the capabilities held by some dedicated Heroes on the Path of the Shadow. I wonder if it only works on people, though. Or a race with great similarity to yours.”*

“Not sure yet,” Shiv said. “Also... the elemental golem I fought didn’t have a face—and some other things don’t look human at all. Perfect Semblance might be missing some details about its scope of effect.”

“Perhaps. This will be something useful to discover early during experimentation and not in a crisis.”

Shiv looked past Valor and considered the gate in the distance. There were still screams trailing in from afar, and though they were gazing down from a vantage point, there were certain things that could only be gleaned when observed from the ground. “I have an idea about how we can start. I might want to take a walk closer to the gate. See just what kind of forces and other surprises they have arrayed there.”

Uva shook her head immediately. “No. The risk is too great, and you’re rushing too much. Take this slowly and carefully.” Shiv wanted to insist but she continued. “You might be able to return from death, but tell me, does the mask have a Binding Enchantment?”

Shiv looked through the list again and frowned. “No. It’s missing that. My cloak has it.”

“So, then, should you die,” she continued, “you are likely to lose the mask and find your mind exposed to the enemy. And that is ignoring the danger posed by the Jealousy.”

Shiv looked up into the “sky” and frowned at the colossal, looming octopus demon. Its single, crimson eye glowed like the sun through a film of rising smog. “How high is its Psychomancy Skill?”

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"I couldn't contend with it," Uva admitted begrudgingly. "I do not think even the owl would be fully confident. It is a Great Demon that hails from a dimension that feeds on emotions—and its flavor is deceit and heartbreak."

"Yeah," Shiv grunted, seeing her point. "Might not be the best idea to draw its attention. Yet. But we're going to need to make our approach at some point, and the mask is my best chance of surviving any encounter against a powerful mind mage. At least in the near term. Depends on how good my teacher is."

Uva gave him a slight smirk. "Depends on how willing the student is to learn. But you see my point. I have an alternative suggestion. One that will be helpful for all of us." A particularly piercing cry came from afar then, making Adam flinch. "One that might clear our minds of the blackness we have just witnessed and mete out a bit of retribution."

"Well, do tell," Adam said, sounding impatient. "And know that we don't have months to do this—we have maybe weeks at most by this point." Something on his face soured. "And I can't believe that the capital hasn't sent reinforcements. My father—he is a hero! Blackedge is meant to guard against the Abyss. To lose it would compromise the Orange Belt and threaten Fortress City Despero next."

"I suspect things will not go nearly that far," Valor said with a breath. *"Sullain is targeting Blackedge specifically—your father especially. This is an act of revenge, if the Composer's words are true. A home for a home. Sullain is many things—and a radical in the extreme. But he is no true fool. He knows he dances a fine line already, and if he pushes further into the surface, he will have no point of retreat or recovery. He might be able to endure for a time in the light, but not the bulk of his forces."*

"Well, that's a real consolation for me," Adam grumbled. "Only my home is at risk. What joy..."

"Your home is at risk in more ways than you know, if Harkness's words are true. She said that the nobles there are playing their games of power, and your father has been targeted specifically, and does not hold the Auroral Court's favor. At least not the bulk of the court..."

"And we're going to believe the words of a mind-twisting murderess who sought to kidnap children and train them as slave-assassins?" Adam spat, disgusted.

"I think there is some truth in her venom. That is why the words likely hurt so much. Regardless, I do agree with you. The Dread Horizon and your town are likely besieged not only literally, but also politically. You two are likely the only variables they have not accounted for."

Adam's sourness diminished slightly. "Very well. Sister Uva. Let's see if we can find ourselves some slavers we can question and..." He looked at Shiv and shook his head. "A face for this walking nightmare to *claim*."

“Oh, and disciples,” Valor added. Both Shiv and Adam regarded him. *“This is part of your training too. Treat it as such. Remember what I want from you.”*

Shiv grinned. Adam grimaced.

“Alright, *Adept Adam,*” Shiv said, gesturing for Adam to lead. “Show this foolish Young *Master-Tier* what he must learn.”

“Fine,” Adam muttered. “I need you to listen closely now... the first class at Phoenix Academy...”

Shiv nodded.

“Was called *shut up and listen* to your instructor! We start that lesson right now.”

“Whoa,” Ikki whispered off by the side. “Did the small surfer just turn into a male Uva?”

Both Uva and Adam glared at the young Umbral at the same time.

“You know what, Sister Uva, perhaps the lesson should be shared with some of your subordinates too.”

Uva nodded. “Hmm. Agreeable.”

“Uva!” Ikki complained.

Between the Umbrals’ familiarity with the wilderness and Adam’s terrifyingly impressive Awareness Skill, it took little time for them to find some stragglers. Adam, Shiv, Uva, and Valor studied a halted cave biter from afar. Below, hidden in the vegetation, were Ikki and the others, spread out and laying in wait.

The cave biter was truly massive—practically the size of a small mountain. It was also loudly bellowing about how it didn’t want to walk anymore, no matter what its contract said.

In response, a few hundred tiny figures holding the treasure trove on its back and driving the slaves on the ground were lashing it with whips. Whips that seemed too small to actually deal such a large beast any harm, but it was flinching each time anyway.

Off along the side of the ebony road, a four meter tall humanoid dimensional made of interlocking shards of metal extracted a few of its blades from the unmoving body of an Umbral. The slave had taken a chance to slip and run when the cave biter decided to go

on strike. That same slave was now laying face down in the soft loam, his blood feeding the bioluminescent blades of grass.

The bright blue backdrop made the pool of dark red ever more distinct.

There were perimeter guards as well. Most were lesser elementals of varying varieties, but Uva pointed out two Grudges, which were lesser demons capable of mind magic to some capacity. They resembled writhing patches of shadow outlined by screaming faces. Just looking at them made Shiv's stomach turn a bit. And then there were a few human looking figures—so human Shiv thought they could pass for surfacers if not for the gleam of their cat-like eyes.

I guess that's an adaptation one gets when living in the Abyss all this time.

"Well, that's not a small group," Adam muttered.

"It's the smallest group you'll find among the slave drivers," Uva said, narrowing her eyes at the enemy. Fully in the field of action, she wore a focus-crystal full helm that covered her entire face, and Shiv felt her mana field expand by half again.

I really do need to get one of those focus crystals. Wait, I think one of those Abyssal humans is holding one... Well, what's yours is going to be mine soon, bastard. Shiv chuckled.

"Shiv. Please don't laugh like that." Adam sighed.

"Like what?" Shiv asked.

"Like you're planning to peel someone's face off for your own use," Uva said, a slightly sardonic edge to her voice. Shiv guessed that she was doing that 'barely smiling' expression under her helmet. "You were planning to do something like that, weren't you?"

"Ah," Shiv said, shrugging. "Yeah, but I was mainly thinking about killing a specific guy for his staff. Your helmet's given me focus crystal envy."

Uva hummed a light laugh. "Now. Plan of attack, Adept Adam?" She looked to the Young Lord, and he just blinked.

"What? You're ceding authority to me?" he asked, surprised.

"I am not ceding anything. I am technically not here. This slave caravan is about to be hit by a group of unaligned raiders or... a *Path-empowered beast*." She gave Shiv a brief glance. "The Arachnae Order and the Composer know nothing, and she sends her condolences to the Lords of Law that reign over Compact."

Adam barked a laugh. “You know something? You’re growing on me, Uva. Which is strange since *you’re not here at all.*”

“I’m glad you understand. Now. What do your surfer war colleges teach you?”

“Many things,” Adam began. He made an “L” shape with his hand and closed one eye as he examined the enemy. “But let’s start with tactics. Right now, we have... approximately 153 active hostiles. Most of them are Initiate. *Barely.* But the Adepts number around twenty. You see those?” He pointed out a few individuals to Shiv. The Deathless was surprised to see how many Adepts were automata as well.

Guess their slavery preferences aren’t exactly prejudicial, Shiv thought. Automata had different needs from humans, but they still had similar enough ethics and morals. Emotions, too, surprisingly enough.

“Wait... you counted thirty more than I see...” Uva muttered.

“That’s because some of the slaves aren’t slaves.” Adam pointed more targets out to Uva and Shiv. “You see those people? They’re too *well-fed.* But more than well-fed, their manacles make the wrong noise with each step—which means they have been modified. And the elementals and guards aren’t really watching them at all... See that idiot in the back? One of her manacles is undone. The other slaves have noticed, but she hasn’t. And the guards aren’t reacting. And that’s not accounting for the rider trying to hide using the towering shroom caps above us.”

Uva was leaning forward with every word, relaying what Adam just told her into her communication brooch. Shiv, meanwhile, couldn’t stop staring at Adam. “Holy shit. You got all that just from a few seconds of watching?”

Adam smirked smugly. “Well, no. I sensed the rider before any of the others. The bastard put a muzzle on his mouth, but the thing’s heartbeat is the sound of thunder in the air—and it’s flying along. I guess it’s probably a rather vicious creature. The skies get quiet when hawks are in flight. Do you know that, Shiv? Because birdsong is like a challenge to a bird of prey, and unfortunately for our friend in the air—” Adam nocked over a half-dozen magical arrows as he drew back on Spellstring. “They are not the hunters here.”

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32 (II) Ambush

32 (II)

Ambush

Somehow, Adam did the impossible: He managed to fully, genuinely, and absolutely impress Shiv. “Well, damn. It’s like I’m looking at your father.”

The Young Lord failed to hide a blush. “Ahem. First lesson: Shut up. Second lesson: You listen. Listen to me.” He pointed at the forces on the ground. “You see them?”

“Yeah?” Shiv said.

“Do not touch them. If you get into the fray, I suspect that most of the slaves will die—and there are approximately... nine-hundred or so slaves in this caravan. Worse, you might scare that big creature, and if it starts stampeding, we could be looking at mass casualties. If we’re going to do a slave raid, then by the gods we’re going to do this right and *precise*. No collateral damage if we can help it.”

“Rightly said,” Uva said with a tone of respect in her voice.

Behind them, Valor chuckled.

“So... what do I do?” Shiv asked, feeling slightly offended. “And I don’t intend to just discharge my Momentum Core among all those people—”

“Right. Don’t intend. But how often does what you intend to happen transpire?” Adam asked.

Shiv thought back to his vampire hunting days and grunted an acknowledgement. He set himself on fire more than a few times to survive after being spotted or surprised. “Yeah. Sometimes...”

“Shit happens,” Adam said. “That is what Captain Irons used to say at the academy for TacStrat101.”

“What’s that?”

“A class. On tactics and strategy. 101 means it’s for beginners.”

“Ah.” And now Shiv was feeling something he hadn’t for Adam in a while: Envy. The Young Lord might not have Shiv’s Path, but he spent years being a Pathbearer—being an actual warrior. Shiv wasn’t blind to tactics, but the approach one took to clearing lesser vampire nests alone was pretty different from what was needed to ambush a small enemy force of a few hundred other Pathbearers without killing any of their transported prisoners.

Especially the big one, Shiv thought. *Don't know how Adam plans to deal with the adult cave biter...*

Adam continued. "So. This being 101, here's the basics to an ambush. Before anything else is intelligence. Know their strength and composition. We have that, but things are still not optimal. We don't know their habits, tactics, or schedule. But the Umbrals do, and this should be the last in the group for a while."

"Okay," Shiv said, actually listening now. "But... what am I doing—"

"I'll get to that. Lesson two, Shiv."

"Fine."

"Tactics are a whole study in and of themselves," Adam said. "There are numerous ways Pathbearers can support each other in combat. Just learning about how to counter Jump Mages is a nightmare—but thankfully, I have that covered." Adam tapped a space mana arrow with a finger. "There are definitely no powerful Portomancers among that group because if there were, they would have just moved the biter—despite the mana strain that would cost. This also tells me that this isn't a well-trained operation. Even poor militaries avoid skimping out on a capable Jump Mage."

"So, you can kill them if they jump?" Shiv asked. "All of them?"

"At the same time? No. I won't be able to track the spatial routes. But I *can* kill most of them before they ever jump. Them, and most of the perimeter guards. Now. Next part. We wish to kill the enemy but keep the slaves alive. That requires *speed* and *accuracy* at the same time."

"And that's you," Shiv said, sighing at the Young Lord's attempts to show off.

"No, it's all of us. I can only get so many—and even then the Adepts will likely not die so easily either. Remember these letters: METTT. Mission. Enemy. Terrain. Troop reinforcement. Timeframe. I explained the first two to you somewhat. Terrain is our advantage—the enemy has, perhaps due to fear of the flora and fauna, kept away from the vegetation flanking the road. This is a mistake. But the vegetation can turn against us if a dedicated Pyromancer survives and ignites all that can burn. It's hard to fight in an inferno."

"You can get used to it." Shiv shrugged. Both Uva and Adam stared at Shiv. "What?"

"For us *normal people*, burning alive isn't that fun. So if we want to preserve the terrain advantage, we do this quick and brutal. We break their resolve. We crack their formation and send most of them running. Ikki and the others can cut down those in the thicket without too much trouble."

The Young Lord let out a huff of consideration. “Another part of this is our own troop availability timeframe. There aren’t many of us, but we should be considerably stronger—at least individually. That will have to make up for a lot—and the fact that we don’t have what we need to achieve a proper ambush formation. But if you and Uva do your parts right, then I don’t think that will be that essential.”

“Oh, and what do you need from this *absent sister*?” Uva asked.

“At a baseline, for you to pin that monster,” Adam said, indicating the cave biter. “If you can keep it calm and still, that will be optimal. What might be better is if you can pacify any other mind mages in the zone before breaking the minds of the hidden slavers.”

Uva nodded. “I will see it done. But there is an issue of range...”

“Yes, I’ll need you to position yourself closer with your sisters. Rush in just enough to pass your Psychomancy field over the biter. Call out any impediments to me using your brooch. Then draw back after you’re done with your sisters. Do not risk discovery.”

“Understood.”

“Shiv,” Adam said. “You are going to be my bird of prey today.”

“I thought you were the hawk?” Shiv asked.

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“I am the hunter.” Adam grinned. “You will be my beast. The final parts for an ambush are surprise, speed, and violence of action. Your Momentum Core discharge will signal us to begin our offensive and allow us to achieve all three of the aforementioned components. You’re going after the rider—to ensure they don’t get away and call in reinforcements, and to deprive them of any aerial assets. Then, after you drop, I will indicate harder targets for you. Hopefully, by this time their formation will break, and most of them will be fleeing into the woods. The risk we face there is if the slaves start fleeing too and mixing in with the slavers. Alternatively, the enemy will hold their positions and fight. I suspect some slaves will die if that is the result. Whatever the case, I’ll strike at the most dangerous foes with my arrows. Just follow the shots.”

“So, you’re going to be the nail guiding the hammer, huh?” Shiv asked.

Adam eyed Shiv and snorted. “I told you, *Master Shiv*, the metaphor is a hunter and his beast. Bring out your skin decoys too and wrap one around your armor. We can’t have the bastards thinking you’re at all human when the killing begins.”

“Join the Traders, he said. Avoid my own indenturement by securing contracts from the others.” Vet spat off the back of his wyvern, hoping his phlegm would land on the head of one of the slaves below. He had been circling the air for well over an hour now, making sure this group of louts actually arrived. The other riders were gone—they were probably in Little Gomorrah drinking it up and getting dirty with the succubi. And here he was again, stuck with monitoring detail. “It’s shit. It’s all shit. I hate this. I hate my life. And I hate the godsdamned slaves—just move! Just fucking move! You signed the felling papers, what are you regretting now?”

And now he was projecting. Because he signed the same papers they did under Compact. The only difference was that he had a Path that gave him the means and skills to be useful. Useful in the sense that he was worth more as a slave catcher than a slave. They, meanwhile, weren’t that useful. Because the System was a felling asshole that either made you someone that could decide their own fate, or someone that appeased someone of the Martial Paths to ensure their survival.

These people weren’t doing much appeasing. That meant they were stupid. That meant they didn’t understand some very simple things.

Vet didn’t blame the cave biter that much. The dumb creature had the intelligence of a dog that could talk, but it was also the size of a mountain. Vet wouldn’t take shit from most people if he were the size of a mountain. Well, unless they were like a Master Pathbearer or something, but like, there weren’t that many of those out there, really?

“*Hungry!*” the wyvern chirped. The damn thing’s long, snake-like neck kept flopping back as it tried to rear back and take a bite out of Vet. He kicked it in the face with his armored boot, reminding it that he was the rider, and not food.

“I godsdamned hate you too,” Vet said, spitting on its forehead. Why he got the Path of the Lancer, he would never know. But a Martial Path was a Martial Path, and it was better than being one of the chained shits below. As Vet passed over the edge of another mushroom cap, he saw that the dumb bastards hadn’t moved at all. “Great One’s Corpse, what is so hard? Just hit the stupid thing with mind magic. It barely has a mind to change! I swear, if I was down there—”

A sudden ripple of wind washed over Vet. The wyvern shrieked, its four insectoid wings jerking hard against a sudden rush of turbulence.

“Hold... felling still!” Vet cursed. “Where’d that bloody wind—”

And then his answer came in the form of a *bomb*. Or at least, Vet thought it was a bomb. Approximately three hundred meters away, an entire patch of the forest below simply *disintegrated* into paste and shrapnel. Vet blinked as he tried to control his wyvern, his mind struggling to process what he was witnessing.

A faint *gleam* in the distance was the only warning he got before *the monster* came.

As Vet chose the wrong time to blink, a *missile* hit him. A missile that held the mass of a small mountain. The only reason Vet survived was because his wyvern took the brunt of the impact—but it didn't spare either of his legs. Vet screamed as his mount splattered apart beneath him while his lower body was shredded below the thighs. Something hard cracked into his chest, and Vet felt things inside him shatter.

He vomited blood inside his helmet, and his Berserker Rage Physicality Skill Evolution triggered. Rather than going into shock from the pain, Vet let out a primal scream and took the handaxe from his hip—a handaxe he swung hard against the offending *missile* that was somehow still grabbing him. His axe crashed against the *missile* to the accompaniment of thunder, but a moment later, Vet realized that there was no thunder at all—it was just the echo of the sound barrier being broken. And as his eyes cleared as well, he saw that it wasn't a missile holding him, but a *nightmare*.

The *thing* was shaped like a man but looked like a monster. It wore a coat of flayed skin over a dense exoskeleton. A large spear followed the monster, drilling through the air and bound to the beast by crimson mana—*Biomancy*. Then, there were its eyes. Eyes of pitch black surrounding rings of light at their center. Vet noticed the monster was wearing a peeled-off human face over its skull-like head, and it was studying him too, ignoring him as he swung his axe against its sides over and over and over... This chapter is updated by novel♦fire

Until the axe shattered, like glass against metal.

The nightmare then reached up and tore Vet's helmet from his face. It stared at him for a moment thereafter before *sighing*. "Hm, no, nope, you're too ugly-looking for me. I'll take someone else instead."

Something inside Vet broke. Tears spilled out of his eyes. He started shrieking. Warmth spread through his ruined greaves. He barely got a note out before the *nightmare* tightened its hand, shaped a spell, and demanded that Vet's heart *stop*.

Intimidation > 14

"Well, at least I got *something* out of that," Shiv muttered as he cast the dead rider aside. He suspected the man had Adept-Tier Toughness and some kind of Adept Physicality Skill Evolution, but not much else besides. Considering how much of Shiv's kinetic energy the wyvern soaked, smashing into the beast first was a good idea. His brief glimpse into its biology also gave him some insights.

He was beginning to notice that many organisms—even plantlife—felt similar at the foundations when compared to people, despite the massive differences in structure and anatomy. *Cells... There's something there...*

Trailing colors flashed far below. Shiv watched as a tide of spell-carrying arrows cut through the air. As he crashed through the caps of mega-fungi and dipped through the foliage, Shiv caught sight of slavers bursting apart, slavers burning, slavers dropping as mind magic arrows destroyed their consciousnesses. In the time it took for Shiv to rip the wyvern and its rider apart, Adam was butchering the weakest enemies wholesale—so quickly that the caravan was still in a stunned state.

A second later, the fleeing began. All sense of cohesion shattered. The cave biter let out a loud cry of: ***“WAIT! WHO IN BRAIN! WHO IN BRAIN WITH—I... I AM SLEEPY...”***

The Deathless grinned. *Nice going, Uva.* He reached into his cloak to retrieve his brooch—because having it on him while he discharged Momentum Core would have disintegrated the device outright. “This is Shiv. Rider’s dead. Mount’s dead. Touching down soon.”

“Confirmed,” Uva said, sounding slightly distracted. *“I have the beast. Their mind mages have been pacified as well. Note that some of the slavers are using the slaves as shields.”*

Adam’s sneering laugh came through the brooch with an interference crackle. *“Not for bloody long.”*

Then, there came the sound of more arrows being loosed—ending with crackles of lightning and screams.

Adam’s going to be a real problem when his Marksmanship or whatever he has hits Master, Shiv thought. *I’m kind of looking forward to it, actually...*

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32 (III) Ambush

32 (III)

Ambush

Shiv’s drifting thoughts came to an end as he smashed through a final layer of vegetation. He blasted through dense branches the size of bridges back on Blackedge and accelerated his fall with a push of his Biomancy before impacting the ground. Rather than sinking into the soil and sending shrapnel born of earth and debris

everywhere, he *absorbed* the force of his landing using his Momentum Core and found himself an eighth full already.

Just then, over a dozen *organisms* entered his Biomancy field. Shiv turned, stomping through the woods with a bone dagger in his left hand before taking his bone drill with his right. He laid the drill on his shoulder as he spotted his newest enemies. Some slavers were making a run for it—dragging an entire row of enchained automata and Umbrals behind them. Shiv counted eight slavers. Only two had magical resistance, while one had a *dot* of Biomancy around them.

Poor bastards, Shiv said. Then, he saw the states of the slaves, and whatever discomfort he felt vanished.

The chained automata and Umbrals were dragged along their sides, their weight paltry to the Physicality of their captors. Most of them were either Pathless still, barely Initiate, or non-martial Pathbearers. They couldn't keep up with the slavers, so they were just being dragged. He could feel most of them missing entire stretches of skin—and see automata with wires exposed and coolant leaking.

It was about this point that the slavers spotted him emerging from the dark of the woods and all ground to a halt.

“What is that?” a spear-wielding slaver, an Umbral woman, curiously, cried out, pointing her weapon at Shiv. “What the felling *shit* is that?”

A bulky Abyssal human clenched his jaw and chambered his shoulder-mounted ballista. “It's dead! That's what it is!”

He fired. A huge spike of raw iron shot out. Back when Shiv was Pathless, he wouldn't be able to perceive this thing coming. Now, it was practically a *snail* to him. Shiv tapped his bone drill against the coming projectile and stole its momentum. It crashed into the mud at his feet. Shiv stepped over it.

The Abyssal human's eyes widened as he tried to ready another shot. Shiv tested the man's Reflexes with his bone drill in response. A second later, the man was pinned chest-first to the base of a mushroom, gurgling blood as the other slavers looked on in horror.

“Looks like you need to work on your Reflexes,” Shiv said, feeling the man writhe. “Well. Maybe in another life. I think... yeah, I hit them. The drill's through your ascending aorta. Won't be long now.”

The Abyssal human's leg twitched as he relieved himself a final time.

The other slavers moaned in horror, and now the slaves were looking up at Shiv from where they lay. He stood there silently, draped in his own flayed skin, wearing his own

bones, a pitch-black dimensional cloak shivering behind him, casting him with another layer of menace.

“Shiv. Do you know the best way to win a bout?” Adam had asked before Shiv launched himself.

“Kill them before they’re ready?” Shiv had replied.

“No. It’s to win without even fighting. And that might be something you can do with your... habits. You certainly enjoyed terrifying me earlier, so why not use it against those actually deserving?”

“Is that why I’m wearing my own skin?”

“Yes. Horrific as it is. It might make them surrender. If nothing else, I expect you to get a Master-Tier Evolution for Intimidation soon.”

And Adam might not be wrong. Both the slavers and the slaves shared a mutual expression of absolute terror. There was an Umbral child among the slaves, her lip quivering, her small body shaking. The armed slavers weren’t much better. One of them tried to run. Shiv shaped his Biomancy and held her skin in place. While her muscles kept going. She pushed forward. Shiv pulled back. A second and a bone-chilling ripping sound later, most of the slavers and slaves got an in-depth anatomy lesson from Shiv as they looked upon the fleeing slaver’s exposed flesh.

Practical Metabiology > 13

“Hell yeah!” Shiv laughed. “I finally pulled that off.” He was proud of himself. He had been trying to extract the skin off someone without doing any deeper damage to improve his control. Ekkihurst claimed it was supposed to be simple in *Odes*, so Shiv kept trying—and was rewarded. It didn’t strain his Biomancy much at all, either. It was just about disconnecting the right parts and supporting the rest.

A whimper of absolute horror sounded from the Umbral slaver holding the spear. She turned. Shiv stared intently at her... and thought it best that he find a male to test Perfect Semblance on. It might be awkward pretending to be a woman. And an Umbral woman at that. He looked at the other slavers.

“Alright. Which one of you is the *prettiest*? I need a new face.”

The Umbral slaver’s eyes rolled up into the back of her head, and she dropped. The other ones screamed. The slaves screamed harder. Including the small slave child—her heart was pumping at dangerous speeds.

Intimidation > 18

Ah shit, Shiv winced. I didn't want to traumatize the slaves too. Dammit.

Stolen story; please report.

"Shiv! Shiv!" A series of arrows crashed against something hard as Adam called in. *"I found a tougher nut—and the bastard elemental's closing in on Ikki. Follow the sound of my arrows and deal with the problem!"*

"Got it," Shiv said. He looked at the slavers. "Never mind. I'll take one from one of your corpses later." Find the newest release on

This was the exact wrong thing to say if he wanted to calm the slaves, as they all started wailing for mercy. It didn't help that he used Biomancy to obliterate all the slavers right after—and launched his bone drill through the two that had resistance. Shiv felt his Intimidation shoot up another level as he stared awkwardly at the screaming, weeping slaves now covered in slaver bits. "I... Uh, just stay here. Someone who doesn't like wearing parts of their own corpse will come and help you in a bit."

Shiv gave them a nod, realized none of them were going to be in shape to run away because of their injuries and how much their legs were shaking, and sprinted away.

"Broken Moon, I feel like a bastard," Shiv muttered, trying to unhear the Umbral child. "I might have gotten a little too carried away there. Too used to just pulling people and stuff apart..."

Intimidation > 19

Shiv blasted out into a clearing a minute later, using the resounding impacts of Adam's arrows as his guide. He arrived to a scene of carnage. Dozens of slaves lay on the ground in pieces, an Umbral Sister was clutching a deep wound lining her side while hiding behind a badly mauled tree, and Ikki was limping away while carrying a near-broken automaton in her arms. Behind her came a familiar sight—the metallic dimensional made of blades.

The one that killed a slave earlier.

"Run, little Umbral Sister," the blade dimensional sang, its voice the sound of clashing steel. *"Run, and show me your back—"*

It launched out a series of metal shards. Ikki turned, bringing up her spear to deflect one—but she wasn't nearly fast enough to block the others. In the end, it didn't matter, as the shards crashed against Shiv. The bladed dimensional shook with surprise before it pushed its shards harder against Shiv's armor. He drained the momentum, but to his

surprise, the blades actually managed to take chunks out of his exoskeleton before he stopped them.

“Finally,” Shiv said. “Something worth fighting. I hope you can manage to kill me, because your friends are all disappointments.”

“Shiv!” Ikki cheered. Her smile faltered as the flayed face he pasted against himself flapped over, staring at her with its empty sockets.

“Get the slaves and your sister out of here, Ikki,” Shiv said. “I’m going to see if this one’s worth my time.”

The blade dimensional retracted its shards and started circling Shiv. *“What... are you?”*

“Just a guy looking for a face. And you don’t seem to have one.” Shiv stared harder at the dimensional. No notification appeared. *Well, that answers my question. Has to be a race that looks at least something like me.*

“Why are you clad in flesh and remains? Be you an Acolyte of Lord Scorn?”

“No,” Shiv said. He didn't even know who that was. And that was all the conversation he had with the dimensional. Ikki fled with the slaves while Shiv charged the enemy. He kept his bone dagger in one hand and left the other empty for now. *Let’s see if I can get some parrying done. If I can get that to Adept too, it just might complement my Diamond Shell. Speaking of that, I really hope this bastard can kill me. My Toughness has felling stalled since fewer things have been able to kill me physically. Let’s see if this one is... Hey, the blades look a little like my kitchen knife...*

Suddenly, Shiv had a new desire. “After this is over, I’m looting you. And then I’m gonna find me someone who can make me a full kitchen set out of you.”

“What?” the blade dimensional said, momentarily confused.

Shiv wasn’t confused. Which was why he launched himself toward the dimensional and booted it in the chest. The air shook from the force of his blow. Might of Mass fed Momentum Core as the dimensional was blasted through a tree. To the dimensional’s credit, it managed to stop itself from being launched much further by burying a few shards against the ground after a second. Shiv noticed how there seemed to be a pulling force with the dimensional. *Magnetism?*

Then, a rain of blades flew at him fast. Shiv grinned when he could barely track them. The damn dimensional was *fast*. It definitely had a higher Reflexes level than him, but maybe not a Master Tier Skill. Shiv deflected the first shard and the second, and then had to rely on his Momentum Core to drain all the following as they buried themselves against his body. His choice to make his armor thicker was good too. There were still

things that could pierce his flesh, but Diamond Shell made every centimeter a struggle to get through.

As Momentum Core filled, Shiv's Reflexes started matching then exceeding the dimensionals. He didn't attack, however. He focused on parrying, guiding the shards away with his palm and dagger.

"Why do you not strike? Is it too much? Are you spent after one kick?"

Shiv didn't reply—he wasn't here to talk to the thing, he just wanted some skill levels out of this. And after a few more seconds of parrying, he got just that.

Parry > 32

Momentum Core > 65

"Well, that's something at least," Shiv muttered to himself. Then something hit him in the shoulder. Might of Mass stopped him from moving, but he felt a blade punch relatively deep—even nicking his skin a bit before he shrugged it aside.

"Is your intention to taunt me? Is that it?" the blade dimensional raged. It was launching more shards from all directions—and though Shiv was getting faster, he could not dodge them all. He also didn't want to discharge his Momentum Core right here, considering the fleeing slaves and sisters.

"Well, it was worth something while it lasted," Shiv said. And then he showed the dimensional that it wasn't the only one that could do the "blade from left field trick."

Where its blades nicked and got jammed against his armor, his bone drill smashed down from on high and left the entire dimensional pinned against the ground. The blades composing the elemental did some damage to his drill, but that's why Shiv had harvested his own corpses. A radiant, metallic mana shone out between blades of warped steel, exposing the dimensional's core. It shifted the upper blades of its body into something resembling a face and let out a rasp that sounded like a sword getting pulled from a scabbard. *"M-monster."*

"Kitchen utensils," Shiv said, his heart pumping in excitement. "I'll prepare part of you as a gift for Georges when I see him again. Right now, though..." Shiv punched through the bent blades and tore out the dimensional's heart. He then chucked both core and dimensional corpse into his cloak. Which was getting a bit heavy and starting to drag.

Carrying a good amount of weight on me now...Maybe I should...

A series of arrows hit something in the distance. And kept hitting said *something*. Adam was ringing the bell. Time for the beast to come running. "Alright. Let's hope this next thing can kill me."

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33 (I) Mask

“The first layer is to avoid notice altogether. The second is to be seen, but disregarded. The third is to be seen and regarded as someone who belongs. The fourth is to be suspected—but not of your true crime. The fifth is to be exposed, but make them confused about your next step. Read complete version only at novelfire

There is no sixth layer. The sixth layer is where you are burned and cast aside, no longer any use to the Stolen Throne.

And many of you will be burned. Many of you will be dead. Many of you will be forgotten for years and years. But in this time you will hone your Path. You sink deeper into whatever darkness you are assigned, mold to whatever face you are told to wear, and deceive even yourself if you wish to survive and ascend to the status of a true noble.

For that is the prize of this service: rulership. For the Stolen Throne can only be held by the Council of the Faceless—and that is something which must be proven.

So, beware, little rabbits. Beware. For all the world will be your enemy, and whenever they catch you, they will kill you. But first they must catch you. So shed your fur fast and quick and take your masks off the ground.

Give up your old face, and take up a new one...”

-Lecture at Aviary delivered to new trainees

33 (I)

Mask

“A-a-and then, i-i-it told me it w-w-wanted my f-faacccce!” the Umbral child sobbed loudly, holding onto one of the Umbral sisters. “H-e-e—” She took a ragged, wheezing breath. “He said he was going to take my face from my boooooddyyy!”

And she wasn’t alone. There were hundreds of slaves being gathered and guided in the aftermath of the battle, and all of them bore scars of one variety or another. However, a *specific* group of slaves were trapped in the throes of absolute terror, refusing to follow the members of the Arachnae Order—who were *definitely not there*—or even the Weaveress Jump Magi trying to get them to safety.

The reason behind their refusal: They wanted to know if the *Skintaker* was still out there in the woods. And they would not go unless they were absolutely protected the entire time, every step of the way.

“I saw its eyes... it glowed in the darkness behind the skin... Its face was a mask of death! Death!”

“It ripped the slavers apart! Taunted us with their blood! I—I still taste the foulness in my mouth, oh—oh, *Great One*, I can still feel the hotness of the viscera soaking my arm...”

An automaton wept softly, their electronic voice breaking down to crackles. “One shudders to imagine the lusts and desires of such a beast. Of what darkness lurks behind those pale eyes...”

Far above them, Shiv stood at the edge of a titanic mushroom cap as he clutched his head with both hands. More wails of terror came from the slaves, and that earned them even more assurances from the Umbral Sisters that the *Skintaker* had been slain and dealt with and would never be seen again.

“Godsdammit,” Shiv muttered, feeling slightly worse than terrible at all the trauma he just caused.

“Yeah,” was all Adam managed, looking over the edge with an equally uneasy look on his face. Uva pinched the bridge of her nose, unable to look at either of the men.

“Say the thing, Adam,” Shiv muttered. “Say the thing.”

“What thing?” Adam asked.

“*You’re a godsdamned bastard, Shiv,*” Shiv said. He wasn’t as good at doing Adam’s voice as Adam was at doing his.

“I... no, I don’t think I can this time. I bloody encouraged you to do this. I thought— It was a good idea. It was! I wasn’t wrong to suggest this. You said the slavers broke. They were too terrified to fight back. You got multiple levels in Intimidation from this encounter alone!”

“Yes, and some of that was from a child,” Uva said, her voice flat. “A child who will likely need many, many sessions with a Psychomancer to truly heal from this experience.” She eyed Shiv. “What possessed you to say those things?”

“I was trying to scare the slavers for more levels. I’ll... I’ll make it clearer next time. Oh, I finally managed to perfectly extract skin off a body.”

Uva blinked. “You did? I remember you complaining about how you didn’t get how the Sculptor did it.”

“Yeah, I was trying to do too much at once. There are just a few parts you need to move and alter, and then the body practically handles itself. Biology is like that in a lot of ways.”

“Interesting,” Uva said. “Very disturbing but...” She rubbed his arm. “It seems to make you happy. So. Good.”

Shiv managed a smile despite hearing the child starting to hyperventilate below. “Oh, I also heard how you put the cave biter to sleep. Real quick too.”

The Umbral Psychomancer offered the slightest of smiles. “Its body was large, but its mind was simple. It had a bit of Magical Resistance, but getting through took little effort on my part. After that... Well, it was a matter of shifting frustration into weariness. I also took hold of its eye stalk and used it to burn some Compact dungeaters. That was cathartic.”

“I wish I could’ve seen that.”

Uva pressed her lips together. “Take off your helmet and mask then.” Shiv did that briefly. He got a memory of a massive dangling eye releasing streams of fiery mana into fleeing slavers, breaking their formations, while lighting-tipped arrows struck down others. Shiv promptly got a few other memories too, but those more of a private nature.

“Have I told you how glad I am you’re a Psychomancer?” he asked.

“You have told me many things,” Uva said, holding her head high proudly. “That is among them.”

Shiv smirked. And looked at the carnage they left behind. Who would have thought an ambush comprised of six Umbrals and two surfacers would leave over a hundred slavers dead and almost six hundred slaves rescued. The only way things could have gone better is if they were more precise and had more time to prepare. Or if they had more support.

“This was pretty magnificently planned, Young Lord,” Shiv said, feeling a bit awkward at complimenting Adam. The sentiment seemed shared as Adam just managed a stiff nod before he changed his mind and shook his head.

“No. Still too many died. I—I should have been more aggressive with you. In fact, I should have helped you reposition with my arrows. I didn’t think of that at the time—”

“Yeah, but—”

“There is no but. People are dead. People are dead because I didn’t perform to the optimal standards.” Adam gritted his teeth. “There is no excuse for any failure. Even if the success seems greater.”

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Shiv studied Adam, and realized just how much pressure the Young Lord placed on himself. “Did the academy teach you to be this rigorous?”

“No. I just... I can hear them die. I can sense their hearts stop—their last words...” Adam swallowed. “I was close to them. But still too slow. Too far. Too damned passive.” His expression hardened. “It won’t happen next time. I won’t let it. I won’t let Blackedge be this.”

“We won’t,” Shiv corrected.

The Young Lord regarded Shiv and begrudgingly nodded. “Yes. I must admit, Omenborn, you are... adequate at following instructions.”

Shiv frowned at Adam. “Adequate? How should I have been better? Should I have praised your name every time you called me?”

“It is customary for a soldier to offer due respect to their superior.”

“But I’m the Master Pathbearer here.”

“Lesson one, Shiv. Lesson one.”

Uva snorted. Shiv laughed. Even Adam managed a slight smile. The Umbral let out a breath. “You have both done something noble here today. I shouldn’t be surprised, but... I will thank you on the Composer’s and the Order’s behalf.”

“Unnecessary,” Adam said, holding his bow high and grinning. “I feel that I have yet to properly pay out my *debt* to her for this work of art. He paused. “Shiv. Give the rapier, too. I am finished with fear.”

“Fear?” Shiv asked.

Adam nodded. “I—the reason why I didn’t ask for it before despite... despite what it offers is because I was scared. I was terrified when I held the blade because I remember her coming at me, the rapier slashing against my armor over and over.” Adam grimaced. “She battered me for the pleasure of hearing me cry out. If I didn’t have my armor... I still see her in the edge of the blade. Still.”

Shiv blinked. “I didn’t know that. I—do you want the mask instead?”

“No,” Adam said. “I prefer the blade by far, and deception is not of my nature. I just need to—”

“You should see a Psychomancer. That can help.” Both Adam and Shiv looked at Uva as she finished speaking. She rolled her eyes. “One specializing in healing trauma, not dealing it.”

Adam shook his head. “No. I must... I should do this alone. For myself. For my—” He was about to say pride, but then turned, glared at Valor who was just staring at him. “Godsdamn you, skull.”

“*I said nothing*,” Valor replied, though Shiv could hear a grin in the Legendary Pathbearer’s voice.

“Your presence says enough,” Adam spat. “I’ll go see a bloody Psychomancer later. Never mention this to me again.”

“Are you talking to them or me?” Shiv asked. “Because... I’m going to make fun of you for this. And everything else. At some point.”

“You’re a godsdamned bastard, Shiv.”

“There’s the line,” Shiv snorted. “Alright. Time to find a face I prefer and see which corpses I want to keep.”

Both Adam and Uva let out a mutual sigh.

“This is your fault,” Uva muttered.

Adam’s eyebrows practically shot over his forehead. “What? He was always like this! You know this better than I do! He babbles to you constantly about cooking or Biomancy and you just stare at him longingly.”

Uva narrowed her eyes. “Yes. Because he’s *actually sweet*, but you’re encouraging him to be some kind of war demon intent on scaring small children.”

“One of the slavers passed out,” Shiv said, trying to defend himself. “I think I scared them more.”

“And then you killed them, dear. So, they’re not really scared anymore at all, and the child will need years of therapy. Ergo, focused on scaring small children. Because your friend encouraged you to wear your own flayed skin.”

“I’m not his friend!” Adam spat.

Shiv thought about what Uva just said and frowned. He felt bad again. “Damn. The logic tracks.”

Adam looked at Shiv like he was simple. “No, it doesn’t! I—go rip someone’s face off and see if you can wear it, you psychopath!”

Unfortunately, Adam was a bit too loud then, and his voice reached down. Where the freed slaves were. Where a certain already traumatized child was prompted to look up while Shiv looked down. Her eyes widened. She held up a small, shaking finger. “S-S-S-S-Skintaker.”

She shrieked. The people around her looked up and shrieked. The Umbral sisters below were soon forced to take desperate measures to keep the situation under control.

Shiv went back to holding his head again. Adam adopted a look of despair. Uva pinched the bridge of her nose harder.

“I’m—I’m just going to put them all to sleep,” Uva hissed.

“That might be best,” Shiv said, taking a few steps back away from the ledge in shame. The screaming continued. And then they turned to yawns. And then silence.

“Great job, Cherished Sister Uva,” Ikki cried from below. “Now, flood their minds with more memories of your boyfriend so they will never heal properly! WHAT WERE THE THREE OF YOU DOING ON THE LEDGE LOOKING DOWN? WHAT POSSESSED YOU TO DO THAT?”

Uva drew in a suffering breath as her Psychomancy spell broke apart. Slowly, she leaned over to Adam. “This. Is. Your. Fault.”

“Shiv, no, let her go, you’ll make a terrible girl,” Uva said, shaking her head.

Shiv sighed. “Yeah, I thought so too. Alright. Back in the *no* pile.” He chucked the dead slaver into the *second* mass grave—the one filled with those he intended to discard entirely. The first mass grave was technically his cloak, as Adam muttered sarcastically. A moment later, all three of them—and Valor—agreed that there was nothing actually sarcastic about the statement, and thus Shiv’s Cloak of Midnight’s Kindred was unofficially named Mass Grave One.

Mass Grave One was packed mostly with dimensionals and the good-looking slavers. Because if Shiv was going to pretend to be a piece of shit, he might as well be disguised as a polished piece of shit. Tragically, the pretty slavers were running thin, and Shiv still hadn’t found the perfect one...

Cloak’s getting really heavy, too. Even for me. I’m starting to sink into the soil. I’ll need to offload some of these bodies back in the city. Maybe I can sell them to Dven or something.”

“Just choose one of them,” Adam cried. “By the Auroral Council, what are we doing?”

“We’re finding someone that I can actually mimic,” Shiv snapped back. “Now, Young Lord, since you don’t want to be sorting through the bodies because your nice-smelling boy hands might be contaminated by all these corpses—some of which you have made, maybe find something else to do instead of badgering me?”

“I cannot believe—” Adam let out a loud growl of frustration. “Valor. Valor, please just tell him to pick a body. And tell him this corpse-defiling is undignified and beneath a Pathbearer.”

The skull looked at Shiv for a moment. *“I hid inside the rectal cavity of a large ogress for three days and three nights to assassinate a rival Master once.”*

Shiv froze, a body dangling from his hands. *“What?”*

“Shiv, focus,” Uva sighed. She shot a look at Valor from the corner of her eyes, but was otherwise too respectful of the Great Valor Thann to voice anything close to disgust.

Adam had no such compunctions. “You what?”

“Three days. I thought of many things while I was in there. I understood that sometimes... one must do the distasteful to achieve what they truly desire. But being able to do the distasteful at times is freedom in of itself. And so it stopped being so disgusting for me.”

“I don’t know, Valor, it still sounds kind of gross,” Shiv muttered as he shook his head at a headless body. “Hey, Adam, you know I was going for faces, so why did you shoot so many of them in the head?”

“I’ll deal with your madness later,” Adam snarled at Shiv. “Valor. What in the gods possessed you to tell us this?”

The skull bobbed as if slightly offended. *“I just think you’re being judgmental. Stealing the face of a slaver to infiltrate and liberate many is a noble sacrifice on his part.”*

“How about this one, Uva?” Shiv asked, holding a new option.

The Psychomancer frowned after staring at the corpse for a while. “Where are his teeth?”

“Don’t know, ask Adam.” Shiv grumbled.

“No,” Uva declared. “Go through the rest. Be thorough. I think there was one that looked like he wasn’t carrying some kind of disease of the face.”

“Got it, Sister Uva.” Shiv saluted.

Adam stared flatly at Valor through the entire conversation.

The skull didn’t respond immediately. *“I think... it is heartwarming how love can bloom. And how people from different worlds can understand each other.”*

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

33 (II) Mask

33 (II)

Mask

“I cannot believe you,” the Young Lord said, shaking his head. “I cannot believe—”

“Wait! Shiv! That one!” Uva said, pointing.

“This one?” Shiv asked, propping up the corpse. Soft skin, blond hair, delicate features...

Adam looked like he was about to let loose a torrent of complaints but found himself stunned by the face. “Broken Moon, that one does look pretty good.”

“You got him in the throat too.” Shiv grinned, shaking the body as if it was a small doll. “Nothing wrong with his face at all.” The Deathless’s smile dimmed as he looked down. “But, uh, I think he has more venereal diseases than all the other slavers put together. Hope those don’t carry over.”

“It says semblance,” Uva said. “Not hijack body. I think you’re fine. I hope so. The mask best pray to the Composer you are fine. I will accept nothing otherwise.”

“Gods, she’s so hot,” Shiv muttered to Adam under his breath.

Adam fought the urge to gag. The Young Lord then looked at the chosen slaver. “Well, you did it, Shiv. You found a body that... I’m starting to feel bad for killing this one.”

“He’s still a slaver,” Uva said, narrowing her eyes.

“Yes, but why, considering he had a face like that?”

Uva squinted at the slaver, and then smiled as she looked at Shiv. “Hm. People have varying preferences. Some like the soft and supple. Some prefer those with a bit more strength and vigor.”

Adam closed his eyes. “Shiv. Take the damn slaver’s face before I turn my bow on myself.”

Shiv stared down at the slaver’s face for a few seconds. Once more, the notification appeared.

Kill him and take his face to claim his semblance and steal a skill.

Claim target’s semblance?

Shiv acknowledged the request, and a change took place. The slaver’s face combusted at the same time Shiv’s mask ignited. He cursed and pulled off his helmet. Adam’s eyes widened and Uva cursed—blasting Shiv in the face with a spray of Cryomancy. The Deathless reeled. The flames spread across both his and the slaver’s bodies.

“Shiv!” Uva cried, eyes wide with worry. She shaped another Cryomancy spell, but he held out a hand, halting her.

“It doesn’t hurt at all,” Shiv said, surprised himself. “Actually, I can’t feel anything.” The slaver dissolved into embers and ashes. Embers and ashes that swirled around Shiv and started reassembling around him, mote by mote.

Uva bit her lip in worry but held herself in check. Adam took a step back, and then another, as if fearful the Deathless might explode. Valor did the opposite: he drifted closer as Shiv reformed—but ultimately, not as himself. Shiv stood a perfect replica of the slaver he had just incinerated, changed seemingly in height, mass, and appearance.

Uva’s eyes flashed briefly—and so did Valor’s. Both of them shared a look.

“Your Path has changed too, and your skills... I can see most of them with my Analyze Skill,” Uva breathed.

“Not his, though,” Valor said. “The dead slaver’s. Shiv seems to have taken more than the poor fool’s face—he’s taken a slice of his soul as well.”

Shiv called upon his status from the System and found himself surprised. His own sheet came up first, but beneath it was another one, bearing another name and another Path...

Name: Tanner “Shiv” Lowe [True]

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:

Marksmanship 11 (Common)

Baking 9 (Common)

Intimidation 18 (Common)

Barter 10 (Common)

Alchemy 2 (Common)

Engineering 1 (Common)

Cooking 23 (Initiate)

Knife Proficiency 29 (Initiate)

Grappling Proficiency 40 (Initiate)

Stealth 21 (Initiate)

Striking Proficiency 21 (Initiate)

Pyromancy 6 (Initiate)

Spear Proficiency 10 (Initiate)

Parry 32 (Initiate)

Biomancy 45 (Initiate) Follow current novels on novelfire(.)net

Disease Resistance 8 (Initiate)

Awareness 10 (Initiate)

Practical Metabiology 13 (Initiate)

Psychomancy 6 (Initiate)

Silver Tongue 4 (Adept)

Might of Mass 71 (Adept)

Diamond Shell 80 (Adept)

Foreshadowing 13 (Adept)

Momentum Core 65 (Master)

Vitality Drain 9 (Legendary)

Revenant 5 (Unique)

Blessings:

Song of the Vigilant - Allows the Pathbearer to maintain absolute focus while the song is active. The song will expand out from the Pathbearer for one hundred meters and reveal all that is hidden.

Curses:

None

Name: Mark Speirson [Perfect Semblance]

Age: 27

Race: Human (Abyssal)

Path: Guardian

Feats [0/1]:

None

Skills:

Survival 14 (Common)

Sling Proficiency 11 (Common)

Physicality 29 (Initiate)

Intimidation 20 (Common)

Singing 18 (Common)

Armorsmithing 7 (Common)

Toughness 42 (Initiate)

Bulwark of Iron 61 (Adept)

Blade Whirlwind 51 (Adept)

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Blessings:

None

Curses:

Light-Damned - The Pathbearer burns physically, mentally, and spiritually when exposed to true sunlight on the surface.

But the System wasn't done with its notifications yet.

Choose skill to steal

Adept Slots: (0/1)

Initiate Slots: (0/2)

Shiv blinked. He assumed Skill Thief would allow him to take some levels from the dead slaver or something. This made Shiv consider between his highest two choices. Bulwark of Iron sounded interesting, and the corpse had a shield on it, so it must've been something to do with that. Problem was, Shiv was already practically a walking fortress, and he didn't want more durability, he wanted someone to break through his Toughness and kill him for more levels. That, paired with the fact that he lacked a truly Adept-Tier Weapon Skill of his own made him focus on Blade Whirlwind.

Steal Blade Whirlwind for Adept-Skill Thief?

After a moment's hesitation, he confirmed his choice. And then a searing pain passed through Shiv's brain. He let out a hiss as he clutched his head. "Agh, *burns!*"

Uva flinched. “Shiv! Take it off!”

“No, no, I’m just stealing a skill.”

Another second later, the burning subsided, and Shiv checked his status sheets again. To his surprise, he realized that the Blade Whirlwind Skill now appeared on his own sheet as well. Memories poured into his mind, of him slashing and stabbing other boys in a dark alley, of him surviving his duels because he was more vicious, more aggressive... But these weren’t his memories, these were from the slaver—Mark Speirson. This was the only Adept-Tier Skill he had back then, and it allowed him to attack in all directions around himself when he swung his weapon, becoming like a whirlwind of blades in a tight alley...

“Well, that’s much more than I was expecting,” Shiv muttered. “I thought it was just going to give me a level or two. But no... I just stole an entire Adept-Tier Skill from the dead guy.”

“You... This is vile,” Adam said, vibrating with outrage. “The Quest gave you this *and* the cape as a reward? Why?”

“Do you want the mask now?” Shiv asked. “Because if your answer is yes, my answer is no, and it’s too late. I’m keeping this thing.” He chuckled. “I actually got an Adept Weapon Skill now.”

“If you speak another word, I will tackle you into the corpse pit,” Adam growled.

“You mean break your shoulder on me?”

“No,” Adam said, walking forward with a grin. Shiv suddenly realized that Adam was taller than him, larger than him... *Oh, right, I’m stealing the dead guy’s full appearance.* The Young Lord gripped Shiv by his collar—wrapping his finger around the leather armor the slaver wore. “You seem to be *smaller* than you used to be.” He shoved. But Shiv didn’t move. Adam frowned. He tried again. And then tried pushing with both hands.

Shiv remained in place. Like a pillar. Except he was small, short, and blonde now.

“Why?” Adam growled. “Damn you, System, why couldn’t you let me have this?”

The Deathless found himself focusing on another problem. “Valor might be right. This is only a slice of the guy’s soul. Enough to fool an Analyze Skill but... I don’t remember doing any surviving. Or singing. I don’t actually have those skills. I only have Blade Whirlwind now.”

Adam gave up trying to move Shiv, letting out an annoyed breath. “So. You can only keep one Adept-Tier Skill?”

Shiv called up his Skill Thief options.

Choose skill to steal

Adept Slots: (1/1)

Blade Whirlwind 51

Initiate Slots: (0/2)

“Yep,” Shiv said. “Slot’s filled. I also can’t take any of his Initiate Skills, even though the slot is empty. It seems that I can only extract one skill from one body.”

“Ah, a modified exo-mind Enchantment,” Valor said with interest. *“The System has favored you greatly to deliver this unto you. It allows you to bear another’s experiences along with a near perfect disguise.”*

“Near perfect?” Shiv said. “It says Perfect Semblance.”

“Correct. But not absolute, no? You need Absolute Semblance to hide from someone truly. You can be perfect, but a god’s will exceeds the world, and even a Heroic Pathbearer can shake the fabric of existence.”

“So. Still have to be careful.” Shiv nodded. He tried a few more things. The first was dismissing his Perfect Semblance. To his pleasure, he could quickly dispel and call upon his new form with his thoughts. “Three seconds to change.” He then took off his mask, and his form dispelled again—and the Blade Whirlwind Skill was gone from his mind as well. “Okay. So. It’s in the mask. Thing’s pretty useful. I don’t think it can burn multiple faces at once, but it lives up to a mask born from a bunch of melted assassins.”

Adam was practically pouting by this point. So Shiv spited him further by handing the mask to Uva. “Here. Try it.”

“Really, Shiv?” Adam said.

Uva accepted the mask from Shiv with a slight smile. As she put it on, she assumed the form of the slaver in a rush of flame, and Shiv nodded. “That’s just weird,” he said, shaking his head. “How does it feel for you?”

“Like I’m still wearing a mask,” Uva said. Yet, now she had the slaver’s voice. Shiv blinked. “What?” she asked.

“You sound like the slaver.”

“You sounded like him too.”

“Huh,” Shiv said. “Didn’t seem that way to me. I just sounded like myself.”

“Probably an effect of the mind-shield,” Uva theorized. And then quickly pulled the mask off. The Perfect Semblance broke around her in a burst of embers. “That Enchantments giving me a headache. The mind-shield pinches my mana field something hard.”

“Ah. I probably didn’t feel it as bad because my Psychomancy’s weaker.” He took the mask back from her and studied it appreciatively. Right now, it just seemed like a bronze mask disfigured by a mana bomb. But once he put it on, it was like sliding into a new skin. “Wish I could take someone’s appearance or skills without needing to kill them. But I guess it needs to burn a person’s soul or vitality or something to do this. It lets me access their entire status too.”

“Quite potent. And fitting. You were bound for the gate, and the System desires conflict. So, it has gifted you the potential means to fan the flames of chaos.”

“Yes. Like giving a hawk the means to lurk among... Well, I won’t call them pigeons.” Adam considered a metaphor. “A hawk lurking among crows.”

“Is everything a hawk or hunter metaphor with you?” Shiv asked.

Adam sneered. “Consult lesson one.”

Shiv chuckled. “Asshole. Well. This has been productive. Shame none of them could kill me.”

“Shiv.” Uva frowned.

“What? I want more Diamond Shell. Say, is the cave biter still around?”

Uva squinted at him in exasperation. “Shiv. No. Leave the poor thing alone.”

“What?”

“You’re going to see if you can fight it or ask it to eat you or something. Anything that might be fatal and dangerous.”

“I’m just curious about how it is. And I wouldn’t be against fighting a mountain-sized monster if it gives me a reason.”

“Shiv,” Uva said, starting to lose her patience.

“It—it could just sit on me?”

“And what would that do?” Adam asked. “Unless its body is Tougher than yours, you’ll just end up inside it like a diamond nail.”

Shiv sighed. "Dying used to be easy and constant."

"Aw, now you will have to toil and struggle to improve more like the rest of us," Uva said, rubbing his back almost mockingly. Then she kissed him on the cheek, and that made things feel a bit better.

"Shiv. Sometimes, being around you makes me feel like I'm having a stroke." Adam sighed.

"Well, Adam, if you die, I promise not to steal your face and pretend to be you before stealing everything your family owns."

Adam almost gagged. "And just because you said that, I am willing myself to be functionally immortal." He shook his head and looked down into mass grave two and at all the bodies still lying around. "Well. I suppose you might as well flay the rest of them and leave their faces hanging from the trees or something."

"What?" Shiv said. "Why?"

"What do you mean, why? For psychological effect. They'll send a scouting party and discover a forest of flayed corpses with skins swaying in the air. Rangers from the Kingdom of Lone Star use this technique to dissuade the orcs from raiding their lands every summer."

"I guess," Shiv said. "Just seems gratuitous by this point..."

"Really? This is where you draw the line? Here? After literally making armor out of your old corpses?"

"That's just economical," Shiv defended.

"And now I am the one who suspects she's having a fever dream," Uva deadpanned. "You have enough bodies, Shiv. You're sinking into the soil."

"Yeah. You're right."

"Uva. They're slavers." Adam spat into mass grave two. "They were selling children. They don't deserve good dreams."

The Umbral Psychomancer opened her mouth to argue, and then sighed and rolled her eyes. "Fine. Shiv. Flay five and let us return to camp. The stench is starting to cling to me, and I need to bathe."

Shiv grunted as he looked at her. "What a coincidence. Me too."

“Oh?” Uva feigned surprise. “How surprising. But I might know a place in these woods...”

Adam looked pained. “How are you two flirting next to a mass grave?”

“The seeds of love can bloom even from corpses.” Valor bobbed, doing the closest thing he could to a nod.

The Young Lord just groaned. “Well. We have a way to keep close to the bloody gate now. Or at least one of us does...”

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

34 (I) Recon

“I don’t know” is not a good enough excuse. It is not enough for the Pathbearers under your command, it is not enough for the people you fail to protect, it is not enough for the cost it inflicts on the Republic.

You cannot afford to not know. Intelligence. Knowledge. Understanding. You can hate the enemy as much as you want, you can despise their culture, their faith, their very existence, but if anyone in this course ever tells me “I don’t know” again, I will formally request that you fall on a sword.

And if you lack a weapon that can pierce your flesh, I will loan you my blade.

The answer to the question, Young Lord Depon, is “I need more intelligence.” You will know. And you will understand your enemy. I don’t care that the orcs killed your brother at Lone Star. I don’t care what they did to his corpse. If you do, then you best start learning about the war-loving bastards because you’re going to run up against them at some point, and let me tell you, the stories of them being savage, barely literate beasts are mostly to cope with the fact that they are very, very cruel, and very, very good at war.

Now. We’re going to do this exercise again. This time, you take the role of the orcs, Young Lord Depon. Your objective is simple. Use the practice dimensionals to take the rest of the class’s positions or fail trying. And if you fail again, I am going to strike you from this class and leave you marked for ineptitude. You have the force advantage. You have them surrounded. Now. Take the fort and kill all the survivors.

Think like your enemy. Wear their skin. Win. The Republic demands that you learn, so obey me, and understand this is the only way out of the shadows of your past.

-Captain Harry Irons, TacStrat 101, Phoenix Academy

34 (I)

Recon

“So. What is for breakfast?” Adam asked, yawning. He blinked blearily at what Shiv was preparing and just stared ahead. His red hair was getting long and messy, parts of it clinging to his face. Sleep and nourishment became less and less of a necessity for Pathbearers after certain thresholds, but after the events of the last day, the Young Lord slumbered like he was one of the dead. “Are those... snakes?”

“Yeah,” Shiv grunted. “Give it a second. I’ve tried frying, slow roasting, and even boiling these with soup. You’ll get to try all three types and tell me which one you like best first.”

“Are you using me as a taster?” Adam asked, still frowning at the snakes. “And snakes? Really? Aren’t those poisonous?”

“Not entirely. Glands got harvested by the Sisters already.”

Adam shrugged. “How long have you all been up? Wait, how long did you sleep? It’s always damned hard to tell in the Abyss. There’s no sunlight, and the glowing veins make it feel like we’re living in perpetual twilight.”

“Slept about two hours. Maybe. Probably less. You were out cold by the time me and Uva got back from the waterfall. It’s not far if you want to clean up.”

“I think I’ll pass for now,” Adam said, trying to comb his hair with his fingers. “You won’t believe how many bugs are around this place... I’m surprised none of them managed to get into our camp.”

“That’s because the Sisters dosed the place with pheromones, and I keep crushing the larger bugs with my Biomancy. An ugly dog-sized scorpion thing with three tails got pretty close to your tent at some point. It’s part of the soup now.’

Adam froze and watched as Shiv dropped another slice of snake flesh into the bubbling cauldron. “Are you trying to gain a Poison Resistance skill?” THIS CHAPTER IS UPDATE BY no v elfire

“That’s actually not a bad idea. But no. Sisters took the stingers too. Uva said they could make something useful with that.”

The Young Lord looked around at their camp. Aside from him, Shiv, and Valor floating at the opening of the cave they chose as campsite after their ambush, he saw only empty tents and the doused campfire. A set of alarm and minor protection wards circled the entrance of the cave, the spell patterns shimmering weakly with mana. “Where is everyone?”

“Scouting. Preparing. We got a Weaveress Shadow Cell coming in soon too. Trapdoor, according to Uva. They might have some details about the gate and how we can get closer among some other things. Uva also said they’ll be interested in talking to you about yesterday. Something about an after action regarding tactics and strategy.”

“Ah. Wonderful. It’s exactly like I’m back in TacStrat 101. Hopefully I don’t run into the Weaveress equivalent of Irons.” Adam paused. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I’d give a bloody lot for the man to be yelling at me right now. He would know how to take that gate—gate raids are practically his favorite thing in the world.”

“Sounds like an interesting guy.”

“He is. He would probably like you. To some extent. You’re his kind of person. Do or die. Try, try, try again without any hint of frustration or despair. And... Oh, that’s starting to smell really good.”

Shiv handed Adam a bowl of scorp-snake soup, and the Young Lord regarded the meal for a moment. He sniffed and then tentatively took a bite. His expression went blank. He closed his eyes. And *seethed*. “How do you keep doing this? This is absurd. I had a Master Chef for almost all my life.”

Cooking > 25

Shiv grinned both at Adam’s begrudging praise and at the two levels he got for Cooking. “Yeah? Well, your Master Chef doesn’t have Biomancy to judge the state of the meat. Or Georges.” Shiv’s grin faded. “Did he... have a fine mustache? Was kind of emotional at times?”

Adam stopped mid-swallow. “Yes?”

“Ah, shit,” Shiv said. He wasn’t sure how to go about this. He remembered the chefs slaughtered in the kitchen. The only reason he probably wasn’t among the dead initially was because Roland Arrow came personally to speak with him.

“What?” Adam said, his voice more severe.

Nothing for it. Rip the blade out. Shiv looked down and grunted. “He’s dead. So are most of the other people who used to cook for you. Kitchen got hit during the assault. I went back looking for Georges and found them. That’s where I got the chestpiece—it

was given to me by a dying Family Guard... Feather, I think his name was. He and his sister both died fighting too. They all did what they could.”

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The Young Lord stared at Shiv for a long minute. His face was calm, but there was a war raging behind his eyes. After a small eternity, he took a sip of soup. “I thought about throwing you off myself. Off Blackedge. When I realized you were the one helping me. Even when I was fighting the raven, there was something in me that hoped you were a reason for this, that I could finally be done with you.”

Shiv didn’t say anything. He just listened. Adam’s expression flared with brief anger and frustration. “But then you went and did the worst thing you could to me. You proved to be a *decent* man. And a good chef. And you have no idea how much this makes me *hate* you.”

Shiv regarded Adam momentarily, and then nodded. He cut another slice of meat—no reason not to prepare while dealing with this. Whatever was happening between him and Adam, the others could still use a little food when they got back.

“That’s it? You’re just going to nod and keep working?” Adam said. There was a hint of rage in his voice there, like a spider rearing its front legs.

“What can I say that will make you feel better?” Shiv asked.

“You could have been a bastard,” Adam whispered. “An actual piece of human trash. You could have done me the dignity of being a monster or a broken, miserable degenerate. You could have done any of these things...”

“No,” Shiv said, resolute. “Not who I am. Not what I want to be. I’m not going to break and be miserable because that would please you or the world. I fight for myself. I fight for the things I want. That’s the way I’m going to be. That way, and not some other thing.”

“Look at you,” Adam said, his face turning borderline nauseous. “Listen to you. You just say these things and *mean* them. Why? What possessed you to be this way despite what you are? Despite what *they* did to make you?”

The Deathless placed the snake flesh on the frying board. *Needs a bit more Pyromancy.* He channeled a rush of flames with a small spell, and soon the meat was crackling. “Because I want to. I told you before, Adam. I’m my own man. Are you yours?”

“Godsdamn you,” Adam spat. “Godsdamn you. Godsdamn your parents. And godsdamn me for... for...”

“Would it help if we just fought?” Shiv asked.

“No. Because there’s no winning there either.” To make his point, Adam walked forward and slammed a fist into Shiv’s back. He threw it as hard as he could. It shook the cave. Dust rained from the ceiling. A tent fell over.

Shiv responded by holding another pan over the food to keep out the dust and flipping over the slice of meat. “You should use your bow. You’re not a brawler.”

For a second, he thought Adam would hit him again for saying that, but the Young Lord just scoffed. “And how long will it take for me to deal true harm to you that way? And what’s to stop you from just coming back stronger? Every defeat makes you more. Every wound becomes your shield. Every weakness will eventually be your strength. But me? I just lose. I am Young Lord Adam Arrow. My father is a hero of the Republic. My mother was Rose Van Erren, Diviner of the Republic. And I... *lose!* I lose everything. I lose everyone. I lose and lose and lose and there is less of me every time.”

I shouldn’t have told him about the staff... Shiv turned away from the meat, not even caring if it burned. “Adam—”

“Do not!” Adam shouted—practically screamed. “Do! Not! Do not care for me! Do not console me! I wish—” His lip curled, and for a moment, Shiv was worried Adam might actually start crying. But Adam closed his eyes and breathed in. “I need to go out. I need to... to hunt... to be alone.”

He rushed back toward his tent and began gathering his equipment, snapping his armor in place at frantic speed. Shiv grimaced, and saw that Valor was looking at him. Worse, Uva and the other sisters were approaching too.

And the felling meat is burned and I’m still not done preparing, Shiv sighed.

“Don’t follow me,” Adam rasped as he rushed past Shiv. Shiv watched the Young Lord go, unsure what he was supposed to do. Adam flared his wings before even clearing the cave. Ikki asked him what was wrong, but he walked right past her, earning a flash of shock from the Young Umbral before he blasted off into the air, cracking the ground with the speed of his ascent. Uva looked at Shiv, and he could only shake his head.

“I’ll tell you about it later. I’ll try to get food done for now. Almost done. Almost.” Shiv noticed his own hand was shaking a bit, and he stilled it with a frown.

“This was needed.” Valor came to a hover beside Shiv.

“I’m not so sure about that,” Shiv said. “To be honest, he was kind of pissing me off by the end. I see why he’s the way that he is, but this isn’t my doing. And his feelings are his own responsibility.” Shiv paused. “You alright, Ikki?”

The Umbral blinked. "He must've been really mad, huh?" She rubbed her arm slightly. "What did you say to him?"

"I told him someone he cared about died. And some other problems came with that." Shiv frowned. "A lot of problems."

"So it seems," Uva said, still staring at the cave entrance. "Perhaps I should request that someone keep watch over him."

"Don't think that's necessary," Shiv said. "Adam's impulsive. But not an idiot. I don't think he's going to make a suicide run on the gate or even get himself noticed. His Awareness is too good for that." He paused. "But we might want to pack and prepare to move. Whatever Adam does might just get someone to look around here."

Ikki sighed. "But we just moved..."

"Sisters, break camp," Uva said, her voice rehearsed. She looked at Shiv again, and sank her magic into his mind. "*Are you alright?*"

Shiv smiled slightly. "*I'm always alright. Eventually.*"

She narrowed her eyes. "*Did he try to hurt you?*"

"Why's my tent knocked over?" Ikki complained off to the side.

"*Not really,*" Shiv said. "*And that's part of what pisses him off more, I think. We'll see how he's feeling later. Meanwhile... you're looking very nice this morning. I think the bath in that pond did us some good.*"

Uva rolled her eyes but failed to hold back a slight blush. "*Shiv. Come now.*"

He chuckled and went back to finishing breakfast. But though Shiv felt done with conversation for now, conversation was not done with him.

"*I would have hated having someone like you in my life when I was his age,*" Valor said. Shiv grunted. "*I am being serious. You represent a shadow in many warriors' hearts. Of a rival who stands stronger, tougher, ascends to power more quickly... yet gives very little reason why they should be hated. Pair this with the nature of your past, and the fragility you induce in him becomes torturous.*"

"I guess," Shiv said. Then, as he started flipping plates with cooked meat, he decided on anger. "Just one problem: Why should I care about that? My whole life, people hated me for what my parents did. For what I was. He hated me too. But like his dad, he just seethed and suffered my existence from a distance. Too noble to come strike me down, too passive to do anything, too miserable to let this go. So they prayed for the system to punish me."

“Goodness is a moment, Shiv. A deed. Good can be used to describe someone’s character, but it is my experience that with enough pain and loss, even a good heart can be taught to choose something that debases them. That someone can learn the wrong lesson.”

“Fine. But it’s not my lesson to teach.”

“Correct. But it is something he can only learn from you.”

“Why should I care?”

“I cannot say,” Valor answered honestly. “You are... Deathless. Both in mind and body. What breaks and wounds and leaves another close to oblivion is only fuel for your heart. In some matters of spirit, I would call you an idealization of a warrior. But you have to understand that most struggle to even pretend, and the strong must give so much of themselves to achieve what you find so natural. For most, becoming one who reigns over the world, the system, and themselves is a battle, every day.”

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34 (II) Recon

34 (II)

Recon

Shiv started handing out plates of food, but he was listening. That quiet knot of anger was dying down to a nub of annoyance. “So. You want me to put up with Adam? To comfort him?”

“No. Great One, no!” Valor almost choked. *“That might just shatter his mind entirely. To be regarded as pitiful and a creature to be protected and comforted by the object of his envy, loathing, and respect... It might break his sense of self for good.”*

“So, what should I do?”

“As you did when training. As you did during the ambush. Challenge him when he needs resolve. Spite him when he feels worried. Make him build strength. But let him rest when he is wounded and weary. He can be built into a true Pathbearer. And friend. Give him time. But you must be wise.”

"I'm not sure how wise I am, Valor." Shiv shook his head and placed Uva's dish beside her as she broke down their tent. "There's soup and slow-cooked variants as well if you want more. Adam was supposed to do a taste test." Shiv paused. "I might have put in a little too much salt this time."

"Yes, but that is why I am here," Valor said, holding his head up proudly.

"Valor. Has anyone told you that your training methods are strange? Do you always get your disciples to just train each other?"

"No. But you are far from a typical disciple. What I am to do with you is simply propel you further. But also remind you of things besides becoming a legend."

"Like what?" Shiv asked.

"That people and the world are fragile. We may be enduring. But some things, when broken, will never return."

Shiv considered that. And nodded. "Fine. But if he's still pissy when he gets back, I'm going to bully him."

"It's practically the love-language between you two by this point," Uva muttered off to the side.

Shiv winced in discomfort. Ikki giggled.

"...and that concludes my report," Adam said, arms folded behind his back. The Trapdoor agents looked at each other and exchanged a series of gestures that had the Young Lord swinging his eyes between them in slight nervousness. "Again. I take full responsibility for the excess civilian casualties. I should have approached the situation with more measured aggression and foresight."

"No, no," the leader of the Shadow Cell said, holding out her many hands. "It is... We are not criticizing your efforts. We are merely comparing notes. What you have done is... quite remarkable considering the force size and timeframe you had. Your tactics and approach were sound."

"But imperfect," Adam added.

"A criticism that we all must share," the Weaveress refuted. "Even I have only achieved nine *truly* perfect raids against Compact's slavers over my centuries in service. The deaths are our burden. But also our kindling. We can only endeavor to save more next time, Esteemed Adept Adam."

The Young Lord nodded gratefully and concluded his report.

The lead Weaveress—an ancient Trapdoor veteran by the name of Still Water—arrived in camp as everyone was breaking it down. She proved her capabilities as a Heroic Pathbearer focused foremost on Stealth by manifesting out of thin air beside Shiv to take a drink of his soup. The Deathless flinched in shock when she asked if she “kept them waiting” for long.

The truth was that she arrived much earlier than expected—before Uva even had a chance to report to an Operator about them moving their forward operating camp again. With her came two other Trapdoor agents. The one missing an arm was called Liquid Serpent, and she immediately started boasting about her revolving hand crossbows to Ikki and anyone who would listen. The last of the group was a white-shelled, Umbral-shaped automaton called Spark Ripper who bore a rare Fusion Skill combining Aeromancy and Swords Proficiency.

Shiv wanted to find out about how they attained their Fusion Skill, but at his approach, Spark Ripper sputtered something incoherent and fled. It took Still Water explaining that they had extreme social anxiety for Shiv to understand what just happened.

Their cell was supposedly getting a brief moment’s rest after a series of *mysterious explosions* tore through some of Compact’s border territories. As a result, the Court of the First Blood was blamed, and the two sides were engaged in another ugly skirmish. A tragic but common state of affairs in the Abyss.

After a while, Adam returned with what seemed like half a forest of dead animals in a net. He simply muttered “ingredients” to Shiv and said nothing else—not even bothering to clean the muck and blood off himself before launching into an aggressive after-action report before the Trapdoor agents were prepared to receive it.

Oddly, this seemed to endear Adam to them—especially Liquid Serpent, who started calling Adam the “nice-skinned one” for some reason. When Shiv looked to Uva for confirmation, she replied with an expression of cluelessness herself.

“Trapdoor seeks effective soldiers. Sometimes, effective means peculiar.”

“As we have not been within Compact territory,” Still Water continued, “there are many things we cannot tell you. Such as how Compact will likely be strained for manpower in the area soon due to the recent attacks by the bloodspawn. And how their Lords of Law will be called upon by the First Blood’s Elders to stop the conflict before it spirals out of hand. Or how there will be a special caravan heading for the gate in one day’s time. A special caravan that rumors suggest to be carrying part of a very special Necrotech weapon.”

Adam, Shiv, and Valor all shot to attention. “Necrotech weapon?” Adam asked.

“Oh... *Is this part composed of a lot of mithril?*” Valor asked with a weary note to his voice.

“Interesting. How did you know about its composition, Great Valor?” Still Water asked.

“I suspect I know more than just its composition. I likely know what it is: A part of a walking fortress-sized siege-construct containing an Animancy Core: A Soulbreaker Engine. If I am to guess further, this might be the Animancy Core itself.”

“So, my guess was correct,” Liquid Serpent hissed, spinning her crossbows again. “It was some manner of... *mithril mechanism*, after all.”

Shiv didn’t know why she said the words with so much emphasis, but decided to let it go.

Valor sighed. *“If I am to voice my guess, I suspect that Blackedge has managed to secure its own territory and hold a defensive line for now. The Necrotechs should not be so bold to move through Compact territory, but a rogue vicar with much to give and little to lose... might just be able to strike a contract with one of the Lords of Law. Now that Blackedge’s wards are enduring and Sullain has not yet managed to smash through its walls, he must bring in something capable of overcoming the city’s mana field—which means he is rushing as well.”*

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A surge of joy passed through the Young Lord’s face. “The town is holding... It’s holding, Shiv!”

“I wouldn’t be too happy yet,” Shiv muttered. “This construct sounds like a problem.”

“It is. Animancy is the most fundamental expression of magic because it deals in the manipulation of the source of all mana. The soul. But that is just why it is such a volatile art. The slightest mistake in understanding and intent inflicts damage so severe that even the fabric of reality is not spared. These wounds linger until the System itself intervenes to mend what was lost.”

“So, we intercept, destroy, or steal this weapon,” Adam said. “It might not be a simple operation, but—”

“There is also another thing we don’t know,” Still Water continued. As she leaned a bit more out of her invisible cloak, Shiv noticed she had eye patches on two of her eight eyes. “We don’t know that there is a small army of elite, mercenary Pathbearers protecting the weapon. And we certainly don’t know that they might be meeting with a delegation of surfacers inside the Compact gate.”

“What?” Adam said, startled. “What delegation? What surfacers?”

“This part we actually don’t know,” Liquid Serpent clarified. “We only *ironically* didn’t know all the things before, you see. This is all we managed to get before the people talking to us *expired* during interrogation.” Liquid Serpent laughed, the sound sibilant and uncanny. “They were weak...”

“They really weren’t,” Spark Ripper mumbled, pulling their invisible cloak tighter around their body. “You just made me use too much electricity this time.’

“More importantly, the construct is considered a restricted weapon between the Five Faiths,” Valor said. *“An Animancy weapon is highly unstable and can only truly be channeled through mithril. And if you are in the vicinity when it fires... your soul will wither, and you will face a death more absolute than most.”* He eyed Shiv briefly. *“Regardless of who you are.”*

The Deathless only narrowed his eyes as he considered something: “If I die but manage to survive that... maybe I could get an Animancy Skill too?”

“Shiv,” Uva said, her voice bordering on threatening. “Do not.”

“It’s just a thought.”

“I know. Now. Move that thought out of your mind. I will not share space with it.”

“Fine.”

“*Shiv.*”

“Fine. Just give me a second to get distracted by something so I can stop thinking about it.”

Valor let out a very uncharacteristic groan. *“Damn you, Sullain. This is going to be a problem...”*

“Yeah, we thought so too,” Still Water said. “That’s why we came in to give you all a heads-up. We heard that these two were planning on using the gate to cross over. Well. Once the Composer hears about this, I suspect she’ll be scrambling to demand an answer from Lords of Law too. And the First Blood will start moving their armies because they’ll assume that someone might be trying to sell a Soulbreaker Engine...” The Trapdoor Weaveress trailed off with a grunt and took a drag of her smoke. Shiv blinked. He didn’t see her holding that until now. Or even know that Weaveresses could smoke.

“This is going to cause a hellstorm,” Still Water whispered. “A real big one. But also, no one’s really in position to intercept or halt the transport. By sometime after midnight, it’ll

pass through the gate for good. And once it's there, it might be gone for good, no matter what we do. Compact isn't going to let anyone else take a look inside their gate, the Necrotechs will deny, disavow, and ignore, and everyone else will be spitting venom but getting nowhere."

"Typical politics," Spark Ripper muttered.

Still Water breathed out. "There's a wrong smell on the winds. Bad days are coming. Bad times. The air tastes just like it did before the last War of the Five."

The Umbrals all looked disturbed. But Adam was staring off, absent—considering something. "We might have a means of interception," he said. "To make sure the weapon never gets into the gate—and maybe create an opening to slip in ourselves. But we'll need more information, and fast. And we'll need them to stall along their path." The Young Lord found Shiv already looking at him. The Deathless held his Mask of False Paths up for everyone to see.

"What's that?" Liquid Serpent said, squinting.

Shiv put on the mask and showed them. A second and a brief burst of fire later, the Perfect Semblance of a dead slaver stood in Shiv's place.

Still Water leaned back and shared a look with her two comrades. "Well. That's useful." Her eyes flashed. "Hmm. Can't even tell it's you anymore, Esteemed Master Shiv."

"Yeah," Shiv said, examining his new hands. "Pretty convenient. But it's also untested. I just took this semblance yesterday. Not sure if I got everything down yet, but..."

"But this is the perfect opportunity for a field test," Adam said, pressing the issue. "Think of it. The last caravan was attacked and slaughtered. If the special weapon's transport team is taking the same road to approach, and they come across a *sole* survivor..." He let silence and imagination fill in the rest.

"There's also a substantial risk," Uva said, looking at Shiv with the slightest hint of worry. "The mask is not a bound item. Should Shiv be killed while in his guise for any reason, it is likely that the deception will be unveiled and his presence revealed." She frowned. "The mask is the only thing protecting his mind from enemy Psychomancers as well. This is too soon. Too aggressive."

"And if we wait and hesitate, then Blackedge will be in more danger—and this might even draw your people into another war with the surface," Adam replied. Shiv took the mask off into the meantime, showing the Trapdoor Operatives the item's functionality. "This is our best chance to achieve multiple goals. To discover more intelligence about how to access the gate, to stop a dangerous weapon that threatens all of our peoples, and also for Shiv to finally make use of the mask. Him appearing as a sole survivor of a massacre is more than believable, it's practically perfect."

"I'm willing to do it," Shiv said, shrugging. Since this group was filled with elite warriors, maybe if things went wrong, one of them could kill him too...

"It is disturbing how excited you get imagining your own deaths," Uva said flatly.

"Sorry," Shiv replied. *"I just want more skill levels."*

"Well, you might be getting improvements to Stealth and Acting soon," Uva said, her mind still tinged with worry.

"Uva. I can't die."

"That's not the worst thing that can happen to you," she said. *"You might be able to come back, but if someone shatters your mind..."* Read complete version only at [\(n\) ovelFire](#)

"They won't. I'll have the mask. If something goes wrong, I'll use my Biomancy to pull the corpse into my cloak and act before anyone knows what's actually happening. The cape's still bound to my soul. It shouldn't come off."

She didn't like this. Not even a bit. *"It's still too soon. With more time to prepare, we could maybe see about finding an enchanter. There's a limit to how much magic can be infused into each Tier, but..."*

He tightened his mind around hers in something of an embrace. *"I'll be fine. I'm always fine."*

Uva looked at him, smiled slightly, and nodded. She trusted him. *"Alright. But proceed with care."*

"I always do?"

She squinted at him. *"Shiv..."*

"Okay. I'll try."

"I'll tell you what, Adept Adam," Still Water said after a brief moment consulting her comrades. "As it goes, the Arachnae Order cannot be found operating on Compact territory. But. Should you be able to create an opening or cause the mercs to 'lose' their cargo somehow, you'd be doing a great deed for the political stability of the Abyss. And your home. Just a shame *no one* can help you out."

"We're back to being ironic," Liquid Serpent whispered with a laugh, as if everyone hadn't gotten the memo. "We are *absolutely* going to help you steal a weapon of mass destruction."

Adam let out a breath and nodded in appreciation. “Thank you. Shiv. Are you ready to give us another master class in acting?”

Shiv grunted. “Yeah. I think I can pull off ‘terrified, shell-shocked survivor.’ Just gotta keep my eyes wide and mouth open. And whimper about the Skintaker?”

“Hmm? Skintaker...” Still Water said. “We heard chatter about that from Operations earlier. Something about some kind of demon flaying faces out in the woods.”

Uva, Adam, and Shiv all shared the same awkward cough.

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35 (I) Infiltrate

When in deep cover, it is essential and most effective that you let those you interact with come to their own conclusions. The sign of a good performance isn't strain or effort, but harmony and adaptation.

Even if you answer every last detail correctly, memorize the entirety of another's life, there will be a point where you make a choice so drastically unlike them that it will arouse suspicion. This cannot be avoided. This is the nature of our existence—even with magical enhancement. Short of having a Master-Tier Acting Skill, you won't be able to fully submerge your own ego and melt into another.

But you can sink deep enough that no one notices, so long as you keep yourself subtle. Don't volunteer details. Don't shake what someone thinks of you. Let them define who you are and adjust to fit their mold. You can be active to avoid the passivity trap in these confines.

And ultimately, if things get truly desperate, it is not uncommon for one to fall ill or be impaired in a way that makes it easier to hide whatever inaccuracy or oddity of behavior. Understand that this constrains the effective limits of your cover as well.

After all, playing the simpleton can let you go unnoticed, but no one is going to let a simpleton anywhere near a true position of power...

-The Ways of the Unseen: Aviary Training Manual

Infiltrate

Intimidation > 20

“Okay. Do the expression again.” Adam waved his hand in front of Shiv’s face.

Shiv just stared at him for a beat. Then slowly opened his mouth wide and started staring off at nothing.

“Mouth wider—eyes more distant. More distant. More distant.”

“Adam, my eyes can’t get any more distant. I don’t know what you want from me.”

“Just think about a traumatic moment in your life,” Adam said.

“It was kind of shit when you got back from your academy and decided to make everyone notice me,” Shiv said. “That just makes my hand shake a bit from the adrenaline, though. So does remembering how badly the War Priest and the faithful beat me.” His expression turned to snarl.

“No... *no*... Shell shock, Shiv. Shell shock. Horrified. Mentally spent and lost inside yourself. Not the face of a snarling dog.”

“Then we’re not going to be able to pull this off with my memories, because the worst ones just piss me off?”

“Godsdammit, you’re useless,” Adam muttered. He dropped his head and looked at Uva. “Uva, can you...” He gestured wildly in Shiv’s direction.

The Psychomancer glared. “First. I can’t get to his mind when he’s wearing the mask. Second, are you truly asking me to mentally *damage* the mind of someone I care for so they can achieve an exaggerated expression of trauma by being actually traumatized?”

Adam considered her question. “Can you do it if he takes the mask off, briefly?”

Uva clenched her jaw tight and took a step closer to Adam. “Of course, Adept Adam. But this will require careful calibration, so he still has a mind left to perform the incredibly complex and delicate task that is infiltration. A task he is not actually trained for—and has no skills for. I must damage him just right, and to do this, I need a testing canvas first. Being the only other surfacers here—and one that shares a culture and history with him—I think you are the only viable candidate. Wouldn’t you agree?”

By this point, Adam was actively backing away from Uva as she practically loomed over him, her agitation clear with every word. Off by the side, Shiv looked on and sighed. “Broken Moon, that drives me wild.” Back when he was growing up, he never expected

people caring for him, let alone getting mad on his behalf. Now, with a *very* attractive Umbral threatening to destroy Adam's mind, Shiv was feeling his stomach do backflips.

"I—I think this is the most amount of words you've said to me at once," Adam stuttered.

"I can say more to you. Mentally. Shall we begin, Adept Adam? This might take a while. Oh, but then the mercenaries will pass by without being infiltrated, and this whole thing will be pointless." Uva practically had her nose against Adam's forehead. "Adam. Do you understand how *stupid*, *rushed*, and *reckless* I think this operation is, yes?"

"Yes," Adam said, creating more space between them. "You told me. A lot. All day."

"Well. Let me tell it to you once more, and add something else: Stop overcomplicating. His goal is to get in with the group, confirm the presence of the weapon, and then create an opening for us and Trapdoor to eliminate the enemy, if possible. If they are beyond our capacity to handle—or the situation does not lend itself to an ambush—he is to pin a mana tracker onto the weapon so we have something to offer as evidence, and so you have something to follow after they enter the gate."

"Yes, yes, fine, okay," Adam said, holding his hands out so that Uva would stop menacing him. "Shiv. Just... be simple, okay? You can do that, right? It's not much harder than you are right now..."

"Sure, Adam. Of course, being the simple man I am, your next meal might end up forgotten. Because simple people can't remember that much stuff at once."

"Fine, just... do what I showed you, okay?" Adam scoffed. "You two are nightmarish together."

Shiv and Uva shared a look. They might not be able to communicate via mind magic right now, but their eyes said enough.

"Adept Adam. Is Master Shiv ready?" Still Water's voice echoed from Adam's brooch. *"I have eyes on the secret convoy. They've encountered some of the... decorations you left behind from last night. A few of them are actively arguing about asking for increased pay."*

Shiv grinned. That explained why his Intimidation went up without him doing anything earlier.

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"There are twenty mercenaries in total. At least ten Adepts. Two are Masters. One... One I'm not sure about. They glanced my way a few times. Bloodspawn. Might have some kind of Heroic Awareness. Or they're just paranoid."

Adam stared at Shiv. "Let's hope the latter."

"I hope the former," Shiv muttered. "I want to fight another high vampire. It's been a while."

Adam gritted his teeth. "Keep your bloodlust in check. You can level any other time."

"Not without good enemies, I can't," Shiv muttered.

"Shiv, System help me," Adam said, pinching the bridge of his nose. Shiv thought back to when Ikki compared Adam to Uva, and he shivered.

"Fine," Shiv grunted. "I'll do what I can."

"Before that," Uva said. She walked over to Shiv and traced his jaw with an armored finger. The act looked weird against his Perfect Semblance, but Shiv understood. He pulled off his skull helm and lifted the mask for a moment, revealing his true self. He was about to ask her what she wanted. Only for her to pull him in for a taste of her lips.

For a few heartbeats, Shiv didn't do so much thinking. He was just a happy animal. A *simple* man. As she pulled away, he grinned at her, and she smiled slightly. "Remember. Careful."

"Yes, Sister Uva," he breathed. He put the mask back on and locked his helm back in place using his Biomancy. But the floating feeling of euphoria lingered inside him for a few moments longer. Shiv breathed out, completely relaxed despite the coming mission.

Adam blinked at Shiv before he turned to Uva and laughed. "Well. Looks like you did it anyway!" He grinned at the happy Shiv who managed a perfect, absentminded expression while using the slaver's face. "That's the exact expression I want. Now. Let's get some more blood on him. We really, really need to sell this..."

*** The source of this content is N0velFire.net

Approximately an hour later, Shiv was staggering out from the woods, clinging to the memory of Uva as he tried to keep his expression consistent. The mercenary transport team was loud enough that even he could hear them from hundreds of meters away—and to make matters more interesting, he felt his mask-hidden mana splash into a much larger Biomancy field almost six minutes before the group actually arrived.

Must be a Master Biomancer among them. If this goes bad, I better kill them first if I can. Meanwhile, just keep doing the face, Shiv...

The mercenary transport team arrived just as his face was about to start cramping up. He counted eight on the road, dragging a large trolley containing what he assumed to be the Animancy Core behind them. If the others weren't there, Shiv guessed they were

spread out in the woods to prevent someone from managing an easy ambush. They were already looking more professional than the outfit Shiv and the others hit last night.

The one pulling the core along was thrice Shiv's usual height and muscle. The skin he left exposed was a rough and ugly gray lined with scars, while the rest of him was layered in dense chunks of obsidian. A fanged mace hung from the brute's side, and it was a bit bigger than Shiv's true body. The big beast stopped dead as other members of his group noticed Shiv. The Deathless watched as the brute regarded him with two beady eyes of piss yellow, slits for a nose, and a jaw filled with rows of jagged teeth.

That must be an orc. Damn, they're big. Then he had to suppress a sneer as another thought entered his head. *Is this how Adam feels when he looks at me?*

The orc drew in a breath and declared: "Contact." His voice rumbled out far and wide as he extracted his fanged mace with a sigh. Rather than hurling threats or responding like a savage, the orc took a measured step forward, leaned down, and placed his massive paw on the shoulder of one of his companions in the vanguard. This one was obscured by a veil of swirling shadows, and Shiv sensed they were at the epicenter of the Master-Tier Biomancy Skill.

And that there should be the high vampire. Shit. If they have Heroic-Tier Awareness too, I might end up having a short night.

Both the orc and the supposed vampire eyed Shiv as they exchanged a few words. They were far enough away that he couldn't hear them—but Shiv was pretty sure Adam got every word. The Deathless added a brief stumble as he kept the shell shocked look on his face, opening and closing his mouth a few times. It might not be much, but...

Skill Gained: Acting 1 (Common)

It was enough.

The orc patted the vampire on the shoulder twice more before stomping forward. Shiv noted the other members of this ensemble. They were all clad in heavy armor—except for an Umbral. Her armor was, in fact, *extremely heavy*, seeming more like a small fortress built around her body than anything. Even her open visor looked like a drawbridge leading into an old castle.

The orc walked out alone, his footsteps hammering hard and loud as he approached Shiv. The ebony road was wide enough to accommodate an adult cave biter that made the orc look like a speck. Yet, there was something colossal about the orc—far greater than his obvious size. Shiv felt it in the way the orc's footsteps made the very ground tremble. It was like the earth below was roused to agitation by the creature's approach.

The orc came to a stop with five meters between him and Shiv. The brute clicked his teeth together and hummed, looking what he assumed to be a bloodied slaver up and down. “You are a *flesh runner*?”

Shiv didn’t know the exact nomenclature for slavers, so he just continued doing the look instead of saying yes. That was the recommendation everyone gave him: Keep it simple and sell the trauma.

An uncomfortable silence followed. The orc breathed in deep. And then made a low, clucking noise with his tongue. “Yes, I think. Hmm. Rather traumatized too. Tell me, were those your compatriots a few kilometers away? The flayed ones hanging from some of the mushrooms by the roadside.”

This time, Shiv nodded with a shaky slowness. He hoped that he sold it well enough.

“Ah. Unfortunate. Unfortunate, indeed. But that is the nature of the trade, no? We move things people want, and they pay us much for it. But never more than what the item is worth. So there are always dangers. Dangers hidden in the dark.” The Orc looked into the woods—and Shiv spotted a flash of metal in the distance. “And dangers in our hearts. For greed plucks at us so easily. Would you not agree?”

Shiv opened and closed his mouth. *Simple. Traumatized.*

Acting > 2

He was going to be a theater star in no time.

The orc let out a heavy breath that washed over Shiv. He was expecting to smell something rancid, but to his surprise, the orc’s billowing breath came with the taste of mint. *His teeth are oddly clean, too... Dammit, is the bestiary right about anything but lesser vampires? Why does the Republic lie about practically everything?*

“Well. You have nothing to fear from us, little flesh runner. Nothing at all. Because we do not have the time for you.”

“Gate,” Shiv managed, trying to sound as vulnerable as he could. “Take me there... please...”

The orc observed him. “Hmm.” He blinked briefly, turned to stare at the vampire, and—Shiv caught the vampire rolling their eyes. When the orc faced Shiv again, he was smiling, and that look was triggering Shiv’s *fight or fight harder* instinct something severe. That was not the face of a herbivore at all. But so far, the orc seemed oddly pleasant. Even rather affable. “My name is 811. You wish to go to the Compact gate?”

“Gate *Theborn*?” 811 asked further.

Shiv was about to agree again when he paused. He didn't actually remember what the gate was called. Ikki mentioned it at some point, but he just let it slip from his mind. "I... I think... I don't know... There was... so much blood. The attack is... My memory is bad right now."

811 nodded. "Understandable. Trauma does this to a *human* mind. Ah. Come along, then. Let us take a walk. You may tell me what happened to you, if you so wish. I understand this makes your race feel better—you are *social animals*, correct?"

Shiv suddenly felt like he was an animal on exhibition. The orc walked next to Shiv and placed a hand against his back—a hand that covered his entire back. *Shit, I was hoping he would take me closer to the transport... Now he's moving me further away...*

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35 (II) Infiltrate

35 (II)

Infiltrate

Shiv looked over his shoulder when he heard a few of the mercenaries laughing. Someone said something about *an itch*, and the shrouded vampire was still shaking their head.

Something felt wrong in Shiv's stomach. Very wrong. But so far, the orc was behaving very kindly—too kindly. If they just told Shiv to piss off, that would have been a failed infiltration, and they would need to do something else, but now he was being led ahead of the group—practically made to jog to keep up with 811's every step.

"Do you know why they call me 811?" the orc asked.

Shiv looked up and tried to keep more fear than curiosity in his voice. "I'm afraid I don't know too much about orcs."

"Ah. That is because our races rarely have conducive discussions. Well. Conducive to understanding, that is. When it comes to killing each other, our kind does that rather well. That is why I am 811. I am the 811th clone of my spiritual line. The memories of my predecessors still echo in my mind. They have been to many places, killed many people, but most of them died here. On this planet. Against you. Humans. So small. So fragile. Yet so vicious and cruel."

811 looked up into the sky and smiled. "We appreciate that in you. My kind was made for bloodshed. Yours was *born* to it. Ah. If only yours could have committed more. System. You are so broken it makes me happy."

Okay, what the hells is this conversation? Shiv wondered, doing his best to not sweat profusely. He heard stories about orcs being monsters, but he had no idea if this thing was about to cry in sympathy or eat him. Shiv's disturbed confusion played on his face as the orc just smirked.

"Ah. Ignore me. I am of the sentimental kind. Even for my race. Now. I have spoken much, and I have been kind. This is a social behavior that should be rewarded, yes?"

Shiv blinked. "I guess?"

"Will you tell me your name, then?"

"I—" Shiv nearly told the damn orc his actual name because of how weird this conversation was. "I'm Mark. Mark Speeiron. I'm... I'm no one. Just a slaver... Oh, go—uh, Great One, they're all dead."

"Hm. Right. The *survivor's guilt*. Your minds are so odd. Why are you punished for surviving? For proving your effectiveness? Such a poorly designed organ. Such a wonderful organ."

"You don't get bothered when your kind dies?" Shiv asked, genuinely curious.

The orc shook his head and sighed like a parent about to correct a child. "You truly do not know much about my race. It is so sweet. The ignorance. I could pull you apart right now."

Shiv's basic instincts screamed for him to attack the orc first. His desire to see if the orc actually could rip him in half made him keep this act going. The rest of the group was getting further and further behind. Then, Shiv realized the shrouded vampire was actually following them. And they were only two meters behind Shiv.

Yep. Something is absolutely about to go wrong. Not great for the infiltration effort, but the orc might just be able to put me down...

Whatever the case, Shiv was going to be getting something out of this.

"Who were you contracted to?" 811 asked. "Is it Scorn? Belalu? Liu?"

Shiv didn't know any of these names other than Scorn. That was supposed to be some kind of demon lord from another dimension or something. He continued playing the ignorant. "I'm not much of a reader, man. I just... I owed some stuff and I had skills. That's how I got into this work."

“What? You were not curious at all? About your own life? About *who owns you*?” For the first time, 811 seemed *mad*.

“I... I...” Shiv grimaced. “I’ll need to find out. Just give me a break. I’m stressed, I’m tired, everyone I was with got butchered and flayed by some kind of... *Skintaker*—”

“Skintaker?” 811 blinked. He leaned down. “Tell me. What is that?”

“There was a... *creature* that attacked us. That slaughtered us. He—uh, it was powerful. And large. And... he tore us apart. We couldn’t do anything to stop him.” Internally, Shiv was cringing. It wasn’t his intent to lead the conversation down this way, but he ended up trying to tap into more of the *traumatized fool* character, and now he was basically praising himself for the violence he committed. He kept going on for a bit, trying to make himself babble and even tried to whimper. Shiv regretted that. He didn’t have the voice for whimpering. Though maybe it sounded different to others with his stolen body?

“Truly,” the orc breathed. 811 shouldered his mace and looked joyously into the woods. “I think I will take a walk here after having a brief set of libations at Little Gomorrah. I hope you are not lying to me, Mark. Because you should not lie to your friends. You really were attacked by a *Skintaker*, yes? You are sure?”

“Yeah, I *am* sure!” Shiv said, trying to act offended. He was going to keep up the act when the orc suddenly led him off the road and into the woods. *Shit. He’s about to do something soon.* Shiv’s mind tremored with anticipation and excitement. They had been going long enough that the rest of the group was beyond their sight—the rest of the group aside from the vampire.

“W-where are we going?” Shiv said, doing his best to sound scared.

“Taking a look,” 811 said, staring off into the darkness with his beady, yellow eyes. “Perhaps we might even get lucky right now. I could break two things out here, and you can die knowing that your people have been avenged.”

“Die?” Shiv asked, blinking.

811 stared at him with so much pity that Shiv realized it was genuine. “Ah. You truly know nothing about me or my kind. I will miss you, little victim. But... despite my fascination with your culture and my determination to understand you better, I am still an orc. A *war-born, war-bred, war-fed*. I am... feeling the itch. The *Black-Hunger*. And I have not maimed, broken, or killed anything in two days and two nights. This is not your fault. I am merely starved, and the others with me I cannot afford to kill per the conditions of my contract.”

The orc came to a stop, and so did Shiv. This was a hell of a way to find out that orcs literally had to hurt and kill someone to keep themselves fed. By this point, Shiv didn’t

have the urge to keep on playing the scared victim. It was time to drop the pretenses and have some actual fun.

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811 rolled his tree-trunk arms and gripped his mace tighter. The vampire leaned against a nearby tree and sighed. "Come on, 811," the vampire said, his voice a deep rasp. "Get on with it. You feed first. Then I do. And make it quick. We don't want that bitch, Uveda, writing us up for indulging on the job again."

And that explained why the vampire was here. Great. Instead of them taking him into their group and letting him infiltrate their number, he got led off to be butchered and devoured in the woods. What charming people Vicar Sullain hired to transport his weapon.

"Ah, there it is," 811 said, looking down into Shiv's eyes. "The coward has died. You have accepted your fate. Now is the moment the ape ascends to die screaming! Die clawing against the soil of its grave! Beautiful. So beautiful."

"Of all the bloody orcs I get stuck with, this one's a romantic," the high vampire muttered. "Get on with it! Hurry!"

"No," 811 said, grinning. "He must fight. I want to see him fight. One last time. Perhaps for the first time in his life." 811 held out his arms and gestured for Shiv to come. "Make this memorable, Mark. It is the last moment of your life. Scar me, and I will carry you in my mind. And those who come after me will remember you as well. That is an immortality. That is the only consolation—"

Shiv decided this was a good moment to test his stolen Blade Whirlwind skill. He flicked a bone dagger into his hand and slashed out at the orc's exposed skin. He didn't use his Biomancy because he needed to conserve his mana field for when the vampire tried to turn his body against him. That, and 811 had such a strong Magical Resistance that an easy kill through heart failure was impossible. Besides, he might be able to surprise them once more when he returned in his Revenant form.

So, for now, Shiv kept his Perfect Semblance as another line of defense—the orc expected to be fighting a weak, desperate slaver, not another Master-Tier in disguise.

As a result, 811 *bled*. The orc grunted in surprise and flinched back. The vampire shot off the tree. Every one of Shiv's attacks turned into a blur of cuts by the end—his arms becoming afterimages going in different directions, delivering several cuts at once. Blade Whirlwind wasn't a bad skill for fighting groups of foes, but on its own, it wasn't that impressive either. It just let someone cut in more directions at once. Without strength, speed, and a decent cutting tool, it wouldn't do much.

But Shiv was strong, fast, and—

He jerked in surprise as a massive pressure clamped hard around Shiv's legs. Beneath his Perfect Semblance, he felt his bone armor crack slightly. A brief glance down revealed a maw of stone had clamped down around his legs. *Geomancy*, Shiv realized. Then, 811's mace came for him.

Compared to Harkness, the orc might as well have been moving in slow motion. But that didn't matter when Shiv was pinned in place and couldn't move. So, Shiv took a direct approach to solving the problem: He parried the orc's massive weapon down into the stone fangs holding him in place. It was a near thing. Even with Might of Mass, Diamond Shell, and Momentum Core, he drained just enough of the blow's momentum to let him redirect the mace downward.

Parry > 34

The orc let out a surprised gasp as his weapon broke through the stone holding Shiv. That gasp became a grunt of astonishment as Shiv shot off the ground and dragged his bone dagger along 811's neck. Yet, despite splitting skin and drawing blood, Shiv watched as the inner flesh of the orc turned to *stone*. He reached out to catch Shiv before he landed. Shiv launched himself over the orc's back by kicking off the grabbing hand.

But the moment Shiv landed, the earth beneath him gave way. He sank down into the suddenly softening soil up to his waist, and a second later, everything around him solidified, fusing back to stone. A crushing pressure rattled and clenched his armor. Shiv let out a wheeze of pain and growled. *Godsdamned Geomancy. Evolved Geomancy at that. What is this? Did he fuse his Geomancy with his Toughness too?*

811 turned. The vampire was approaching to support when the orc held out a hand, halting the bloodspawn. He regarded Shiv with a new expression, the yellow dots that were his eyes flashing briefly with mana. A moment of silence followed. The orc just sighed. "Well, now that doesn't make much sense. Only one Adept Skill... No Feat. No Blessing. Just... nothing. How did you do that?"

Shiv offered the orc a mocking grin. "You told me to make this memorable, didn't you?"

The orc paused. The orc thought. And the orc laughed, and laughed, and laughed some more. By the end, he wiped yellowish tears off his face. "You... You are truly a gem. I will miss you. And I will remember you. Well done. But alas, one must still feed."

The Deathless spat. "Well. You gonna make this memorable for me too?"

"Ah, your true nature, discovered too late?" 811 sniffled. "I will weep for you in private."

And then he brought his fanged mace down on Shiv. The Deathless parried again, and snarled as something in his hip fractured from the transferred torque. The ground was holding him in place at the waist, and he didn't use Momentum Core this time. Mainly because he had another goal right now. A *selfish* goal.

Alright, you big felling bastard. Come and earn my death. Let's see how many levels you can get my Diamond Shell to advance in the meantime."

Shiv parried. And parried. And felt his dagger shatter apart by the third. The biggest problem wasn't Toughness, but strength. The orc was *monstrously* strong, and Shiv could feel something from the land surging up into 811 every time he swung. Whatever weird mix of Geomancy and Physicality or Toughness, it made 811 hit like a godsdamned avalanche.

When Shiv blocked the fourth blow with his arms, both shattered immediately. The fifth saw them rendered mangled stumps. The sixth blasted apart most of Shiv's chest armor. The seventh speared his broken armor deep into the flesh it was meant to protect. As Shiv gagged and coughed blood, he managed a laugh. Might of Mass, Parry, and Diamond Shell were going to be shooting up today.

The orc let out a slight huff and Analyzed Shiv again. "How are you not dead?"

Shiv spat blood all over the orc's dense obsidian boots. "Hit me like you mean it!"

811 blinked. Chuckled. And did as Shiv asked. This content belongs to

"No, wait!" the high vampire said—but they were too slow. 811's mace trembled with so much power Shiv felt it crack the land before it even landed. When the weapon struck Shiv's chest, most of his body *ceased to be*. But the blow kept going. Shiv figuratively gaped as it tore deeper and deeper into the earth, until a literal earthquake shook the forest and tore an expanding fissure that went on and on for *kilometers*. Huge chunks of stone, entire trees and thousands of tons of soil were launched into the sky and began to fall from above.

It was a small miracle Shiv managed to pop his corpse's head off and get his mask into his cloak. It was another miracle that he respawned as a Revenant in the right direction, because if he ended up behind his corpse, he would be plunging into a deep and black pit. Judging by how the high vampire was screaming at the orc, the bloodspawn was too distracted to notice Shiv's subtle Biomancy. That, and all the smoke shrouded his cloak.

Despite how off-course the infiltration went, this death was pretty good.

Diamond Shell > 84

Might of Mass > 75

Parry > 38

Knife Proficiency > 33

“What were you thinking?” the high vampire hissed. “Are you trying to get everyone to notice us? Are you trying to betray our position?”

Thunderous impacts sounded in the distance as massive chunks of earth achieved touchdown. Slowly, the parted land rumbled and closed at a casual gesture from 811. Shiv noticed how the orc’s body lit with spell shapes, like he was part of the spell. Yeah. Definitely a Skill Fusion. Carefully, Shiv maneuvered closer to his two enemies. They were both powerful, but with a bit of strategy and maybe—

“Back!” the vampire hissed. “You go back, now! And explain what you did to Uveda before she blames me for your mongrel behavior. I will not be penalized for this. Not again! Tell her this is your doing! Yours alone!”

The orc laughed. It was the sound of grinding rocks. “Ah, Isaiah. You really should relax more. What is the point of being a creature of the higher blood if you are so—”

“Go!” the vampire cried.

“Very well,” 811 said. Then, with a grunt and flex of his legs, he launched himself from the ground—and Shiv felt the earth itself give the orc a helpful boost. With a casual hop, the orc shot far over the land and returned to the rest of the mercenaries. Alone, the high vampire looked down into the quickly-closing mess of ruined earth where Shiv once was.

Suddenly, the Deathless realized his little infiltration attempt might not be over after all. Inching closer to the vampire from behind, Shiv prepared to show the bloodspawn just what it meant to be properly drained.

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36 (I) Access

Mana gates are the lifeblood of empires and the reason for their downfall.

We understand that these passageways are created by the System to bridge dimensions and worlds. The goal, usually, is to further conflict. This phenomenon has been observed countless times, such as resource-rich gates often opening along the

borders between great nations, or a gate connected to an extremely warlike world being unleashed upon Integrated Earth.

Because of this—and the assortment of Quests that are issued in relation to the gates—the terms “Dungeon Rush,” “Gate Raider,” and “Gate War” have become mainstays in most societies. For some Pathbearers, their claim to strength and ascension to Master was solely because of their success raiding gates. Entire warbands, nations, and even societies have been created for the end of better challenging, capturing, or closing gates. In certain cases, Pathbearers argue the title of “Gate Lord” is more valuable than being the ruler of a village, town, city, or even kingdom, due to the sheer amount of resources they can obtain.

Due to gates being conduits and “mana veins” between worlds, even the weakest gate’s power far exceeds the mana contained within a singular Pathbearer’s soul, for the most part. As such, the designation for gates shares naming conventions with mana storms, starting from Category 1 and upward.

So far, the highest rated gate is a Category 15 gate located in the Kingdom of Lone Star, and can be spotted easily from even beyond the planet’s atmosphere. Most of Lone Star’s people have not-so-affectionately dubbed the gate “Perdition’s Anvil,” with it supplying over 92.44% of Lone Star’s economy, while its monsters remain the highest cause of mortality for its people...

-Gates: Worlds Between Worlds

36

Access

Shiv attacked the vampire from several vectors at once.

His Vitality Drain hit first. The high vampire let out a vicious hiss as he stumbled in agony. What followed were several brutal blows striking all at once. Shiv’s Biomancy was his strongest magical skill, but it paled in comparison to that of the vampire. Surprise, however, was a potent weapon for the weaker party, and Shiv had a lot more than just one surprise to offer. He drove his Biomancy field into the high vampire immediately. Now, the bloodsucker’s hiss turned into a gagging rasp. To its credit, it responded damned fast—Shiv only managed to briefly touch the high vampire’s heart before he felt its Biomancy respond, clamping down on his field.

Now it was Shiv that gave a silent hiss. A shuddering pain rushed straight to the very roots of his being. The feeling of using a weaker mana field to struggle against a stronger one was like getting your limb slowly ripped out of its socket—except the limb was both Shiv’s mind and soul. An aura of deepest red exploded out from the vampire as a complex series of weaving spells danced around him. Towering mushrooms and

other organisms nearby began to melt into blood. Shiv could feel the grinding power of the high vampire crash against him like waves—and do nothing.

This was why Shiv chose to begin his magical offensive: He had no physical body right then, so there was nothing to lose. Despite this, his Biomancy was absolutely pinned in place. He was a lake being crushed by a sea, and despite all his effort, the high vampire's field pushed through his own in practically a heartbeat.

And it still did nothing, to the high vampire's building fury.

"Show yourself, coward!" the high creature spat.

Shiv pushed through his spiritual agony and turned to his other mana attunements. It took him a colossal effort to focus his intent enough to shape the simplest spell—and Pyromancy was far easier to direct than Psychomancy.

How the hells did Uva even last at all against Harkness... A burst of flame splashed across the high vampire's eyes, causing its eyelashes to catch fire. It clawed out at all angles, striking blindly with its magic. Practically everything organic in a hundred-meter radius was splashing down into a lake of blood at this point. And now Shiv's resurrective husk was condensing around him. He didn't have long before he got an immediate sampling of another—

Shiv resurrected. And then Shiv died immediately. He barely managed a single breath before he felt himself come apart into rivers of blood. *Broken Moon, magic is bullshit... Great. Now, I know the first high vampire I fought was little more than an Adept-Tier weakling at most.* Shiv paused briefly. And now he was experiencing power inflation. Tran and most of the Slayers were awed by Adam hitting Adept-Tier while he was still in the academy. But compared to the actual monsters that walked Integrated Earth, Adept-Tiers were but lambs to the slaughter.

Tragically for the bloodspawn, Shiv was a lamb that could grow a wolf's teeth once he got his neck torn open enough times.

Biomancy > 47

Pyromancy > 9

Psychomancy > 8

The high vampire turned, slashing out with clawed hands and cleaving through the dissolving spill of blood where Shiv once stood. Once again, he started draining the vampire. Once again, the vampire threw its head back and howled in agony. The monster's focus shattered. All the dancing spells orbiting around its body dissolved and vanished, and the world darkened once more. But rather than trying to burst the high vampire's heart with his already strained Biomancy field, Shiv unleashed his

Psychomancy instead. Focusing his intent, he tried to rip and tear at the vampire's mind, but the spells he shaped seemed to have no effect. The high vampire staggered, gathering its bearings, and Shiv cursed. He adapted. He focused his will and poured his deepest desire into the vampire: "*Stay distracted!*"

This time, the high vampire's eyes widened, and Shiv felt the bloodspawn's mind lose focus. *The mind's not like the body*, Shiv realized. *I can't attack it the same way. I need to think mentally... attack him as I was attacked mentally...* The vampire started recovering again. Shiv drew on the closest experience he had and came up with a plan.

A plan that was probably going to make Uva pretty pissed at him later.

Once more, he shaped a spell—but this wasn't a spell meant to strike at another's mind. At least not immediately. No, this was the spell Shiv was the most familiar with right now, because he did it practically every time he got intimate with Uva. Shiv tethered his thoughts and feelings to the vampire, and the damn monster immediately started spasming and shrieking in torment. Shiv frowned. *Come on, asshole, mana strain doesn't feel that bad... Does it? It's like a three out of ten next to getting burned alive in the teleportation anchor. Oh, wait!* Shiv drew on his teleportation anchor memories and dumped them all into the high vampire. The shrieking stopped, and the vampire promptly blacked out.

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Psychomancy > 9

That didn't mean Shiv was done. He kept dumping more of his recently experienced pain into the vampire, until the enemy was just twitching and jerking on the ground. Just as Shiv sensed no more brain activity in the blank-eyed monster, he resurrected once more—and immediately extracted the vampire's heart before tossing the organ down into his cloak. Using his Biomancy hurt *badly*, but Shiv wasn't messing around with this monster. Without Psychomancy, Shiv really wasn't sure how this fight could have gone.

Thank the System most mages have a hard time developing Magical Resistance. If this bastard had 811's Magical Resistance, I would have probably experienced a good ten deaths or more... Not that it sounded too bad in retrospect. He was close to his Skill Evolution for Biomancy now. Maybe a few more would have pushed him over the edge. *Good thing I kept my Perfect Semblance up too. If I just dropped the guise and started fighting, they would all probably be on alert right now. With the vampire dead, I got a chance to keep this infiltration run going. I just need a new face.*

"Not bad, Master Shiv," a voice came from behind.

Shiv spun—only to see Still Water staring at him from behind a tree with a single dagger drawn. “Still Water,” Shiv greeted, bidding his racing heart to calm. “A warning could have been good.”

“That defeats the purpose. Remember, Master Shiv: This is a sneaking mission. And right now, I think the mission’s got a new lease on life.”

Shiv grunted as he pulled his own severed head out from his cloak. “Good thing I managed to decapitate myself. And that the damned orc swung so hard it covered this entire place with dust and debris.” As if the world was agreeing with his statement, a chunk of land that had been thrown up particularly high impacted and made the ground shake somewhere far away. “Things could’ve gone pretty bad if my body dropped into the fissure. Or if they noticed me casting my spells.”

“Yeah,” Still Water said, looking around. “That, and if one of their patrolling Adepts didn’t go missing in the forest due to *no one in particular*, they might have come running to help their friend just now.”

Oh, she’s here to boast, Shiv realized. He chuckled. “Thanks, *no one in particular*.”

The Weaveress gave her own silent laugh. “Don’t worry about it, *high vampire*. Now. Let’s see what that mask can do.”

Shiv took the Mask of False Paths off his original severed head. He then tossed the head on the ground and pulled out five more of his own stored corpses from his cloak.

“I... am not sure what you’re doing, Master Shiv?” Still Water said. She discovered the answer a second later as Shiv harvested all biomass unrelated to bone from his corpses and used it to assemble an even bigger, denser exoskeleton.

“I’m going to need a thicker shell around me for my next round with the orc,” Shiv said as he ripped off the vampire’s mask and studied their face. *Hmm, not too ugly. Other than the teeth...*

“The point is to not have a next round with the orc,” Still Water said somewhat sarcastically.

“There’s going to be a next round,” Shiv insisted. He hesitated before confirming the vampire as his new Perfect Semblance. Kneeling down, he asked Still Water to keep watch as he looted his kill. To his disappointment, the high vampire didn’t have much worth taking, other than a pouch filled with gems, some kind of overly decorated nightglass dagger, and a diary of all things. Shiv took all those—but in the process, felt a strange hardness hidden along both the vampire’s arm sleeves. As he pulled off the vampire’s gloves, a grin spread across his face.

“Well, I was just looking for something like this.” Shiv didn’t manage to find the focus staff that one of the slavers was using yesterday, but what the vampire had on him might just be better. A set of focus crystal bracelets were Shiv’s true reward, and he fastened them to his own arms. Immediately, his mind cleared—the feeling was uncanny. It was like it drank away the drift and distractions from Shiv’s thoughts. *I got to ask someone about these crystals when I get the chance...*

“Someone’s coming down the road. Five hundred meters,” Still Water called out. Shiv grunted his acknowledgement and assembled his new exoskeleton over himself. He was now two skeletons denser than normal, and it was starting to feel awkward to move in. Shiv made some final adjustments to the armor so it didn’t feel that unbalanced. As he solidified a cluster of five skulls to become his new helmet, he stared down at the vampire’s face and chose them as his new Perfect Semblance.

Just like with the slaver, the body of the slain combusted, and the fire and ash fused around Shiv to create a new identity he could wear. He examined his hands, now shrouded in a thick shawl of shadowy fabric. He then wrapped his head like the high vampire used to, leaving only his eyes showing.

Giving his Perfect Semblance status sheet a brief look, Shiv took in a few of the essential details and gawked at just how many Adept-Tier Skills the vampire had. *That’s a damn wall of skills... And he was 145 years old? Well, the System must’ve hated him, since it set us on a course to collide.*

“Well, that’s not something you see every day,” Still Water breathed. She peeked past the tree again and hummed. “Three hundred meters. They’re coming into sight. I’m going dark. I’ll let the others know the operation is still on—and that you got a new face.”

“Yeah,” Shiv said. “Don’t engage, though. This group’s tough. Between the orc and all the others, I don’t think we can achieve a clean ambush with what we got.”

Still Water vanished into her cloak, but kept speaking. “I’m inclined to agree. So, best tag that weapon so we got something to track in the worst case. Best, we’ll find an opening, and we can pick more and more of them off along the way. Oh, and one more thing: what was the vampire’s Awareness?”

Shiv checked the high vampire’s status sheet and chuckled. “Initiate.”

The Trapdoor Weaveress sighed. “Paranoia. Looks like it got to me.”

“Better to have it than not,” Shiv said.

He stepped out of the woods and proceeded back along the wide ebony path. He tried to remember what the vampire’s personality was like to get into character. Shiv needed to be impatient and agitated. Develop a short fuse, maybe. That, and keep to himself most of the time. Except the orc seemed pretty friendly with the high vampire. *But the*

vampire was pretty mad at the orc... Isaiah. Isaiah Galtadore is the vampire's name... What kind of name is that?

And then there was another thing that drew his notice. A notification lingered before him, asking him if he wanted to steal an Initiate Skill from the high vampire. Or maybe replace his Adept-Tier Skill. And with the buffet the vampire offered, he wasn't short on options.

"Isaiah!" a female voice snarled from afar. "Bloodspawn! Where are you? I told you to watch the damned orc! I told you he was your burden. Does that mean something to a spawn of the Court? Was that the reason they cast you out?"

Shiv bit back a groan of annoyance. And already more personal lore was flying at him. He didn't have time to dig through this status sheet in detail, and Blade Whirlwind was... not that effective. Momentum Core already gave Shiv a pretty extreme option for dealing physical damage, but what he needed right now was more flexibility, more *subtlety*, more subterfuge.

And that's why he found a choice that went perfectly with his mask.

Replace Stolen Adept-Tier Skill [Blade Whirlwind] with [Umbral Shadowalker]?

Shiv agreed.

A second later, he held back a gasp as all the memories associated with Blade Whirlwind were torn out of his mind and replaced with Umbral Shadowalker. As the furious woman kept calling out to him, Shiv remembered stalking through darkness as other vampires hunted him. They wailed in sorrowful outrage, demanding he return to let them take and stake his heart, that he didn't deserve his gifted blood for the patricide he committed...

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36 (II) Access

36 (II)

Access

In desperation came struggle, and from struggle was an Adept forged. Isaiah learned how to melt into the darkness that day, to let the shadows hide his footsteps and turn him invisible.

Now, this is a sneaking mission. Shiv grinned to himself. Also explains why I couldn't hear him at all when he was following me. I wonder if this skill can counter Adam's Awareness... Let's give this a field test.

Shiv darted among the trees and bled into the shadows. At once, the dense fabric covering his body dissolved into smoke and blanketed him entirely. Shiv could see through the shifting darkness, but from the outside, it must've just looked like a trick of the light. To his surprise, the darkness also blunted his footsteps, so he made no noise when the environment was pitch black.

This is proving to be a damn good choice already.

"Isaiah!" The woman sounded like she was on the verge of exploding in rage. There were two other mercenaries flanking her. After a moment's observation, Shiv realized she was the short, heavily armored Umbral standing at the back of the group from earlier. He also distinctly remembered the high vampire calling her a bitch.

Well, time to start a toxic relationship on the wrong foot. Let's see if all my practice bullying Adam is going to pay off.

Shiv crept along the edges of the darkness until he was behind the small group looking for him. Then, just as the Umbral was about to call out again, he burst out of the woods and strained his feeble Acting Skill as hard as he could. "Stop. I've heard enough of your voice. It's enough to make someone want to get staked."

The mercenaries jumped. One of them turned and fired a crossbow at Shiv. He angled his head and let it fly past him. "I didn't mean that literally, you bastard," he said with a sneer.

"You bloodsucking *shit*." The Umbral stomped toward him. Her castle-gate-like helmet was closed this time, leaving only three slots for him to gaze down at her face. Shiv quickly judged the Umbral to be extremely angry, but also to lack the features to make that rage intimidating. "What did I tell you about keeping your orc pet on a leash? What did I say? That you get to feed if you keep him on point and focused. Was any of what just happened on point or focused?"

"For an orc?" Shiv asked, half-insultingly, half-honestly.

"You..." the Umbral seethed. "Get to the back. Rear guard. You're pushing the cart with your damned orc. The guild will hear of your conduct. I will make sure you never get assigned to a single protection detail along the Midnight Route or any other routes within Compact territory."

Shiv just sneered, scoffed, and turned away. This was what he wanted anyway—a means of getting close to the transport again. *This is already working out better than me pretending to be a slaver.*

Acting > 5 Google search N0v3l.Fire

And the System seemed to agree.

By the time he was back with the transport again, he found 811 humming a jaunty tune about smashing humans into dust. Shiv hated to admit it, but the orc had a pretty good singing voice, and the lyrical composition wasn't half bad either. *I'm going to kill the big bastard, but I think I'm going to end up remembering him, ironically enough.*

As he passed the front of the cart, he saw a tall and thin man was tugging the chain that 811 used to pull while the orc was pushing from behind. Shiv let out a loud theatrical sigh before he joined the orc in the back. As he approached, the orc grinned at him, flashing rows of pearly white teeth. "So. How did it go? Did you find a speck of blood to lick off the ground?"

Shiv just glared at the orc. He wasn't acting. These feelings were genuine. And in a strange way, that made what he was doing the best kind of acting. The orc tossed his head back and laughed. "Ah. I have made you mad again. I tell you, Isaiah, that you might prey on these races like me, but you are so like them. So human yourself. Does it ever bother you?"

"What bothers me is when a bloody Master can't kill some Adept-Tier vermin."

"Ah, but in his final moment, he laid bare his heart for once, and the System breathed power into him. He fought with strength and beauty. I believe this to be a message. From the System. A vision of what he could have truly been if he were not a slaver in dire circumstance. And it was so tragically beautiful."

Another trickle of yellow ran down the orcs face, and he sniffled. The large, murderous monster was genuinely emotional. These tears were real.

What the hells, Shiv thought. He shook himself out of his stupor and looked at the cargo. The Animacy Core was right here, bundled tight by cords and ropes and—well, it felt strangely exposed. Under-defended, even with so many powerful mercenaries guarding it. Something was off here. It wasn't the same kind of off Shiv felt when the orc took him out into the woods to be killed, but there was a piece of the picture that didn't make any sense.

I still better tag this thing. Like I told Still Water earlier, better to have paranoia than not. Using his new Stealth Skill as best he could, Shiv reached into his cloak—hidden to others by Perfect Semblance—and pulled out a magical tracker. He pretended to stumble and slapped the tracker under the cart. Then he cursed himself, because that

was probably the wrong place to put it. He suspected the mercenaries would see the core switched from one transport to another at some point. *Shit. Well. I have another tracker. I can just...*

“Isaiah? Are you alright?” 811 asked, frowning. “I have never watched you stumble on an even surface before. And your posture... you feel heavier than you did before. You walk like you are much bigger than you are as well—the gait is all wrong. What has happened?”

He can tell that just by observing me? Why did the System put me up against the world’s most observant orc? Shiv cursed. Mustering his own frustration, he managed to snarl out: “Piss off! I’m like this because I’m bloody hungry too.”

811 blinked. And then laughed. “Oh, dear. Oh, dear. I am so sorry, my little friend. You must be feeling worse than I do, considering your lacking Physicality. What was it again? Adept? My, to only endure a single month without food or rest.” But the orc’s eyes glinted with affable cruelty. “But that is not the thing, is it? You don’t need food. You crave it. Crave it worse than I do. Poor, poor little ape-eater. So close in nature to your prey, yet damned to eat them. One wonders if it was truly a blessing to take that parasite into your heart.”

Acting > 6

And Shiv thanked the System for putting him next to the most overly intellectual orc in existence. As much as 811 noticed, he quickly lost himself to tangents and musings. Small mercies.

“I will admit to you, I am disappointed.” 811 sniffled. “I hoped someone might attack us on the way. To force a proper and bloody bout over this... *thing.*” To Shiv’s astonishment, the orc casually knocked on the densely bundled Animancy Core with a massive fist. But what Shiv heard wasn’t the ringing of bone against steel, but bone against *wood.*

What?

“You genuinely wish for that? For us to be ambushed?” Shiv poured disdain into his voice but kept things vague.

811 smirked. “Of course. I even have a small hope that we all lose and fall. Just to see the expressions on their faces before I perish and carry over into my 812th iteration. Just for them to realize that the actual prize is not even with us. That it is likely being moved by a more trustworthy and reliable group than a few mercenaries...”

Shiv’s thoughts ground to a halt. He stared at what he assumed to be the core all this time and blinked. The orc laughed again. “Oh, Isaiah, please use that mind of yours. I know you have one, since you managed to reconstruct my entire arm in the span of

seconds. A brilliant mind. One soured on the flavor of bitterness and drowning in a depressed ego. Think. Think deeply. Why hire us? Mercenaries are loud. Effective sometimes, yes, but loud. And their honor and professionalism have a price. Imagine how easy it would be for someone of your original Faith to simply buy one of us for information. And think of what that is worth across the Abyss—whispers and threats of a new war.”

The narrative has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the infringement.

811 drew in a deep breath and sighed. “You smell that? It is the stench of building chaos. Building and building as opportunities and doubt bleed over every crevice in this vast and lovely darkness. Imagine the shockwaves going from the chasm to Penumbra. Now imagine you were to *think* we have a device of such a nature, but be revealed to be moving some more meager treasure in the end. Disappointment and false information is a vaccine against proactivity. A potent one at that.”

The orc smirked proudly. Shiv blinked.

This was the consequence of rushing into an operation. Of not having enough intelligence. Shiv was beginning to see that clearly now.

Okay. I need to kill him the first chance I get. Because this thing... I hope he's wrong, but a thing this size and of this nature shouldn't be allowed to get that smart. Dammit. Shit. I hope Adam heard all of that—or maybe the brooch in my cloak managed to catch some of that. But if this convoy is just a decoy, then... where the hells is the real Animancy Core?

The question plagued Shiv. All the way until they started closing in on the gate.

“Shit!” Adam spat as soon as the orc finished speaking. He slammed a fist down on the shroom cap he was hiding on. “Godsdammit all!” His insides tightened. His heart began to race. If this group was just a decoy, then maybe the bomb was already across—maybe this entire thing was a ruse. Maybe—

No. Focus. We solve the problems we can. Think. The hiring of a decoy group means the real core is still out there. That means that it must pass through the gate... or has just recently. No one hires a decoy early. Or late. Decoys are meant to split focus and attention. So...so the best chance we have is getting Shiv inside the gate as soon as we can. We have to get him inside the gate—and the transport crew is the best way to do it.

The Young Lord mastered himself and conveyed what he learned to the others through his brooch. Uva *really* didn't like his new plan. The Weaveresses didn't sound sold either. Adam couldn't wait. He just couldn't. They wanted to call this entire thing off

since the tracker was pinned, but Adam couldn't accept this. Not with Blackedge at risk, not when—

“Adept,” Valor said. Adam blinked and regarded the skull. Valor was watching him, the flames inside his sockets dancing. *“Think. You were thinking just now, but you plunged into worry again. Think about the process. Think.”*

“I—I am thinking,” Adam said, frustration leaking through. “I’m thinking that we don’t know anything, that this entire thing was a waste of time—aside from getting Shiv a better false identity he could use. And I think... I think...” Adam genuinely started to think. “This Animancy Core... It’s pretty volatile, isn’t it? You said it... this is part of a Soulbreaking weapon. The... Soulbreaker Engine. Why would Compact allow someone to move that inside their gate?”

“They would not, unless substantial protections are in place. More than some tarp and a few wards. And the assembling of the engine will take time as well. And cannot be done inside a gate due to the structural damage it might inflict on the gate itself. You have more time than you think. And, more importantly, I suspect that the real transport team will cross paths with the decoy within the gate at the end. Just to muddy the waters further and perhaps swap carts or even members.”

“Right. Right.” Adam swallowed. “Should... Should I end this? Should I end the operation and find a way to get Shiv out?”

Valor didn’t reply immediately. Instead, the skull just studied Adam. *“Would it please you if he died for good? Would it mend what is poisoning you?”*

“What, no, I...” Adam thought about Shiv being dead. Being truly dead. And... *he didn’t like the feeling.* “No. No. Absolutely not. I... he’s a freak. A monster. He’s... I know what you’re trying to do here—you’re trying to make me understand my responsibility, but... he can’t die, he’s too... he has that skill! And it wouldn’t be right.”

“What wouldn’t be right?”

“His death. I don’t... he... he still needs to save Blackedge. He needs to save Blackedge with me.” The Young Lord felt something harden inside him. “That’s the only way I’ll ever forgive him. I’ll hate him more if he dies. I’ll hate myself more...”

“So. What do you think is the right thing to do?”

Adam paused. “I...” And then something occurred to him. “What does Shiv think?”

Valor laughed. *“Oh, that’s simple. He has an opening to the gate now. So, I think he’s going to try to walk right in and start adapting and planning from the other end if nothing else occurs. He is practical that way. Though the Jealousy... The Greater Demon... I am not sure if his mask can survive its direct scrutiny.”*

Once again, the Young Lord started thinking, and eventually, he drew his Spellstring with a sigh. "Well. Let's see if one reckless deed can create an opening for another. Uva might just kill me..."

"And I will mourn you as a brave disciple if she does."

"I don't care for you much, Valor. I hope you know that."

"And I am primarily using you as a subcontractor to deal with the tedious parts of Shiv's training. So. I think that leaves things plain between us."

The Young Lord and the skull shared a glance. Then they both snorted.

"Don't die, Adam."

"I'll try not to, skull." Adam took a deep breath. And spoke into his brooch. "Uva. Prepare to get your sisters out of the area. I'm going to take a few shots at the Jealousy when Shiv gets close to the gate."

"You're what? Adam? Adam!"

It was hard to hear her over the crackles of his burning wings.

Shiv eyed the watch towers, expecting them to blast him at any moment. So far, he had passed through multiple layers of defenses alive, but at any moment, everything might go to hell. The grinding sounds his mask made as the Jealousy's Psychomancy pressed against him added to his worry.

"You seem stressed, Isaiah?" 811 said. "Odd to be such a thing near the end of a journey rather than the start."

"I need to drain someone," Shiv muttered, peeking up into the sky. He could see a lot of the wyvern riders doing passovers. A lot of them had mana fields too. Powerful mana fields. A good few were Masters in Psychomancy, Biomancy, Pyromancy, and more. And then there was the Jealousy. A dense layer of cumulus curled around its angular, octopus-like body as its damn eye glared down at the Abyss below, like some kind of twisted mockery of the sun. The Greater Demon was well beyond Master. It was probably Heroic at the very least. Shiv hoped Low-Heroic, because the way his mask's Enchantment sounded made him worry that it was going to break apart on his face.

Ahead, the archway was activated, the gate was bright with spatial mana, and Shiv could see a vast bridge extending out toward a distant structure. It looked like some kind of metallic pyramid, and a grand chain connected it to the withered sun within the

gate. Again, he wondered if it would have been wiser to try and break off and wait, but 811 was watching his every move, and they still needed to find the core.

Shiv didn't know what was waiting ahead of him, or how he was going to find the actual core, or if his brooch would still work—

A loud crackling sound made him stop thinking. A System notification made him start again.

Equipment: [Mask of False Paths]

Condition: Moderately Damaged

Shit, Shiv growled internally. *Guess the damn Jealousy isn't Low-Heroic after all.* He chanced a glimpse upward and looked away when he saw the demon seemingly glaring hard in his direction. Hard to tell with its titanic size, but he was sure that it was really, really focused on him. He prepared himself for what was to come. He didn't want to lose the mask, but it might be his only chance to get out of here with his mind intact. His escape strategy was simple: Hit the orc as much as he could, avoid making contact with the earth, and launch himself out of this place using Momentum Core. If he did all that just right, he might be able to—

A whistling noise sounded from someplace behind him. Shiv frowned as he turned—and the pressure stopped. The Jealousy wasn't looking at him anymore, instead, it was staring at a streaming trail of projectiles blasting toward it from the distance. Shiv blinked. The other mercenaries didn't stop at all—they exploded into a sprint. 811 pushed the cart faster and laughed. In fact, everyone around them was sprinting for the Compact gate as it began to flicker.

“Oh, fools! To strike this late! Come on, blood sipper. Look away. They are the demon's quarry now. You will not get to have a taste.”

Adam, what the hells are you... Shiv's thought trailed off as he realized the Young Lord's intentions. They all knew the Jealousy was the greatest risk to Shiv's cover. So Adam must've been watching from afar, waiting until Shiv got close to the gate before he fired his arrows. This was a distraction. Nothing more. It was a distraction that came with its own risks.

Wyvern riders shot off into the distance. One transformed entirely into a bolt of lightning, crossing the span of kilometers in a flash.

Shiv winced. He hoped Adam didn't put himself and the others in more trouble just to help him get across. Frankly, he couldn't see Uva or the others agreeing to this plan so... *Well, don't let the riders get you. And don't let Uva kill you after.*

Uva liked planning and certainty. This was reckless and desperate. She was going to hate this.

“Isaiah!” 811 cried. “Come on. Stop looking. There will be plenty of things to taste once we offload. The slaves are on me, this time.”

Shiv grunted and doubled his pace. Nothing to do but go forward. These were the cards he picked, and so he was going to go forward, and he was going to play.

For the first time in his life, Shiv crossed through a mana gate.

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

37 (I) Gate

xxx

SIGNED: *Writ of joint command and control over Demonic Expeditionary Column Gravebanner between Lord Scorn the Ruin-Forged and the Lords of Law Over Compact*

xxx

Equity: *All resources, minerals, and trade goods passing through Mana Gate Theborn will be taxed and processed by Compact. Enforcement will be conducted by members of Demonic Expeditionary Column Gravebanner, and they will be given judicial authority within inter-dimensional territories and led by Lesser Marshal Confriga (aside from territories denoted as “Consulate,” “Embassy,” or other sectors protected by contracts of extraterritoriality)...*

xxx

Exemption: *Vicar Sullain is recognized and protected under personal contract. All matters dealing with the vicar are to be regarded as dealing with a Legendary Pathbearer. All requests from the Necrotech Legions for extradition are to be ignored. Exemption stands under command and contract signed by the Lords of Law Over Compact (And will remain in place indefinitely until an update or nullification is delivered to this document)*

-Unclassified sections from the Contract of Control, signed by Lord Scorn the Ruin-Forged and the Lords of Law Over Compact

Gate

Of all the things Shiv expected to feel upon passing through the gate, an intense coldness was not one of them. It was also a *wrong* kind of cold. An unnatural kind of cold. A ceaseless chill emanated from the chained sun in the distance, its grayish glare channeling a constant stream of frost down over the world. That was contrasted with the world underneath as Shiv looked over the edge of the iron-forged bridge he was on. Veins of molten metal circulated through the distant bedrock of its place. The heat below was so intense that Shiv could see an optical mirage forming.

Behind, the spatial mana sustaining the gate went dead, and the way back vanished. Shiv felt the heavy weight of finality tighten its grip inside him. He made his choice. No going back now. Not like back was that great of an option in the end, considering what was happening with the Jealousy.

A rumble sounded ahead as a massive set of stone doors opened to welcome them at the end of the bridge. They were about to enter the base of the pyramid structure he saw earlier, but before that, there were two elemental golems standing guard and a layer of security wards veiling the interior.

Shiv realized they were the same kind of golem he fought in the teleportation anchor almost a week ago—though they seemed just a bit smaller. They weren't his biggest concern, though. Shiv studied 811 next to him, and he knew the orc was watching him too. The brilliant brute missed nothing. Without easy means of escape or reconnecting with his friends, Shiv needed to operate with greater caution. He could come back from dying, but he didn't know much about this place at all.

Losing his mask might just end with an entire dimension of enemies coming down on him at once. Shiv was battle-happy and death-hungry, but he had no interest in being broken and caged in mind or body. And if things went wrong, he very much expected someone to shatter his mind and uncover everything about him...

They passed by the golems and sauntered through the wards. As the spells washed through Shiv, he readied himself for sirens or an attack. They never came. His mask was pretty damaged, but it was still functional. *I really need to find a way to fix this thing. And soon. Not sure how I'm going to do that here, but I'll find a way. I just need to get my bearings first.*

It occurred to him how lucky he was in running into the Umbrals. Nomos might've been a bit of an asshole and his first impression of even Uva was how aloof they were, but Weave took to him pretty well. And he took to it well too. It was practically his favorite city in the world at this point. *Well, the only actual city I've been to. Blackedge is... shit sprinkled with some people I care about. And this place seems to be a special kind of miserable.*

As the last of their group got inside the building, Shiv found himself standing on what appeared to be a very large elevator. A second later, as the large, metal gears in its corners began to turn, he knew he was right. A tension immediately broke among the mercenaries. Helmets were removed. Curses and sighs escaped lips, and 811 began to chuckle. "Another run complete."

"Joy," Shiv said, pouring some of his uncertainty into the word.

The orc bumped him on the shoulder. Then frowned. "Hm. I remember you being easier to nudge."

Right, the vampire apparently lacked Physicality. "I remember you bothering to—" 811 shoved Shiv again. The Deathless timed a near-sprawl perfectly. "Oh, you godsdamned stupid creature!"

811 laughed again. Shiv caught the heavily armored Umbral walking by, sneering at them. "Well. I'm glad you two are having a laugh. In fact, I hope you keep up that laughing when we get to the guild office, because you're both *felling* done. I'm not having you in my band no more. Never again. What happened today with the attack at the end? That was your fault, 811."

"I disagree." The orc smiled politely. "If I may, I would like to defend—"

"Save it," the Umbral spat. She nodded down at Shiv and spat at his feet. "You can save it too. You'll be assigned final pay and be released back as freelancers. I need professionals. Not a brute. And certainly not some First Blood fugitive in desperate need of a personality transplant."

Shiv didn't know what to say, so he just sneered back as he stood back up, towering over her. She poured a final bit of disgust into her glare and walked away.

"Well. Free at last," 811 said with a breath. "I must say, we really should avoid these low-risk, quiet assignments. With what you are and what I am, violence is in our nature. Running from it has done us a disservice."

"Some of us don't come back if we die," Shiv said, fully aware of the irony in his statement.

"Ah, but that just increases the thrill, does it not? Imagine how sweet it will taste to finally best and free yourself from the First Blood hunters who seek your heart? Imagine spreading your own rogue bloodline away from the Court and being a power they cannot touch. Death is a simple slip. A dreamless sleep at worst. But life offers a great many prizes to the ones that dare."

Shiv looked up at the orc. The orc looked down and blinked. “Oh,” 811 said, sighing. “You must truly be tired, Isaiah. You did not tell me to shut up once during that monologue. You are very unlike yourself today.”

This story is posted elsewhere by the author. Help them out by reading the authentic version.

Once again, Shiv reaffirmed his need to kill the orc—and get away from the brute as soon as possible. This cover wasn’t going to last much longer.

Another thing Shiv wasn’t prepared for: How *insanely* boring the after-action-processing was. After stopping on a certain floor, they handed the “core” they were transporting over to a group of automata who secured, scanned, and slapped a tag of their own on the cart. Through it all, Shiv found himself surprised that the mana tag he was given by the Weaveress didn’t set off any alarms.

Trapdoor has some nifty equipment, I’ll say that.

Once finished, the automata wheeled the cart around the corner, and the elevator began to move again.

As did Shiv’s journey into purgatory.

The elevator arrived at its destination soon enough, which gave him a false sense of hope about finding a chance to slip away. That was quickly dashed as they were taken through what Shiv could only describe as teleportation customs at Blackedge, but infinitely worse. They were made to pass through over ten rooms for countless scans, interviews, more scans, an interrogation about what happened along the journey, more scans, made to fill out a report about what they thought they did well and what could be improved. Then, just as Shiv found himself released into a lobby, the angry Umbral mercenary that led this outfit threw what were supposed to be his employment papers at his feet and stomped off, telling him he needed to go through an exit interview with the guild now. She also told him to eat shit until his stomach ruptured. Both statements were delivered with the same tone and seriousness.

“I will be honest,” 811 said, sounding dismayed for the first time. “The excrement eating option has some appeal to me right now.”

Shiv looked the orc up and down and shrugged. “It’s just an exit interview. Let’s get this over with.”

There was no “getting it over with.” Shiv had no idea why the *Guild of Armed Protection and Non-Faith Affiliated Contractors* needed him to go through *five* more interviews—

most of which were frankly just the guild's administrative staff calling him an idiot over and over again for sponsoring an orc.

This was how Shiv found out the vampire and the orc were truly friends, or something close to it.

I really, really need to kill this orc before this becomes a miserable tale of revenge and retribution, Shiv thought, his mind entering a meditative state as the interviewer insinuated he was an idiot once more.

Finally, after just about three hundred contracts and papers signed, Shiv was given a briefcase filled with paper bills that displayed some kind of blind woman holding a blade in one hand and a feather in the other. A few seconds later, 811 emerged as well, letting out a deep groan. "The torture... has ended. We are freed." He reached down and clapped Shiv on the back. Shiv barely remembered to stumble and glare this time. 811 laughed. "Come. To Little Gomorrah we go. Let me get you a slave. One you might like this time. One of the younger ones with fresher blood."

And my pride at butchering the bloodsucker just grows, Shiv thought with disgust.

They staggered out of the building a moment thereafter. As Shiv looked back, he realized another problem he didn't anticipate: He couldn't read Compact script. Language was fine—the System seemed to want people to speak to each other without issue, but the written word remained impenetrable. This made it hard to know where anything was or how to get to this Little Gomorrah when 811 told him to lead the way.

They were walking along a bridge that led to a plaza. There, Shiv could see metal-collared automata and Umbrals working the floor, scrubbing rails, shouting slogans for businesses, offering services. Most of the *unchained* ignored them, but Shiv struggled to turn away. These were slaves. He could tell that immediately. It was just a jarring sight.

People hated me on Blackedge, but no one ever thought of making me a slave like this. Roland Arrow kept Shiv under watch and loosely contained, but even his shadow only loomed so far. He didn't force Shiv to do a certain job or live a certain way. He certainly didn't make Shiv wear chains. Chains that connected him to other slaves. And that was the other thing: They were all bound together in their groups, so they couldn't move that far from each other—or run away easily without pulling the other slaves along.

Shiv also came to a darker conclusion: This was effective for group punishment. If one escaped, the rest might just face the pain.

"I always liked the concept. Slavery." 811 hummed happily as he grinned at the slaves. "Not the keeping or owning of people. No. That is pathetic and weak—one should always seize power for themselves. But the psychological warfare waged against these

people to break them down and keep self-determined beings docile is a thing of *artistry*.”

The orc spoke like he was complimenting a painting. Shiv contemplated if he could knock the orc off the bridge into a river of molten metal below. *I have a feeling it might not be enough to kill this one. And I am going to make sure he is absolutely dead.*

Shiv listened carefully as he walked, to try and catch what people were saying. If he got lucky, he might just get a clue about where Little Gomorrah was. But his focus soon got him to notice something else. Some few meters away, a humanoid automaton in a suit brought a belt slick with blood down across the face of a child.

The boy was ten, if that. He sprawled across the ground, heaving, sobbing. Around his neck was a collar, and in his hands was a mismatched pair of gloves. Gloves that fit the dimensions of the automaton’s hands.

Shiv was walking toward them before he even realized what he was doing. By the time he caught himself, 811 was watching him, and Shiv cursed. *Shit. I should have—*What should he do? Just let it happen? When he could do something about it? When there was probably something he could do? *811 said something about me wanting fresh blood. Well. Here it is. I can use that as an excuse. Use my hunger as something to hide what I am about to do.*

Before the automaton could bring his belt down again, Shiv caught them by the arm. It took a considerable amount of restraint on his part not to close his hand and crush the bot’s fragile limb, but Shiv had strength in spades, inside and out. The goal was what mattered; he could come back and finish the automaton off later. Frankly, he wanted to slaughter this entire place clean, other than the slaves. And he would. The first chance he got, he would.

“I,” Shiv began, trying to mask his anger as hunger, “am hungry.”

The automaton held a very human guise. Its glass eyes flashed bright and dark in something like a blink, and it tried to pull its hand back. But Shiv didn’t let go. Instead, he pulled out some of his *earnings*. He didn’t know what a child cost in this place, but he just might be able to pull it off.

“I’ll pay a premium,” Shiv said, adding a bit of a rasp into his voice to sell his hunger more. “Half. For the boy. Fresh blood.”

“You—” The automaton’s voice was somewhere between fear and outrage. 811 was just shaking his head, as if his old friend was up to the usual antics. Then, the automaton noticed the money, and turned to stare at Shiv again. “Half? Of all that? For just... the boy?”

“Yes,” Shiv said, trying to make it seem like a desperate thing rather than him not knowing how much a slave cost. Or even what the currency here was called. “Do we have an arrangement?”

The automaton grabbed the money, and Shiv released its arm. As it counted the bills, it regarded Shiv and let out a pitched laugh. “I... you must be truly desperate, friend. Hungry and desperate. But I understand. We all have *thirsts*. A word of advice...” The automaton cast the belt it was beating the child with aside and reached down to take the boy’s chain. “...Get yourself sorted early. And drain this one quick. His mother said he was supposed to learn fast and level quickly. She lied. He couldn’t even pick up the right gloves from the store.”

Shiv could feel how deep the lashes ran on the boy’s back. Far deeper than skin. Deep enough that he was bleeding heavily—and there was *stuff* in the air getting inside. An infection was going to set in.

Practical Metabiology > 8

Accepting the child’s chain into his hand, Shiv’s restraint nearly snapped when both his Barter and Acting Skills advanced. It was like the System was mocking him.

Barter > 11

Acting > 7

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37 (II) Gate

37 (II)

Gate

“Get up,” Shiv said, trying to sound uncaring. Inside, he was an inch away from ripping the automaton in half. He had some biology knowledge now, but he couldn’t heal the boy easily. Tentatively, he clamped the parted skin and flesh together with his Biomancy. The act made the child wail. *I’m going to kill this automaton soon too. The moment I get the chance.*

“What’s your name?” Shiv asked the automaton. It stared at him, and he just sighed. “To send you a proper apology. It was... impolite to grab your arm.”

“Ah, I understand now. I am Master-Advisor Maxwell Oldsmith. As for the grabbing... I suppose I understand. Not all of us can be so blessed of self-control. Say, are you an independent contractor of sorts?”

Shiv paused. And then nodded.

“Splendid. Well. I might have something you can do for me as an apology. But that’s best discussed in private. Come see me at the sixtieth floor of the Hex. I’m currently staying at the Yellowstone Republic’s consulate on assignment.”

The automaton’s words hit Shiv like a punch to the liver. “The Republic?”

“Quite so! I represent certain interests from the capital. We are looking for intrepid souls willing to partake in a... limited scope military operation.” The automaton chuckled, as if making a joke they were both in on. “But here I go saying too much in public. A final note: I promise that you’ll get all the taste you crave if you do choose to sign up. To the victor go the spoils, and a siege comes with an awful lot of spoils.”

Every word the automaton came down on Shiv like heavier and heavier weights. The automaton was from the Republic? Recruitment for a siege? Blackedge? What else could they be talking about? Maybe the System wasn’t mocking him. Maybe it wanted him in this state, wearing this mask, drawn to situations exactly like these.

The System desires strife above all, indeed, Shiv thought.

By the time he reacted, the automaton was already walking away, leaving Shiv with a bombshell of a lead, a whimpering, wounded child, and quite a bit less money.

One problem at a time, Shiv thought. He then noticed 811 looking at him. *Okay. Maybe two problems at a time.*

“Come on,” Shiv snarled. He picked the boy up under pretenses of being in a hurry. The child screamed despite Shiv’s attempts to be gentle, but this is the best he could do. He was just planning as he went now, trying to navigate a path out. “Let’s go to Little Gomorrah before my inhibitions get the best of me again.”

To his satisfaction, the diversion worked. 811 was leading now, guiding him through an intersectional plaza connected to several other bridges. Along the way, Shiv spotted all manner of dimensionals patrolling the streets. Some of them seemed like cousins to the Steel Fiend Shiv fought yesterday. A great many more were monstrous beasts only slightly smaller than the orc, sporting with over a dozen, weapon-bearing limbs, the head of a wolf, and a body shielded by rusted armor.

With the way the wolf heads patrolled in groups of five, Shiv guessed they were something like gate security. Overhead, there were other dimensionals as well. Despite resembling faint wisps that crackled with lightning, they also had wolfish heads. *Seems to be a running theme here. Might mean they are from the same dimension. How does that work?*

The boy he was carrying whimpered. Something inside Shiv recoiled at how miserable the child sounded. The worst part was how he couldn't just help the kid without breaking his own cover. 811 was already shooting the boy these strange looks. Looks Shiv really didn't like.

"Shh," the orc whispered, eyeing the child. "It won't be long now."

"P-please," the boy said. "I'll remember next time! I'll remember! Please don't... I promised my mother I'd find my way back..." Follow current novels on

And that was enough to make what Shiv felt about Compact very, very *personal*.

Soon, he found himself following 811 across a new bridge—this one sparsely occupied. The structure ahead was hollowed like a great alcove, with shops and establishments everywhere. Instead of heading for any one of them, the orc took Shiv down a hall and into an elevator. Bottles and filth were littered along the floor. The discarded body of a partially disassembled automaton dangled above like some kind of warning.

Shiv didn't know what kind of place Little Gomorrah was, but he suspected it wasn't going to be a joint he enjoyed.

"Maybe you should hurry along first," Shiv said, pretending to succumb to his hunger. "I need to feed."

"Then feed," 811 said, grinning at him. "Do not be shy. We both know what you are like when you get hungry. Right?"

"No!" The boy begged. The way he was writhing caused his wounds to twist and open again.

This damned orc... Shiv channeled that into outrage. "What, are you taunting me?"

811 just laughed as he stepped past a narrow alley leading deeper into the structure. He gestured for Shiv to go first, and playing the role of surly high vampire, Shiv scoffed, turned, and froze.

He was looking at a dead end. A dead end with three stripped corpses stacked against the far wall. His brief confusion ended when 811 ripped the boy out of his hands and then slammed his large mace into Shiv's back. Everything around them cracked and shattered. Dense stone crumbled and parted. The Deathless bit back a snarl as he felt

his back armor fracture and chip—but making it thicker paid off, it didn't shatter. His Momentum Core drank much of the hit, but three of his right ribs fractured anyway; the orc's blow had been a falling meteor.

Shiv drew on his Might of Mass and skidded across the floor instead of getting blasted off his feet. He came to a sliding halt just a few steps away from the corpses and growled. Yeah. He was *really* pissed now. And the damned orc definitely knew something was up. Shiv turned to glare at the orc, the cold anger inside him dulling the pain at his side.

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There, twitching in the orc's outstretched hand, was the boy Shiv was trying to save. The child's condition was even worse than it was before. The shockwave burst his eardrums, and his eyes were rolling. 811 grinned viciously at Shiv. "I must confess one thing: I do not much like the young. They are too vulnerable—and it always provokes a predator response in me."

"Don't—" Shiv hissed.

811 closed his hands. What started as a whimper turned into a wet squelch. Shiv wasn't fast enough to stop the murder. But he was fast enough to smash himself into the orc's chest in immediate retribution.

"Tainted bastard!" Shiv roared. Another small shockwave shook through the alley. The Deathless heard 811 breathe out, absorbing the hit. The orc swung. Shiv ducked and hit the monster three more times—filling his Momentum Core with every blow. His mind was nothing but cold, *furious* focus. He needed to kill this thing. He needed to murder the orc if it was the last thing he did. He wouldn't be right until he butchered the orc.

At some point, he drew out a bone dagger from his cloak and started cutting as well. 811 reared his mace back, but Shiv parried the blow aside before it could hit. Then he was back to tearing into the orc again, his core filling, preparing—

It was only instinct that stopped Shiv from being caged by a stone trap this time. He slammed into 811, barely budging him out of the way through a combined effort of brute strength and Biomancy before a jagged maw exploded out from the ground to clamp down where he was. His biggest edge against the orc was his speed, and Momentum Core was a good few hits from hitting overload. Shiv's Reflexes got faster. The orc lumbered slower, but all the while, there was a serene smirk on his face. Like he just remembered something pleasant instead of murdering a child.

Shiv pulled out a few more of his bodies from his cloak. He tore them open with Biomancy and fused them into the walls, creating biomass platforms in the alley. Jagged stones burst out from the ground at the orc's gesture, but they bounced off the

Diamond Shelled underside of Shiv's corpse-platforms as he climbed higher, avoiding the ground.

Both Pathbearers met each other's stare. 811 chuckled. Shiv trembled with bloodthirst and aggression. The orc was going to be dead by the end of this. Shiv didn't care what it took. He was going to rip this godsdamn monster apart.

"Who are you?" 811 asked, frowning at a slight chip in his mace.

"How'd you find out?" Shiv responded with a question of his own.

811 tilted his head. "The way you react, mostly. Isaiah was... troubled. Resentful. Hateful. The slave gave you away the most. He loved the whippings. He loved the torment. It reminded him that there was always a place lower to fall, even for a fugitive of the First Blood. He confided in me once that he liked to imagine himself as an Elder in those moments, and the slaves as the ones who used to abuse him—and now continue to hunt him. Your excuse of... wanting an immediate sip was understandable. The money you spent was not. He would have never thrown that away—hungry or not. And ultimately... If he had one virtue, it was *endurance*. He could handle his cravings better than most."

That earned a humorless laugh from Shiv. "And here I thought my acting was carrying me through this whole thing."

"I am afraid not. You were not too bad at a few points. You even got some of the things he said down. But you are too angry to be him. Too decisive. Too explosive. And you walk with too much strength. He was fragile. Soft at times. You... I suspect you do not even know what that is like."

Shiv took this moment to create a new bone drill as well. He could hear footsteps and shouts echoing down along the walls of the alley. "Are we even anywhere near Little Gomorrah?" Shiv asked.

"No. Practically the opposite direction. Another slip in your facade." 811 clicked his pointed teeth together. "Now. Who are you? A raven of Aviary? An agent of New Albion trying to steal a weapon? A weapon that was not where you expected it to be?" Shiv didn't answer that question. So, 811 asked another. "Isaiah. Is he dead?"

Shiv gave the boy's brutalized remains a final look as cold rage surged through his veins. *I was going to save him. I was. I was...*

"Yeah," Shiv said. "And it was an ugly death. He started screaming pretty hard when I laid my hands on him." 811's serene smile faded. Shiv kept going. "In fact, I found it pretty pathetic how fast he broke. You want to know what killed him? *Pain*. He couldn't take it. He passed out—couldn't do anything to stop me from ripping out his heart. Just a shame you weren't there to see it."

The orc stared at him for a moment. There was a twitch to the corner of his lip. A flash of a snarl. “He was my friend.”

“I know,” Shiv whispered. “I could tell.”

811 tightened his grip around his mace, and the ground trembled. The first of the multi-limbed, wolf-headed demons appeared around the corner, but Shiv didn’t give a damn about that.

“I do not have many friends. Few people understand me.” 811 was glaring at Shiv now, his anger rising too.

Shiv sneered. “One fewer now. But don’t worry, orc. I’ll remember you after this. I’ll remember your screams most of all.”

Silver Tongue > 5

Intimidation > 21

And that was the last thing said. The last thing that needed to be said. Words were over. Blood needed to flow. Shiv launched his bone drill into the orc’s skull. It impacted with a brief spurt of blood and a shower of chipped stone. The orc made the gesture of a clenched fist. His body flared with mana. Stones erupted, and jagged crystals burst out from the surrounding structures. He tried to crush Shiv—did break one of the corpse-platforms. But Shiv was already descending, coming at 811 at Momentum Core-enhanced and Biomancy-accelerated speeds. He smashed knee-first into the orc’s face.

811 barely reacted.

He drove his bulk into Shiv's shoulder first. The Deathless drank the momentum out of the hit—only to feel a giant stone hand seize him from behind. It felt like the weight of a small building was pressing down on him, pinning his limbs in place. Shiv jerked and twisted as time crawled to a halt. 811 was rearing his entire body back, preparing to deliver a colossal hit on Shiv—the hit that ended Shiv’s life the first time.

The Deathless just smiled. The orc was too slow. And now, Momentum Core was full. Time to show the big, gray bastard what a heavy hit actually was.

Shiv discharged his core. Suddenly, he was moving too fast for the stone hand to hold. It burst apart into dust and fragments. 811’s eyes barely had a chance to widen before Shiv caught his bone drill and thrust it forward into the orc’s face. The sheer force was too much—too much for the alley walls to endure as Shiv and the orc blasted through meters of dense stone. It was too much for the surprised, wolf-headed dimensionals who were blasted aside. It was even too much for Shiv’s drill, as it snapped in half.

But not before it drew blood, shattered teeth, and kissed bone.

As the last of Shiv's Momentum Core died, he and 811 crashed through another wall before they slid along the length of the bridge, knocking aside pedestrians and ripping the ground asunder.

When they finally came to a halt, Shiv surveyed the damage he left. The building behind him was starting to fold inward slightly. Countless people ran screaming from the stories and rooms lining the structure. Meanwhile, a deep, ugly gash ran along the side of 811's face. Blood flowed from a flap of severed muscle. The orc dipped a finger into the wound and tasted it. "Huh. Not bad. Not bad at all. Here I was hoping you were something more than just a sneaky little dagger. Seems like you have plenty of brawler in you as well."

Shiv mended his bone drill. And he shaped another. And another. Three drills hovered behind him, clutched by the same field. "I haven't shown you a brawl yet."

"Indeed," 811 chuckled. "And I have not shown you all my skills." And as 811 held his mace high, a crack of lightning echoed from on high, and the winds began to build. "Let me give you a full taste of my Mastery."

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38 (I) Brawl

There is no easy way to tell truly how powerful or dangerous someone is from a glance. After years in the forces, I can tell you with certainty that the whole advancement classification we use is pretty felling flawed. Even that fancy soul-measuring thing they do at the academy these days to judge your total mana output only offers a partial picture—and let's not even start with the damn fools who just "eyeball" things with their Analyze Skill.

The first part about being recognized as a Master is having a Master-Tier Skill. This means that a genius at Practical Physics will be regarded as a Master Pathbearer too. And that doesn't make them a "fake" Master by any means, but their Skill Evolutions and knowledge mostly goes toward understanding how physics works on a whole other level. It lets them make cool bombs, but functionally... they're pretty vulnerable and about as dangerous as an Initiate Pathbearer in a direct confrontation, because a lot of pure intellectuals don't bother leveling their damn Physicality or Toughness at all.

Moving beyond that example, there are also levels to Master. Low Master to me means a few things. The first is having only one Master-Tier Skill and maybe not even being in the level threshold. Even if you're at the threshold and have around two Master-Tier

Skills, I'll still call you a Low Master because a Mid-to-High Master can't be a one- or two-trick pony. That'll just get them dead without support.

Then the considerations after this are what skills they are Master-Tier in. My wife is a Master of Physicality, Reflexes, Sword Proficiency, and Blacksmithing. She's a terror up against anyone she can see—but Master Archers and Magi can still blast her from far, far away without her being able to do much. And her Magical Resistance means that she can't operate entirely independently without a lot of magic support of her own.

Comparatively, I have a fused Master-Skill for both Physicality and Geomancy. I also have Alchemy, Practical Metallurgy, Quakesense—which I evolved from my Awareness. I can assemble a durable fortress for an entire army in less than an hour. I can tell how many men are marching from over the horizon and what forces they're bringing.

What I can't do is survive a single cut from my wife without a lot of preparation. Because when it comes to Toughness, I'm just an Adept.

Master is a title worthy of respect, but we war in degrees and details. Know what you got, because no skill is truly absolute.

But Heroic-Tier Pathbearers? That's another scale of power entirely...

-Memoirs of a Master-Tier War Mage

38 (I)

Brawl

Lightning flashed. Thunder rumbled. The ground shook. And 811 found his cruel grin once more.

The orc unleashed his full might with wild abandon as he brought his boot down on the ground. A thunderstorm exploded out from him in the same moment he unleashed a rolling landslide. Those around him were flash-fried as bolts jumped through them—before being launched off the bridge and into the rivers of molten slag below. Two bolts smashed into Shiv, but he just scoffed. Patches of his armor were now burned and blackened, but bone wasn't much of a conductor for electricity.

The elemental golem fight prepared him pretty well for this encounter.

What concerned him more was the landslide coming his way—and how the bridge sounded like it was going to come apart at any second. Shiv moved. But he didn't move alone. He launched his first bone drill at the orc—and found it swept away by sheer force of wind. A small, but protective hurricane was twisting around 811, keeping him shielded. Shiv grinned.

Good. He needed an easy source of momentum.

He charged 811, and the orc just barked a laugh and charged him right back. Groups of armed dimensionals rushed in to stop them. Most were electrocuted the moment they got within fifty meters of 811, others were swept back by the billowing winds gushing out from the orc's body. But at the epicenter of elemental chaos, Shiv stomped forward like a juggernaut, ignoring the lightning, using his Biomancy to hover over bursting hands that erupted from the ground, and filling his Momentum Core with every bit of distance traveled.

And with each step, his rage only grew as the orc deliberately focused his powers on the surrounding slaves. He cooked them with his electricity—ground some to paste with rippling stone. And all the while he smiled sweetly at Shiv, taunting the Deathless with his eyes.

He knows I care, Shiv realized. Cunning, cruel monster. Cunning, cruel, dead monster. I'm going to make you regret every last godsdamned thing you ever did.

"Come on!" 811 cheered as Shiv smashed through one of his grasping hands of stone outright. Even with his full set of skills unleashed, 811 was slow—and getting slower to Shiv. His Momentum Core was half full already—and that was the beauty of fighting a big, heavy bruiser: they topped him off *fast*. Shiv slipped under a lance of lightning and seized both of his remaining drills. He was going to put these through the orc's neck this time—give him a fatal wound to complete the bleeding flap on his cheek.

The bleeding flap that was already *healing*.

Shiv realized there was another reason the orc was committing mass murder: it nourished 811. It made him stronger and slaked his urges. And now, he had all the excuse to let loose and butcher as many people as he wanted to bring Shiv down.

Godsdamned cunning, cruel monster, Shiv thought again.

Suddenly, with a shout of effort, 811 launched his mace at Shiv. The Deathless twisted out of the way, barely letting it scrape his chest armor. Then his eyes widened as the mace detonated with lightning and stone, unleashing enough force that it tore the entire bridge asunder. The ground at their feet turned to twisted scrap and debris. The lesser Pathbearers and slaves around them became puffs of crimson mist or broken specks of machinery. But the exploding mace did one more thing.

It filled Shiv's Momentum Core, and without anyone left alive as potential collateral damage, he didn't hesitate to *discharge*.

A second blast swallowed the area. Shiv drove both of his drills into the orc's neck as the sound barrier shattered for both of them. 811 was laughing, holding his arms out in embrace of the blow as they shot across the collapsing bridge back into the plaza they

passed earlier. The screams of the wind and air turned to wails from the crowds as they approached. Through it all, 811 never stopped channeling lightning from his body—but he did stop being able to shape any stone or unleash tremors. Shiv thought he might need to be in contact with the ground to do that. Shiv then found himself updating his guess as his bone drills slipped through the initial layer of skin only to grind against a layer of dense, crystalline muscle.

As Shiv pushed, 811 gripped his body and squeezed. A shout of pain left Shiv as the ribs 811 fractured earlier broke entirely. The godsdamned big bastard was *strong*. He didn't hit nearly as effectively as Harkness did, but that was a factor of her Reflexes working alongside her Physicality. 811 wasn't fast at all, but when it came to grappling, control and strength went further than acceleration and impact.

They crashed down along the plaza and bounced several times. People *splattered* against them. Shiv tried not to think about it. 811 just laughed. As 811 pulled him even closer, Shiv reshaped his bone drills into daggers—from which he took two and started cutting. He slashed and stabbed at the orc's face and eyes. Flaps of skin and outer flesh parted and bled, but 811's eyes were like impenetrable studs of armor. The orc laughed as he squeezed harder. Shiv felt his armor crack—started draining momentum, but breathing was getting difficult.

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That just made Shiv attack harder. His arms turned to a blur, cuts leaving them both painted in the orc's dark, thick blood. 811 smiled innocently as Shiv tried sawing through the wounds left along his neck. They finally came to a stop against a set of metal doors. Doors that opened to reveal a very confused Umbral staring at them. An Umbral that was promptly splattered against the ceiling—along with everyone else nearby—as rows of stone-shaped fists exploded up from the ground.

Shiv's fury combusted. His hits got harder and quicker even as darkness crept along the edges of his vision, even as his lungs fought for air.

"You are so beautiful," 811 sighed, even as the Deathless opened his entire cheek. "A real brawler. A real killer to the bone."

He headbutted Shiv. Shiv's helmet shattered. The Deathless didn't care. He headbutted the orc right back. 811's fangs broke. Shiv's forehead began gushing blood. It didn't matter—it didn't matter that he was on the verge of passing out, that one of his drifting ribs was slicing through his insides, that 811 was just laughing. He was going to kill this orc, his Momentum Core—

811 spat blood in Shiv's eyes. The Deathless cursed, blinded; still attacking. Then the bastard took the rest of Shiv's useful senses away from him by clapping his massive hands against the sides of Shiv's head. Shiv felt his left eardrum burst. His right was

ringing. Equilibrium and balance became a distant memory, but he still kept ripping and slashing. He could still feel 811 with his Biomancy, taste the orc's blood on his tongue.

He was going to kill the monster. No matter what it took. Even if he had to rip the thing's throat out with his teeth.

Then, something gripped him. Something heavy and strong. Shiv drained whatever momentum he could from it. But soon he was being crushed again—a brief inhalation of air forced out from his chest. It was a testament to Shiv's Physicality and Toughness that he hadn't blacked out yet. Adrenaline, hate, and *bloodlust* kept him going. But the damn hand kept him in place.

Diamond Shell > 88

As he blinked the blood clear from his eyes, he realized he was being held in a massive crystal fist. 811 was approaching him with a smile on his face. And what a face that was. The orc's face was a bloody, swollen mess, interspersed with cuts, broken teeth, and a dislodged eye. 811 laughed as he forced his left eyeball back in its socket with a finger before he came to a stop before Shiv. The Deathless struggled, stabbing, writhing, twisting against the crystal hand, taking in what little momentum he could to fuel his core. He just needed another hit. Another hit to reset the situation.

He struck out at 811 with his Biomancy. The orc barely reacted. His Magical Resistance was about as strong as his body. He advanced leisurely, ignoring the bone daggers Shiv launched into him, and chuckled at the Deathless's feeble Pyromancy. As he got close, Shiv's only working ear cleared, and he heard the orc speak to him.

"You are a System-sent gift, you know that? So many humans... they run from me. They are afraid of me. They do not give me the fight I want. They refuse to bleed with me, they reject what they are, what they can do. But you do not. I see it in you. I hear it in you. You are not afraid of it either. *Death*. You just enjoy life. You just want to fight. But..." The orc sniffled as he picked up a severed limb—a limb that belonged to a slave. "You also care. So. Not entirely like me in the end. Still human. Just enough."

"Shut up and fight," Shiv growled, his voice hoarse and vicious.

811 drew in a huge lungful of air—a lungful he knew Shiv couldn't take—and nodded. "Well said. I do get a little distracted sometimes. Now. Let me show you my final Master-Tier Skill."

811's eyes crackled with electricity, and his fists hardened to dense slabs of stone and crystal.

Here come some new Diamond Shell levels, Shiv sighed internally. Better use this to charge up my Momentum Core quickly.

But the first sign that it wasn't going to be so easy to fill Momentum Core came with 811 adopting an actual *fighting stance*. He brought his fists high beside his face and began to bob and weave as he approached.

Shiv blinked. *Oh, shi—*

And then the beating started.

Shiv twisted his body in anticipation of a jab—but then the orc disappeared as he ducked. Only to reappear right under Shiv, corkscrewing what felt like the hardest body shot in existence into Shiv's liver. Shiv's Biomancy gave him every last ugly detail as he felt his body go into shock. His liver was ruptured. His small intestines were shredded. Even with how thick his armor was, the orc's blows came all the way through—passing deep, like Diamond Shell didn't matter at all.

Is this where Master-Tier Striking Proficiency gets you? Shiv wondered, his thoughts drifting in the throes of agony. It was only thanks to the focus crystal bracelets that he managed to shape a spell with his fingers, pulling his organs and broken bones back in place to stop the damage from getting worse.

811 roared a laugh. He bounced on his feet in front of Shiv, grinning. "Look at you. Not even shaking. Are you sure you are actually a man, and not a piece of iron?"

Shiv spat blood at the orc—and got it on the insides of his mask. *Oh, gods, I'm a—*

That thought vanished along with 811. And then Shiv knew nothing but pain and agony as the orc reappeared at random places to drive bomb after bomb into Shiv. Momentum Core required Shiv's focus to properly use. He managed to partially absorb one or two shots, but the orc vanished every time he dodged, only to appear somewhere behind or beside Shiv to brutalize his abdomen.

By this point, Shiv accepted himself as dead. He accelerated his healing and began to line his insides with tumors—at least the growths would keep his broken bones in place and cushion his organs. Except that didn't happen. Every one of 811's blows kept passing through all the way—it was like the forces of his punches had to travel straight through Shiv. If the Deathless didn't have Diamond Shell, he suspected that his insides would resemble little more than soup right now.

Might of Mass > 77

Diamond Shell > 89 Get full chapters from novel·fire·net

"Taking it like a true Pathbearer!" 811 cackled as he began to blink everywhere with every duck. Shiv blinked, trying to track his enemy—only to catch the worst uppercut of his life coming from an angle he just didn't see.

Peace. Silence. Nothingness. The pain was gone. Shiv's thoughts were settled. There was a sense of bliss, even if he wasn't fully aware of it.

The bliss broke like a bubble as Shiv slammed against what felt like a wall. A ragged cry out of pain escaped him as his entire body felt like death—made him yearn for death. He tried to rise, but the movement nauseated him—almost making him throw up right then and there. He ripped his mask off and chucked it into his cloak before what felt like an ocean's worth of blood spilled out from his lips and nostrils. Shiv gagged. Darkness crept around his eyes as he considered blacking out again. He decided that he really wanted to fight instead. Using his Biomancy, he wielded his broken body like a puppet. And he was *broken*. Most of his lower spine was cracked. One of his arms had a bone sticking out. All of his organs were bleeding.

Looking behind him, he saw that he was halted by some kind of monument he couldn't read. As he tried to find where 811 was, he winced when he saw a trail of scratches running along the ground—running for what seemed like 200 meters. Even with Might of Mass and Diamond Shell, the orc had hit him so hard he went sliding across a good portion of the plaza. And 811 was advancing on him, a heavy fist stained red with Shiv's blood, another clutching the head of a struggling Umbral, her shrieks the sound of absolute terror. It ended with a pop as 811 closed his hand again—an echo of the way he killed the boy.

"Godsdamnit," Shiv hissed with seething rage, yanking himself back on his feet.

The orc's expression, by contrast, was borderline euphoric. "Ah. Finally. You show your true face. Quite the skill, being able to disguise yourself so effectively. But an odd combination of Master Skills to have, being so brutal, so direct, so tough, yet so subtle." 811 clicked his tongue. "Or maybe it is not your skill. Maybe it is from the mask you just took off. Right. That is it. It fits better. I think I will keep it after you are done using it. There are a few things I would like to do with a mask like that..."

Godsdamned... cunning... monster, Shiv thought again. He dragged himself forward with his Biomancy—doing his best not to pass out. This still wasn't as bad as the teleportation anchor, but Broken Moon it was an ugly eight out of ten.

"Oh, you are still coming. Still!" 811 looked like he was in love. "You cannot even imagine running away, can you?"

"Not with you," Shiv growled. "Not right now. Besides. I can't beat the shit out of you without getting any closer."

811 crooned with delight. It was such an un-orc-like thing to do that Shiv stared in disbelief. "Come on, then," 811 said, getting into his stance again as he came at Shiv. "Let us dance until the blood runs dry."

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38 (II) Brawl

38 (II)

Brawl

Shiv launched himself at the beast with a snarl—masking just how much pain he was in. He needed to grab onto 811. If he could just get his hands around the orc and discharge Momentum Core while holding onto 811's neck at the right angle...

811 ducked and vanished. Shiv lurched back on a guess and watched the orc's fist blast through where he just was.

Got yo— was Shiv's incomplete thought as 811 twisted on his heel and slammed an elbow into Shiv's temple. Unconsciousness took him again. Only for the next five punches to hammer him back to life. Shiv felt his cheek shatter as 811 loomed over him, driving fists down like falling hammers. The Deathless snarled. Damn the pain and damn this life. He was going to take this orc with him no matter what.

As 811 hit him again, Shiv stole a technique and spat blood at the orc's eyes. And Shiv couldn't miss with his Biomancy guiding the splatter. A final blow landed against Shiv's chin, but instead of getting knocked out again, his Momentum Core boomed as it hit capacity. Through the agony, Shiv grinned. "*My turn.*"

He discharged his core as he hit 811 with a monstrous uppercut of his own.

Might of Mass > 78

Striking Proficiency > 23

The plaza came asunder from the sheer force of the blow. The monument nearby turned to rubble. Even people fleeing across the bridge in the distance were flung off their feet as Shiv launched himself and the orc into the air. 811's head snapped back, and this time, the orc's eyes rolled—but he blinked and gritted his teeth as he barely avoided passing out. Until the back of his head smashed through a nearby building. Then 811's body went limp. Shiv and 811 exploded out through meters of dense stone again, emerging into what seemed like a loud, densely packed bar filled with heavily-armed customers and practically naked servers.

“That’s right, you tainted bastard!” Shiv hissed his triumph through a haze of pain. He slammed himself against the orc using his Biomancy, bashing 811’s body as the final rush of momentum died. They smashed hard against a countertop as Shiv continued smashing his head against the orc’s face. A faint, undamaged part of his brain was surprised about how well the countertop was holding up. The rest was being used to reshape 811’s face.

By this point, Shiv heard *cheering*. Rather than running, the customers in the bar looked on, treating the fight as in-house entertainment. Out of the corner of his eye, Shiv spotted the heavily armored Umbral from earlier. Her helmet was off, she looked extremely drunk, and she had two scantily clad men laying on her lap, but it was definitely her. She blinked as Shiv bashed himself against 811, and started cheering hardest of them all.

“Kill the bastard!” she yelled, holding up a massive jug of liquor.

Shiv endeavored to do his best. With each hit, Shiv recharged some of his Momentum Core—but it also cracked open his own face, and the tumors were spreading fast...

Not going to be long now, Shiv realized. As he reared his head back once more, 811’s eyes snapped open—and lightning exploded out from him. Stone rose from the ground. The people in the room were knocked back—but unlike many of the slaves or the non-martial Pathbearers down below, they survived with varying degrees of injuries.

Shiv didn’t get to check how injured they were, because a column of stone blasted up under 811, and they were speared through the ceiling once again. Shiv howled with agony as his lower spine broke entirely. He stopped being able to move his upper body much at all either. So he just bit down on the orc’s neck. 811 reciprocated, biting—and ripping off one of Shiv’s ears. They emerged out from under a bed as a man and a woman cried out together. 811 swung Shiv around like a sack, slamming him into a wall and punching him.

Shiv pushed back with his Biomancy—the only actual working *muscle* he had left, but the bastard orc held him in place with both hands.

Biomancy > 48

“Hey, you two get your own room,” a vampiric Pathbearer complained as he used a bedsheet to shield his modesty, leaving his automaton companion exposed.

“Sorry,” 811 said politely. “We will be heading next door now.”

And then he hit Shiv with the hardest straight so far.

The room blew apart. The walls blew apart. The only thing that didn’t blow apart were 811, Shiv, and the sex-interrupted Pathbearers. Shiv did however tumble through three

more rooms before he bounced on a bed. And found himself staring at an Umbral male and female engaged in activities.

Shiv gurgled and wheezed. They locked eyes with him, and then looked at each other.

“Did you hire someone to watch?” the female Umbral said, breathing heavily.

The man swallowed. “No,” he said, but kept going anyways. “Not me.”

811 casually walked into the room, giving the active couple a “sorry,” and a grin. Shiv snorted and tried to pull himself back up. The orc’s eyes widened in surprise before he broke from his astonishment and swung a hook into Shiv’s now mostly tumorous liver again. Getting blasted out from their own room and getting cut up by shrapnel did nothing to halt the lovers’ continued intimacy.

It did, however, make Shiv fold over and let out a string of curses. “Agh! Bastard! *Godsdamned bastard piece of tainted shit!*” He wanted to black out. He wanted to kill this orc. He wanted a lot of things. The System gave him another two levels in Diamond Shell instead. If nothing else, he was getting a lot of what he wanted: More Toughness.

Diamond Shell > 91

Once more, Shiv pulled himself up with his Biomancy—only for 811 to grab him by his waist. Shiv howled in pain, and decided to express that by headbutting the orc again. 811 grunted in discomfort. His own face was practically a bloodied crater too. But rather than hitting Shiv again, he just chuckled. “Do you know how many levels you have given me over the course of this fight? Because I have gotten more Toughness from this little bout than I have in the past twenty years.” Fresh chapters posted on novel fire

“Come closer,” Shiv spat. “Let me give you one more.”

He smashed his head into the orc again, but his Biomancy was beyond strained. Shiv *was* pain. And he was dying. He couldn’t move if he wanted to. He groaned as he had his forehead pressed against the orc’s, and 811 just smiled back at him. “You want to hear something funny? Even if your answer is no, I am telling you anyway. Guess where we are?”

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Shiv tried to move. It was all he could do to avoid screaming as his body descended into a paroxysm of pain.

“We are at Little Gomorrah! You found it!”

And something about that revelation was so absurd, Shiv laughed. Even if it hurt. Even if he hated the damn orc. "I'm going to kill you," Shiv slurred in response. "For what you... did. I'm gonna..."

811 brought another hand up and clutched Shiv's face gently, almost intimately. Shiv noticed the damned orc was crying. Weeping, even. "I am afraid not, sweet enemy. You have given me a taste of a lifetime. Memories eternal. But you are done. You are broken. And I cannot ask anything more of you. You were... perfect. I... lov—"

Shiv was done with this intellectually cruel orc horseshit. He used the last of his strength to spite 811 by biting down on the bastard's tongue.

For the first time, Shiv heard 811 yelp in genuine pain. The orc struggled. The orc pulled. Shiv bit harder, tasting the sludge-thick blood of the orc in his own mouth. 811 let out a bellow as he turned Shiv's neck one way and his body the other. But unlike with the slaves, he couldn't just crush Shiv. Even finishing the Deathless off required a final exertion of force. An effort that was interrupted as Shiv finally remembered something: His mask was off. Psychomancy was back on the table.

He did the same trick he pulled with the high vampire. He tried to reach into the orc's mind. Only for his mana to bounce off.

Ah, great, forgot he had Magical Resistance. Good thing brain damage doesn't carry over when I—

811 roared and snapped Shiv's neck. It still took the Deathless a moment longer to let go of the orc's bleeding tongue. Long enough for Shiv to drain the orc's vitality and make the bastard bite his own tongue in surprise.

"Gah!" 811 roared as he collapsed to one knee.

Vitality Drain > 10

Revenant > 6

Might of Mass > 84

Momentum Core > 69

Diamond Shell > 100 (Skill Evolution Imminent)

Striking Proficiency > 28

Grappling Proficiency > 45

Knife Proficiency > 37

Pyromancy > 9

Biomancy > 49

Parry > 41

Alright. Let's do this again. Shiv drank in the orc's heat—and was surprised to feel plenty of heat left in the bastard. *Broken Moon. Just how high is his Toughness? He bleeds easily, but it's like trying to hammer apart a mountain. I did manage to knock him out earlier, though...* That, paired with Shiv's imminent Skill Evolution for Diamond Shell, gave him a surge of excitement.

Despite all the death the orc inflicted, all the pain Shiv endured, he wanted part of this. A hard death. A major jump to his Diamond Shell. He got just that. If there was only a way he could have achieved it while keeping those people from dying...

The way is getting stronger. Becoming a greater Pathbearer. The System wants strife, so I have to be good enough to win every time. So I need to die more. I need more of this. But I also need to finish this and vanish before a Psychomancer finds me. Master-Tier Pathbearers aren't too common, but there has to be more than a few in this place, and if the Jealousy can fit through the gate and crawls in here when I'm not wearing my mask, my Toughness isn't going to matter. But before that, there's an orc I need to butcher first...

Darkness congealed around Shiv. 811 writhed and turned, his eyes widening as he finally noticed the human figure hatching from a shroud of blackness behind him. "How... *unexpected*..."

Shiv didn't even bother with his Biomancy field—using it made his very soul feel shredded. His other magical skills didn't matter either. Not when the orc's Magical Resistance was as strong as it was. So. Down to the bloodstained, tattered rags he had for clothes and bereft of all weapons, Shiv set about killing a mountain of power and muscle with his bare felling hands.

And felt good about his odds.

He burst out from his resurrective cocoon and jabbed a thumb into 811's left eye. The orc flinched slightly. Ducked. Vanished. Shiv dove to the side just as a massive fist blasted through the place where Shiv's midsection was. The Deathless scoffed. "Really? There? Always?"

The orc began to circle him. The room they were in trembled and cracked as a cage of stone and crystal came crashing in from all sides. "It is effective," 811 said with a smirk. "So. What are you? How are you still alive?"

“Technically, I’m an assistant chef,” Shiv said, mocking the orc with a partial truth. “Functionally, I’m alive because you’re not dead yet. If you want me to go away, you better kill yourself.”

811’s smirk turned feral. “And lose out on all this fun? No. No, I do not think I will.”

And then lightning exploded out from the orc. Without his bone armor, Shiv tried to dodge—but spasmed as electricity surged through his body. The stones crushing down on the room made everything cave in next, pinning him in place. And finally, as a capstone, 811 hit him again—another uppercut. Enough to blast Shiv back out of the building, and push a certain skill over the edge.

Skill Evolution: Diamond Shell (Adept) > Adamantine Adaption (Master)

Adamantine Adaption > 101

Shiv’s jaw cracked—but didn’t break. The diamond gleam that characterized Shiv’s skin turned a bit more metallic. As he blasted out of the building, the rags that used to be his shirt shredded off of his body. Before he could get his bearings, Shiv found a swarm of dimensionals chasing him on the way down, their bodies armored and blazing, and their heads orbs of brightening flame.

They were promptly flung aside as a massive gust of wind came rushing forth, carrying with it 811. The orc crashed into Shiv like a rising meteor. The impact between them blew out all the glass on the outside of the building. The world tumbled around Shiv as 811 poured lightning into him. Shiv twitched briefly—and then the feeling *wore off*. He snarled and elbowed 811 in return.

The orc’s lip was cut wide open. 811 held back a hiss of pain. Shiv’s Momentum Core filled.

With an animalistic roar, 811 gripped Shiv and squeezed, the orc’s raging tempest taking them downward. As they plunged, Shiv felt his ribs creak momentarily—and then that pain wore off too as his flesh turned even harder *everywhere*. 811 strained and shouted, exerting himself. Shiv responded by slamming his own hands on the sides of the orc’s head. 811 snarled as his equilibrium was lost this time, leaving him open to a counter-attack.

Or it would have if they hadn’t struck the ground at that point.

To Shiv’s surprise, the impact did little more than briefly stun him. It was more like smashing through a wooden door. But as he rolled, a fist burst from the ground and clutched him again. The Deathless sighed and watched the orc stagger toward him, stumbling as he struggled to keep his balance. Shiv tried to break free, but it was his Toughness that evolved this time, not his Physicality.

Once more, 811 hardened his fists. This time, lightning crackled from his eyes. “I am not going to stop this time. Not until you are good and ruined.”

Shiv spat. “Then stop moving your mouth and start using those hands. Don’t keep me waiting.”

Dimensionals closed in on them. A blaring declaration sounded somewhere, saying curfew was in effect, calling people to stay out of a certain area.

None of that mattered as 811 ducked and then blasted off the ground, throwing a colossal overhand strike into Shiv’s jaw.

The first hit snapped Shiv’s face to the side and gave him a nosebleed. The second went into his liver—but just made him grunt. The third, fourth, and fifth sounded like the orc was swinging a club against a metal pole. Shiv barely felt any of those. And all the hits after that mattered less and less.

At the start, Shiv was too surprised by how durable he was to drink in any momentum. Every subsequent hit felt weaker than before, be it lightning or fist. And by the twentieth punch, Shiv’s Momentum Core was full, and 811’s wrist made a horrid snapping sound as the punch landed at a poor angle.

“Gah!” 811 cried. “What—how, *oh...*” He saw Shiv’s grin, how the man only had a thin trickle of blood running down his nose after all those punches, and noticed the rippling distortions building around his supposed punching bag. “Oh, dear.”

“Yeah,” Shiv growled. And then he launched himself and the orc back into the building as he discharged his core.

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39 (I) Fugitive

Attention, all residents and guests:

A “Master-Tier Dispute” has occurred in the Hasbath Plaza area. All Initiate Pathbearers or below and non-martial residents and guests are to seek shelter immediately.

All Adepts are warned to be mindful and avoid the combatants and debris.

Master Pathbearers and above can ignore the warnings posed in this broadcast so long as they understand the aforementioned risks.

As always, encountering an act of the System does not constitute grounds for a lawsuit, and any attempt to abuse Compact's generosity will result in summary and kinetic refutation.

We hope you all have a great day.

-Emergency Shelter and Curfew Broadcast in Gate Theborn (Compact Territory)

39 (I)

Fugitive

Momentum Core > 70

Shiv felt something inside the orc's chest break as they smashed through another wall. A path of ruin and rubble crashed down behind them, blocking the security dimensionals' pursuit. As they emerged into what seemed to be a grand and wide lobby, Shiv saw they were quickly accelerating toward a wall made of solid gold. Holding onto 811's throat, he spiked the big bastard headfirst against the wall, using him as a meat-shield to blunt the impact.

Not that it mattered. Shiv felt tough enough to shrug off a literal mountain falling on him by this point. Maybe he wouldn't be able to dig himself out afterward, though, and would even end up dying of suffocation or starvation.

The orc was still stronger than him—a better brawler and a better mage. But now, with Shiv's Adamantine Adaption Skill Evolution, 811 was now the underdog in a direct fight. Because what worth was there in being stronger when your punches and direct magic attacks failed to achieve anything more than a nosebleed?

"Get up," Shiv snarled. The orc blinked a few times, eyes rolling. "Aw, got a concussion?" Shiv asked sarcastically, before grabbing 811 by his head and slamming him through a nearby desk. Wood and marble blasted everywhere. A human-looking automaton dressed in a fine suit and a red cap sighed at Shiv and the orc from nearby. "Please, Master Pathbearers, take the fighting elsewhere."

Some shrapnel was lodged in the automaton's body, but it seemed fine overall.

Adept, Shiv guessed as he started smashing elbows into 811's face. He felt his arms—his entire body get harder with every blow, adapting specifically at the points of impact. The orc was bleeding badly now, face shredded and mangled like he'd been cut up by a knife. With every punch, Shiv drained more momentum, building up his core again. He dropped a heavy haymaker—811's rolling eyes snapped to alertness, and he *dodged*.

The orc vanished in a gust of wind. Shiv's fist sank through the marble-tilted floor—and got locked in place there as a column of dense crystal and stone fused around the limb. “Shit,” Shiv cursed. 811 reappeared right next to Shiv, unleashing a hurricane of hooks, straights, uppercuts, overhands. He pounded Shiv's liver like he was trying to mine a gold vein. Blood twisted and jerked from 811's brutalized face like lengths of liquid rope. He was giving all he had—his entire body was solidifying into crystal, his blows carrying the power of Geomancy and lightning.

Shockwaves blasted out from Shiv as he kept trying to free his arm while the orc used him as a heavy bag. The automaton was launched off its feet—but showed only slight damage to its hull. A surreal scene took shape as sighs and boos sounded across the lobby, with people moving from where they were sitting and walking out at a brisk pace at most. This was how Shiv guessed that most of the people in the chamber right then were Adept martial Pathbearers. The few nursing severe wounds or clutching their bleeding ears were, he deduced, Initiate, Pathless, or non-martials. And the one woman who continued reading what looked like a newspaper nearby without a care was likely another Master. *At least.*

How people react tells you a lot about them, Shiv realized.

811 gasped and staggered back, staring at Shiv with disbelief. “Why... What... This makes little sense.”

The Deathless frowned at the orc as he finally ripped his arm out of the stone-vice with a final shout of effort. Shiv opened and closed his fist as he studied his arm. “Yep,” he breathed. “Definitely a bit more metallic-looking than before under the lights.” Absolutely no cuts, though. Pushing through the pain of using his Biomancy, Shiv examined the effects his new Skill Evolution had on his body.

Where Diamond Shell gave his biology a layer of collective protection from his skin to his very cells, Adamantine Adaption left his body seeming extremely *fractured*. But after another heartbeat of observation, he realized he wasn't looking at fractures, but minuscule slats of dense, metallic matter infused into his very cells. Some slats were bunched tight together, forming a concentration of *density* for the parts of his body that were just impacted. Shiv suspected this was the reason why the first blows the orc landed on him earlier still hurt. *Just a little.*

Now, though 811's fists carried within them the combined power of a storm and an earthquake at once, Shiv was a *godsdamned* mountain, and so the hits graced him with the yield of bombs but the effect of raindrops.

Mud-thick blood splattered out from the places where 811's crystalline hands were cracked. He heaved for air, blinking at Shiv through two swollen eyes. “How... how are you—” His eyes flashed, and he clenched his broken fangs in disbelief. “What? Master—*Adamantine Adaption*? That—that is no human skill! That is not even an orc skill! It is for monsters! That belongs to a cursed Tarrasque or Sea Leviathan!”

“Clearly not just them,” Shiv said as he advanced on the orc, cracking his knuckles. The remainder of his pants peeled off, leaving him only ripped shoes and miraculously strong undergarments. He needed clothes. He needed to get out of here and find a new Perfect Semblance to replace his burned identity. But before any of that, he needed to finish this bloody orc. “I’m gonna hear you scream for what you did to those people, 811. I’m not done until you’re just paste between my felling fingers. Now. Ball your fists and die fighting, Pathbearer!”

He charged. To 811’s credit, he did ball his fists. He did call upon rising stalagmites of stone and crystal. He did unleash a wave of wind and lightning at Shiv. The Deathless just marched through it all, shattering through stone, ignoring the lightning, using the wind to fill his core, using his building Reflexes to avoid the erupting hands that sought to hold him in place.

Parry > 42

811 roared and dashed toward Shiv. He blinked across space as he used his Master-Tier Striking again. But there was a limit to even skills. He might have been a better boxer than Shiv by far, but the Deathless wasn’t afraid of him, and he was far faster. 811 missed his first punch—did his pivot into a spinning elbow, only for Shiv to duck under that as well. Shiv wrapped his arms around 811’s leg and yanked with a shout of effort. 811 had his base pulled out from under him—the orc toppled. And was promptly dragged off the ground as Shiv drew on his Might of Mass, swinging the giant around like a club.

Might of Mass > 86

811’s head was whipped back into the golden wall that stopped their initial entry into the lobby. A new dent was made near the last one. And then another. And another. Smears of orc blood splattered and painted the walls. Shiv roared as he flung the monster overhead and started bashing them against the ground. Tiles exploded. 811 tried to call on his Geomancy, but another emergency meeting between his skull and the golden wall renewed his concussion. His spell broke. And Shiv’s Momentum Core was full again.

Grappling Proficiency > 46

For a moment—just a moment—Shiv released him. 811 sailed through the air, his brain clearly rattled, his eyes rolling. Then Shiv was on him again. He seized the orc by the neck before he could hit the ground, and they made eye contact a second before the Deathless discharged his Momentum Core.

“Fight back!” Shiv bellowed. A kinetic bomb erupted off of his body. The Adepts and others were gone. The only Master in the lobby finally turned, then. She looked up from her newspaper, narrowed her eyes at Shiv, and then she decided to teleport away instead of ignoring what was about to come.

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The world lurched. Shiv zoomed forward—but he spiked the orc's face into the ground before he did.

For the first time, Shiv heard 811 scream in true agony. The sound was everything he hoped it would be. The orc's shrieks drowned out even the howling winds and lasted until the sound barrier burst apart against them. A channel of blood and tissue painted their path of destruction as they exploded through room after room before erupting back out of the building. A group of unfortunate dimensionals were in their way—and were rendered into broken pieces of armor and puffs of dying embers. Shiv felt multiple mana fields brush his—but he was moving too fast for anyone to respond with a spell.

As orc and man sailed into the open air again, Shiv saw that 811's right arm was barely clinging by a few strands of gristle and skin. The orc was also blacking out from the pain. *What a disappointment. Time to wake his ass back up.* He planted his feet down on 811's chest as they made their descent. Legions of dimensionals and Pathbearers were teleporting in all around him—emerging all across the bridge in spatial pockets.

They were finally responding. A bit too late to stop any of the actual fighting. *Typical felling guards*, Shiv thought. He crashed down on a new bridge using 811 as a board, and at some point a jutting plank clipped the orc's compromised arm and tore it clean off. That woke 811 back up again. The orc howled loud enough that Shiv felt a brief stab of pain in his ears. Brief because his Adamantine Adaption kicked in that way too as the corresponding cells hardened in response to the specific trauma.

Did I just become felling invincible? Shiv thought. His initial feelings were a sense of awe and excitement—followed by an immediate plunge into worry as he realized Adamantine Adaption was going to be a nightmare to level now. *Hells, I might have made it extremely hard for myself to die as well. System... it's going to be a nightmare to find someone that can hurt and kill me now...* Chapters first released on NovelFire

But that was a later problem. Right now, he was going to rip this orc apart. As they came to a stop, Shiv jumped off 811 and immediately booted the orc in the head. A splatter of blood sprayed across the bridge as 811 crashed into and *through* a group of wolf-headed dimensionals, tearing them practically in half.

“Shit!” Shiv cursed and winced. “Didn’t mean to do that.” He didn’t mean a lot of things during this fight. As his adrenaline began to stabilize, he thought back on all that just happened over the course of the last ten minutes or so and... *Shit. Shit! I.. really should have—how many people did we kill?*

His thoughts were interrupted as two spatial pockets expanded around him.

“On the ground!” a wolf-headed dimensional barked. The creature swung a massive hammer into Shiv’s chest. He drank some of the hammer’s momentum and broke the weapon in half by charging through it. The wolf-headed dimensional let out a yelp as it was flung off its kicking legs into a wall of its own comrades.

Fiery, flying elementals rose along the sides of the bridge and sprayed Shiv with jets of fire. He gave an initial hiss of pain as some of his skin burned—and then his cells hardened accordingly again. Shiv couldn’t help it. He cackled with laughter. The world kept killing him. Over and over and over. And now, he was truly hard to—

Shiv’s delusions of invincibility broke as a spell smashed against his Biomancy field. His *extremely strained* Biomancy field. The Deathless collapsed as he spasmed and rolled across the ground. His Biomancy allowed him to push the spell—something commanding his muscles to lock up and stop moving. In a roundabout way, it managed to achieve that.

Biomancy > 50 (Skill Evolution Imminent)

“I have him!” a feminine voice cried. Shiv groaned and pushed himself off the ground to see several teams of heavily armed Pathbearers approaching him. At their forefront was a human woman in a dense, turtle-shell-like carapace. She was sculpting a new Biomancy spell, and if this one hit, Shiv might just black out again.

Remember why Magical Resistance is so good now, Shiv groaned internally. I might be a physical juggernaut, but magic still hurts like a bastard.

Then, salvation came from a most unlikely source. Before the armored Biomancer could finish her spell, a bolt of lightning crashed into her face, forcing a cry of annoyance and pain from her lips as her spell broke. A wall of wind washed over the other Pathbearers. A few were launched off the bridge. A massive bruiser of an automaton came pounding forward on its three legs.

“Surrender!” it commanded with an electronic crackle.

Shiv drank in the wind’s momentum and got to his feet, ignoring the bot. He met 811’s gaze and glared. The orc stood there at the end of the bridge, standing atop a pile of dead and dying dimensionals. He was smiling too, sobbing as if something touching was happening right before him. “Come!” he called out to Shiv. “Come, Deathless monster! Let us give 812 a most *smashing* dream to start his life!”

Shiv didn’t understand any of that—had a hard time forming more complex thoughts at the moment. He didn’t care. Shiv was just glad he didn’t need to chase the damn orc. The automaton Pathbearer shouted another decree before punching Shiv in the back of the head. The machine gave a hiss of pain and surprise as its attacking hand was reduced to wires and scrap. Adept-Tier, probably.

Shiv barely noticed.

“Come on,” 811 breathed. He staggered toward Shiv, channeling every bit of lightning, every gust of wind, every burst of stone he had left. But the orc was flagging. His mana fields must have been beyond strained as well. He took a one-armed fighting stance. The right side of his body had been scraped off, exposing bone and inner flesh. His right arm was gone. The right side of his face was the white of exposed bone.

The orc was a monster. The orc enjoyed butchering the innocent and weak. But the orc was ultimately a Pathbearer warrior that wanted to die fighting.

On some level, Shiv understood and respected that. On every other, he was going to rip this damn orc apart.

811 blinked forward and launched a whipping hook. Shiv parried the punch into the ground and lifted the orc off his feet with a single-leg takedown. He carried the orc through another set of walls, into another building. But Shiv held back from draining any momentum this time. He saw *people* around him. Slaves. So many slaves. And then his thoughts from earlier hit him as his initial rage ran its course. *How many people did I—*

811 dropped a thunderous punch on the side of Shiv’s head. Shiv responded by spiking 811 into the ground.

Might of Mass > 90

Grappling Proficiency > 47

“Get out of here!” Shiv shouted. He was in the entrance of some kind of... *foul-looking apartment*. Slaves with unchained collars looked at him and the orc in terror. Both of them were covered in blood—mostly from 811—and as the orc tried to rise, Shiv stomped down, driving 811’s face through the floor. “Run! Now! If you don’t want to die!”

Intimidation > 24

Several slaves screamed. Some wept. All of them started stampeding out of the building. Shiv cursed as he started punching the orc, doing his best to hold 811 in place until they were out. *I need to stop...* A flash of all the destruction and mayhem caused during this brawl with 811 rushed through Shiv’s mind. Something turned sour in his stomach. This fight started with the death of a child. A child Shiv was trying to save. Now hundreds were dead, at the very least. Dead because Shiv was guided by undisciplined rage, and because 811 enjoyed the butchery.

As Shiv pounded blow after blow into the orc’s face, 811 laughed and gagged on his blood. His left eye—the only eye he had left—noticed a nearby automaton slave trying to get out. He snorted. And then sent a bolt of lightning through its body. The automaton burst apart.

“No!” Shiv snarled. “You godsdamned—” And the rage took hold again. The rage. At the cruelty. At the casual murder of the weak and innocent at the hands of a Pathbearer so powerful they got nothing out of this but pleasure. Shiv’s fists turn into crimson-soaked blurs. His Momentum Core surged to fullness. What remained of 811’s left eye burst apart under one of the blows. Ripping the orc out of the ground, Shiv planted both feet on 811’s shoulders as he locked his fingers under the orc’s chin.

Somehow, the bastard was still smiling. “It was all beautiful,” 811 whispered. “All of it. I love you. I will find you again.”

Shiv was furious beyond coherent thought. He yanked twice, feeling tendons in the orc’s neck snap. Absorbing a final hit of momentum, Shiv felt his core hit capacity, and he discharged with a primal shout of anger. His hands were locked tight around the orc’s chin. His feet pushed hard against the orc’s shoulders. His Momentum Core flared. And after three final cracks of resistance, Shiv ripped 811’s head clean off as he slid across the ground, back along the bridge he came and blasted through newly arriving dimensionals sent to apprehend him.

The world turned into a haze of twisting colors, falling limbs, and screaming voices. Shiv never let go of the head in his hands. When he finally slammed to a halt after smashing into a fountain, he staggered out from the debris, soaked, thick orc blood still clinging to his mostly bare body, and surrounded by waves of dimensionals and Pathbearers.

But that wasn’t the most pressing thing for Shiv. No. As he looked down at the severed head of 811, a colossal weight crashed down on him. A weight he hadn’t felt in days.

Foreshadowing: In another realm, a newborn orc bursts free from the corpse-womb that bore him. As he draws breath, a final set of memories flows into him, taken from his spiritual predecessor and bestowed upon him by [The Challenger].

812 takes a tentative step into the wasteland dimension that his people call “The Tutorial.” A sea of corpses and rusted weapons litter the world as far as he can see. He notices his brothers hatching free all around as well, other orcs spawned after the deaths of their predecessors, preparing for a new run on life.

He is bare. He is weak. Though he remembers much, his soul is new, and so he must regain his strength. But 812 is different from the other orcs.

812 is in love. In love with the man that killed his predecessor: an undying titan hidden under human flesh. He still feels that sweet moment when his head came free. He still sees the man’s face: wrathful, furious, feral.

And he knows there is no one more perfect for an orc to face. A reincarnating warrior against an undying one. This tale does not need to have a final end.

And just then, a Quest is bestowed upon the newborn 812. He has never heard of an orc infant being granted a Quest. But this one is. And this one smiles, because he is going to make it back to that world called Earth, and he is going to find the man that killed him—and break him for good.

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

39 (II) Fugitive [Book 1 END]

39 (II)

Fugitive

Foreshadowing > 18

“Shiiiiit!” Shiv screamed. He flung 811’s head against the ground so hard it caked against the surface. He raised his foot and brought it down on the maimed skull with all his strength. Over and over, he stomped it, until he was just pounding a bare foot into a puddle of gore. “Shit! Godsdammit! Godsdamn you!”

He scratched at his face and shouted at the sky, at the System in particular. *All that to kill the orc, and the bastard just reincarnates! And then gets a Quest to hunt me down!* Heavy breaths of billowing anger rushed free from Shiv’s nostrils. Looking around, he noticed a small army of Pathbearers boxing him in from all sides, yet none of them dared to approach.

He saw it in their eyes, read it in their postures. Fear. They were terrified of him. Even the dimensionals—*especially* the dimensionals.

Intimidation > 28

A heavy rush of power surged through his soul, but Shiv grimaced and swallowed sour spit as he took in his surroundings. Destruction was all around him. Massive exit wounds lined nearby buildings. Wails of terror and pain sounded all across the expanse of the gate realm, and Shiv noticed a small, severed hand not too far away.

The sickness returned, and he brought a hand to his mouth. “Oh, Broken Moon. Oh, gods...” Shiv clenched his jaw and refused to vomit. Quickly, he reached into his cloak and pulled out his mask—slamming it back on his face. The inside of the mask still reeked of blood. His blood. The Perfect Semblance of the high vampire fused over him

again, but it was pointless. Everyone had seen him. But he still needed the Mind Shield. *I was... I was trying to save the boy. I was... I was...*

He was still furious, his blood was still coursing hot through his body, and his hands were shaking. He couldn't stop the shaking.

This shouldn't have... *what should have happened? What could I have done? He murdered the child! I was going to—he killed so many people just to... to provoke me.*

Shiv's thoughts went quiet. An uncomfortable realization passed through him. There was no real way he could have saved the boy, the one he bought from the automaton. A lot of other people were just doomed during the fight too. But the way he used his Momentum Core, the way he smashed into places blindly and savagely... A lot of lives could have been spared.

And that was his fault.

A faint pressure jolted Shiv out of his thoughts. His mask rattled as tendrils of Psychomancy failed to push through. He whipped around and glared at the offending Psychomancer. He found him immediately in the crowd, and as Shiv glared, the armored man immediately stopped his spells and raised his hands while backing away. "Sorry! Shit! Sorry! Don't—I'm just doing my job!"

Shiv blinked. *His job... Security!* He needed to go. He needed to run before—

"What is this?" a deep, smooth voice boomed from above. Then came a blinding flare of light, followed by a crushing, oppressive heat. All of a sudden, the coldness of this realm's gray sun vanished. Shiv felt his skin singe, but the temperature quickly became little more than a discomfort.

As the Deathless looked up, he clenched his jaw instinctively. A figure hovered above. A tall, humanoid figure sprouting countless petal-like wings from their back. As the new adversary loomed closer, they did so with the ill-gray sun over their shoulder, and it curved around their skull like a halo.

"What manner of degenerate do I look upon? What sort of mongrel savage are you? Some kind of rat? Some kind of creature? Have you no shame? Who told you that you may drench yourself in the blood of another within this gate—within my vaunted domain? Answer me, deceiver wearing the illusory shell of another. Speak."

"Your domain?" Shiv said, his voice hoarse. He looked down at the mangled bits of 811 he was standing on. "So. You're the boss of this slave-running shithole? I'd tell you I'm sorry about the mess. But I'll be honest and say I'm only sorry about all the slaves and innocents that ended up dead just now."

“Indeed. I am the Acting Gate Lord of this place: Lesser Marshal Confriga. And I do demand an apology. I will accept many criticisms of this place. ‘*Shithole*’ is not among them.” The shrouded adversary drew closer. And Shiv saw they weren’t human after all. The demon’s body was a slick, shiny dark-grey, skin more akin to an eel’s than a human’s. A single, pitch-black eye horizontally split the Gate Lord’s forehead. Below the eye was no nose, only a vertical slit with many rows of small, pointed teeth that went down the rest of his face. From the sides of the Gate Lord’s skull flowed octopus-like tentacles. A few held focus crystals. The rest clutched gems or small skulls of various types.

A twitch of movement made Shiv look upon the Gate Lord’s armor. The Deathless tightened his fists again as he took in what he saw. A series of radiant plates shielded Confriga’s body. He gave off the light of a setting sun, and Shiv thought he saw strange flickers of movement reflected upon the armor. Movement that didn’t correspond to anything in the real world. Yet, it was the children that sickened Shiv the most. Strapped tight around the Gate Lord’s chest piece were three impaled children. One was an Umbral. One was a human. One was a goblin. Each had a spike jutting out from their chest, binding them to the Gate Lord’s chestpiece. They shook and writhed as the Gate Lord descended gracefully, floral wings closing behind akin to a peacock’s tail feathers.

In the right of Confriga’s three-fingered hands was a curved blade three meters long, and it seemed to drink in the light of the world itself.

The Gate Lord stood taller than Shiv by a full head. But he was thinner. Far too thin. He studied Shiv with his eye, darker than night and harder than flint. “Take off the mask,” Confriga demanded, his voice sharp, his pronunciation quick. “Show me your true guise again. Your bloodstained self. Show me your true Path.”

Shiv snorted. “Maybe if you kill me politely, I’ll let you take the mask.”

The Gate Lord went still. And then, he tilted his long blade, and the air around it grew *dark*. “It is not the sign of a proper guest to taunt the master of a house.”

“That’s fine. Any house with slaves in it is one I want to burn.”

“Burn,” Confriga echoed, chuckling. “Do you even know the meaning?”

“I suppose you’re about to show me with that long metal prick of yours,” Shiv taunted.

“No. I will not sully *Absence*’s length with your blood.” Confriga released the blade and let it hover in the air. “I will settle for tearing you apart. And dragging your broken carcass across this place. Across every chamber, every building, every surface you defaced. And then I will raise what remains of you. I will bind the echo of your soul to my service for the inconvenience you have caused me. And then I will forgive you. But never release you.”

Shiv snorted. And then he laughed. “You guys... All of you slaving bastards and murderers just have to have these personalities, don’t you? Can’t a bastard just be an honest piece of shit anymore?”

“I will make you apologize to me for saying these words,” Confriga muttered. “Such language does not fit my presence.”

“Really. You got dead kids run through on your armor, but you don’t like cursing?” The Deathless was surprised to notice something—the Gate Lord seemed absolutely devoid of any kind of mana. At least any kind of mana Shiv was familiar with. *Guess this one’s purely martialor... Shit, the kids... He talked about raising me... Is this a Necromancer?*

Confriga strode toward Shiv. “Language. It is the function that makes us who we are. That lets us express ourselves. It is the great separation of all the *naturallythinking* races from the mere beasts that tap into the blessed System’s gifts by instinct. Such is a matter of propriety to me. And these children... are but a message to the *property* to *obey*. And they are assuredly not dead. For I do not allow their passing.”

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Yeah. Definitely Necromancer. Fine. Let’s see what he’s got. And maybe try to think of a way out of here, because that’s a lot of Pathbearers to fight at the same time...

The Gate Lord brought up a clawed hand and made a gesture. An eerie, green set of interlocking symbols flashed. A surge of similarly colored mana erupted from the orifices of the children, and Confriga shaped a whip that *screamed*. Shiv blinked as he saw what looked like the ghostly spirits of all three children squeezed into the thinness of a whip and coiled around each other.

A burst of anger went through Shiv again. “And you call me the degenerate,” he snarled. He launched a jet from 811’s blood at Confriga using his Biomancy—ignoring the agony passing through his soul. Shiv didn’t expect the blood to hit. He just wanted to see how the Gate Lord might react, and how fast Confriga was.

The answer to the second question was faster than Shiv at baseline—but not faster than he could track with his eyes, and definitely not when his Momentum Core was filled. More importantly, he was slower than Harkness by more than a little. And that made Shiv like his odds. Especially after his literal death match with 811.

Need to watch the whip, though. Somehow, I don’t think that’s going to inflict physical harm, and I don’t want to discover what it might do to me magically.

So Shiv launched the first spell. A burst of flame spread around Confriga’s face—hopefully blinding the Gate Lord. He felt his magic splash apart against an incredibly dense layer of Magical Resistance instead. Shiv stomped forward—and then

immediately launched himself aside as the dead-child Necromancy whip snaked out to spear him of its own volition. He rolled under the screaming length and closed on Confriga, and when he got a step away, he did the unexpected—he threw one of his old corpses at the Gate Lord.

Confriga let out an indignant scoff and swatted the corpse with his hand. Shiv watched as his corpse was nearly split in half. *Okay. Either really High Master or Heroic Physicality.* Not good. Confriga made another gesture, and Shiv's corpse flashed with a green glow—and then exploded. The resulting blast didn't so much hit Shiv physically as it crashed against him *spiritually*.

The Deathless released a shout of surprise as something inside him—well, it didn't so much *hurt* as it made his very being feel like a rubber band. But though he stumbled—he didn't stop. He lashed out with his fist. Confriga reeled back as if surprised—and then teleported. Shiv's hands seized empty air. And then he felt it—the pressure. Confriga was behind him. Shiv twisted and punched, only to see that screaming whip strike his left arm.

Shiv expected some kind of pain. Some strange magical effect or another. He didn't expect absolute agony to tear through him as his entire arm detonated in what seemed like an incomprehensible blast of chaotic, swirling mana. Light consumed Shiv, expanding out from the point of impact. The world was a blinding cauldron of heat, sound, and force. For a second, all three felt like they were too much for Shiv to endure—his skin and flesh fried. His ears bled. His bones fractured and muscles tore. Then, *he adapted*. The heat lessened. The sounds were merely deafening. The pain faded entirely.

Adamantine Adaption > 105

Then, as the light faded, as Shiv cursed and clutched his smoking stump of an arm, he heard Confriga... *screaming in anguish?* Not only Confriga, but all the other Pathbearers and dimensionals present. They were all *burning* too, consumed by a white-green fire as a mushroom cloud of clashing mana swelled to encompass a full kilometer of space. Shiv's mind reeled. And suddenly, a series of unexpected level advancements passed through him.

Vitality Drain > 18

Revenant > 10

"Broken Moon," Shiv hissed. He saw flickers of brilliant white consume the foul green Necromantic mana highlighting where his missing arm used to be. Then it was gone. But those around him were still burning. Confriga's flesh began to melt from his body. The Pathbearers and dimensionals dispatched to capture Shiv began toppling over one after another, their melting bodies now lit as if torches bearing a greenish blaze. Most peculiar of all were the three children pinned to the Gate Lord's armor. They burned

brightest of all—but they burned with the color of glorious white, and their bodies writhed a final time as they faded into motes of nothing.

“What? What have you done!” Confriga screamed, clutching at the absent children once pinned to his chest. The Gate Lord was still burning, the green fire born of Necromancy devouring patches of his flesh. “My conduits! My *effigies!*”

Shiv didn’t know either. So he answered by punching the Gate Lord in the eye as hard as he could. His blow cracked the heat-glassed ground around them. It didn’t even drive Confriga back a single inch. The Gate Lord snarled and seized Shiv’s neck with a crushing grip. The Deathless punched the Gate Lord’s elbow—drained as much momentum he could—but there was no breaking free. The Gate Lord casually lifted Shiv off his feet, even with Might of Mass.

811 had the strength of a small child compared to Confriga. If there was any doubt that the Gate Lord was a Heroic Pathbearer, that doubt was dead now.

“Alright, you bastard,” Shiv spat, clenching his teeth. “Make it count.”

Confriga did. The burning Gate Lord released Shiv and thrust a three-fingered fist into his chest. Shiv watched and timed the blow—and then noticed something: A rush of force speared out from the Gate Lord’s fist a moment before the impact and extended through Shiv like a needle. When Confriga hit Shiv, a channel of ever-growing force crashed through him. The Deathless felt his sternum shatter and one of his lungs burst—but that was when his body started adapting to the blow.

Adamantine Adaption > 106

Within a half second, Shiv was launched almost three hundred meters into the air. In that same half second, Shiv’s Momentum Core was *flooded*. He discharged it immediately and shot back against Confriga’s channel of ever-growing force. His body snapped and jerked—his stump of an arm became a nub of purest pain—but his Adamantine Adaption entered the arms race against the Gate Lord’s ever-escalating blow.

Confriga stared on in disbelief. The Gate Lord was still burning, his once dark-gray skin turning a sickly shade of mottled black. Shiv felt some of his own skin rip and fray—but even that slowed as the adamantine plates lining his every cell grew tighter and tighter. Confriga might be able to split a mountain in half with a single blow, but Shiv’s was an ever-rebuilding fortress lined in layers and layers.

Adamantine Adaption > 107

Might of Mass > 93

“*What are you?*” Confriga whispered, the sound somehow reaching Shiv's ears. Then the Gate Lord jolted out from his astonishment. He drove a palm down, and another channel of force speared through Shiv's back. As the blow struck Shiv this time, he anticipated—and drank in more momentum before it could fully crash through him. As a result, only a small series of fractures lined his pelvis. It was then that the Gate Lord winced, the greenish fire singeing his eye. The intersecting channels of force and Shiv's second discharge clashed at an angle, and he found himself launched off sideways, twisting and turning through the air at impossible speeds. Rivers of molten metal zipped by below him, and Shiv cursed as he lost track of where he was going—only to punch through the walls of another building.

Momentum Core > 73

“Really racking up the collateral damage today,” Shiv hissed to himself. Thankfully, he didn't tear through any people this time. In fact, what he mostly crashed through was crates, cargo, and bits of machinery. He ended up pretty deep in the bowels of the building before he finally came to a stop. As he looked up, the way he entered collapsed—along with more of the buildings outside. But this was—Shiv blinked as he found himself in what felt like some kind of maintenance hall.

“Shit,” Shiv growled, clutching his missing arm. His other wounds didn't feel that great either, but Adamantine Adaption made him a veritable cockroach to kill—even for a Heroic Pathbearer. He remembered 811 saying something about how the skill was only meant for monsters. Well. Considering he got Foreshadowing as well, it seemed like being Deathless gave him a wide range of options, so long as he died enough.

Might be a bit harder now. At least physically. I wonder if I can survive Marikos's Pyromancy as I am right now... Probably not. But what the hell happened with my arm? The whip—it's like it blew up with me. Some kind of unstable mana reaction? Considering how much his Vitality Drain and Revenant Skills spiked afterward, it didn't take much of a guess to suspect it had something to do with his Unique Path.

Shiv started staggering down the hallway. He wasn't sure where he was going, but he had no intentions of staying in place. He really wasn't cut out for being an infiltrator. Barely a few hours here, and his cover was already ruined, a bunch of people were dead, and he just went a round with this place's Gate Lord.

“Yeah,” Shiv said to himself. “Let's call that a draw for now.”

Intimidation > 34 Newest update provided by

A rush of levels passed through him. Shiv blinked. That was a big jump for Intimidation? He wondered what—

“THIS IS LESSER MARSHAL CONFRIGA! I AM HEREBY INVOKING A STATE OF EMERGENCY PER THE CONTRACT SIGNED BETWEEN MY LORD AND THE LORDS OF LAW! WE HAVE BEEN INFILTRATED! BY A NEW ALBION RAT, NO DOUBT! AN ATTACK HAS TAKEN PLACE! THE ENEMY HAS FLED! AS OF THIS MOMENT, THE GATEWAYS ARE TO BE SEALED! NO ONE IN! NO ONE OUT! EVERYONE IS TO REMAIN IN PLACE UNTIL HE IS FOUND AND ELIMINATED! ALL GUILD PROFESSIONALS AND KEEPERS ARE TO REPORT IN AT ONCE! HE MUST BE FOUND! HE MUST BE FOUND!”

The broadcast was so loud it shook the entire dimension. Shiv chuckled to himself, enjoying how pissed off the Gate Lord was, and relieved that he had seemingly lost track of Shiv's trajectory after that final clash of force as well. “Yeah. Good luck with that, asshole. Don't worry, though. I'll be seeing you soon. Right after I get a new face and maybe die a few times. I need to restock on new bodies.”

And as the Gate Lord continued raving, Shiv activated his stolen Umbral Shadowwalker Skill and melted into the darkness. He wasn't sure where he was, but he did have a general plan. He needed a new Perfect Semblance, to die and resurrect to handle these wounds, and then he would pay a visit to the Yellowstone Republic's consulate.

There was an automaton he needed to speak with. And then kill.

If not for that bastard, shit might not have gotten this out of hand...

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

40 (I) Stealth [Book 2 BEGINNING]

—Confidential—

[Ambient Mana Recognized — Incoming Message from Master-Advisor Maxwell Oldsmith]

Blackedge still stands. The initial assault has been pushed back to the chasm. Our partners have been striking the town's wards for the better part of the past two weeks, but their finest assets are unable to draw close due to the Town Lord's deterrence. Despite Blackedge's garrison taking catastrophic losses, their defenders somehow managed to withstand and keep the vicar from fully breaching the town's wards, offering Master Roland Arrow enough time to return and attune his soul with Starhawk's Perch. Intelligence suggests that they have created a grand and temporary teleportation anchor at the center of the city.

Rationing has been instituted in town due to the bombings they've suffered to their food silos and other critical supplies. They are also utterly and completely enveloped. Despite this, the envelopment needs to maintain a considerable distance due to the threat of the Town Lord, with the closest units hiding within the chasm. Our "partner" has tried several more direct attacks, even one led by himself, but the losses they took were beyond horrific. To bring this dreadful affair to a conclusion, we are now trying to transport the final piece of the vicar's weapon to the surface. This way, Blackedge will finally fall, and Starhawk's Perch will be disabled long enough for Roland Arrow to be subdued.

Our agents have also spatially intercepted various Slayer Teams mid-jump from the town. Most of them were dispatched to the capital bearing messages of warning and requests for aid. Five teams were eliminated outright. However, we have secured two members from one group and are currently processing them for proper interrogation and eventual liquidation.

That being said, there have also been setbacks in our efforts: The captured Young Lord Adam Arrow and our agent are still missing. Latest reports suggest them to be in the Umbral Depths somewhere.

Additionally, matters in Gate Theborn grow increasingly unpredictable. An incident has occurred inside the gate realm that has stalled the final delivery of the weapon. Though the core is secure, what started as a Master-Tier brawl has become a greater state of emergency. The Gate Lord claims we have been infiltrated by an agent of New Albion, and so Gate Theborn is under critical lockdown.

Our partner will not be pleased with this. In fact, I, myself, am greatly displeased about being fixed in place. As such, I would humbly request that you direct a missive to the Lords of Law and implore them to apply the proper pressures on Low Marshal Confriga to reopen the path to the surface.

The resolution to the problem of Blackedge, Roland Arrow, and his most heinous and illegal Quest against our Republic depends on it.

-Spell Sealed Sync-Letter Stolen from Inquisitor Szjik of the Yellowstone Republic, signed by Master-Advisor Maxwell Oldsmith

40 (I)

Stealth

"Do you guys really, *really* think he's still down here?" Siggy asked, doing everything she could to keep her terror in check. Using her Adept-Tier Visual Calculus Skill, the goblin Pathbearer scanned her surroundings again. She really didn't know why they made someone like her come down here.

Here she was, patrolling Cargo Containment Sector 42B3, in absolute pitch-black darkness. What made things worse was the rest of her team—she didn't much trust any of them to keep her ass alive if things went wrong. The dimensionals dispatched to support them she trusted even less, because they answered directly to a psycho Necromancer Demon Gate Lord who was currently raging all over the city, demanding that every Pathbearer, demon, and guard under his command find the "*New Albion Vermin*."

The New Albion Vermin that, according to some Pathbearers Siggy asked, managed to incinerate a small army of first responders and wound the Gate Lord after an already Super destructive brawl with a Master-Tier orc.

Somehow, the Aviary spy survived his encounter with Confriga—which meant they were a High Master at the very least.

Meanwhile, Siggy's ass wasn't even a High Adept yet. Her usual gigs were finding things people lost or spying for jealous lovers. She only picked up this merc stuff because she really wanted to save up and leave the Abyss after ten years of misery and madness.

Shows you just how smart I am, she chided herself. So much for making my escape faster. Walking around the dark here might just end with someone dragging a dagger across my neck...

"Get your shit together, Siggy," the stocky human leading her current team sneered. He sneered a lot. "We don't get paid to complain, we get paid to deliver. You wanna easy job? Go pick up a trade or some shit. Of course, you'll end up making piss and shit compared to a real Pathbearer. So keep those little ugly eyes open and tell me if you spot anything."

"Sure thing, *Hugo*," Siggy spat. She was technically supposed to call the fire mage boss or something, but he was an asshole, and she wasn't big on respect. It was part of the reason she was down in the Abyss anyway: a lack of respect for the proper authorities leading to a very special arrest warrant.

In her defense, she really didn't expect that noble bastard to fucking drown chasing her.

The containers around them were stacked high and marked with fading paint. The dust here was practically up to her ankles. Every now and again, she would see a group of dimensionals, demons, or another Pathbearer team pass by again, and that would make her feel better. But then they would be gone, and it would be her, Hugo, Coghell, and Lies.

Siggy looked at the other two members of her group and frowned. Coghell was a large automaton that made so much noise with every step that Siggy felt like she was walking alongside a marching band. Lies was an Umbral Jump Mage with more scars than

personality. Siggie always found her creepy. Mainly because of how she had a habit of walking into the woods with a few select slaves while they were on caravan duty and coming back alone thereafter.

The goblin Pathbearer was no saint, but at least it was just a thing of business for her. Everyone else was incompetent, drunk, drunk and incompetent, a total maniac, or just generally untrustworthy. And those sure were the types you wanted by your side while walking through the darkness, trying to find a missing spy that could trade punches with a Heroic Pathbearer.

“Is it just me, or has it been a while since we saw another group?” Siggie asked. The tension inside her was drawn taut. She needed another hit of reassurance by this point.

“It’s just you,” Hugo sneered. He lifted his heavy faceplate and took a sip of liquor. “Godsdammit, Siggie, if I knew you were going to be such a pussy, I would—”

“Whoa, stop!” Siggie said. Her eyes caught something. Something the rest of the group missed. “There.” She pointed at the edge of a cargo container. “Get some light on that.” This update is available on [novel·fire·net](#)

The fire mage sent a hovering torch of flame to light the edge of the container. There, he saw what she indicated: a bloody handprint.

“Taint my ass,” Hugo breathed. “Never felling mind. You’re still a pussy, Siggie, but you got nice eyes. Good catch.” He licked his lips and examined the handprint closely. “I guess the Gate Lord hurt him plenty bad. Bad enough we might be able to finish the job.”

That was another thing Siggie didn’t like about Hugo—he was someone she regarded as a *hyper-optimist*. The breed of idiot that got himself and everyone he led killed against something they shouldn’t be fighting at all. “Maybe we should get back to the checkpoint and inform the rest of the patrols?”

The author's tale has been misappropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

Hugo scoffed. “And screw ourselves out of a sweet, sweet bonus. Taint that. We find this bastard ourselves, and then drinks are on me at Little Gomorrah.”

“Closed right now,” Lies whispered. The damned creepy Umbral started giggling. “Saw them burst in earlier. I saw them blast in through the ceiling. A man armored in bone and an orc fighting. It was bloody. So much vibrant red.”

Siggie blinked. “Wait, you saw *him*? The spy?”

The Umbral kept laughing to herself. “Yes. So much rage in him. He kept fighting. Like he didn’t know anything else.”

“Shit! Godsdammit! Lies, why didn’t you tell us this shit earlier?” Hugo glared at the Umbral.

“Because I didn’t want to,” Lies said, grinning.

The fire mage just growled.

Suddenly, a shriek pierced the air. This was followed by a series of deafening and heavy impacts. The ground shook. Something knocked a container aside, sending it screaming across the ruined concrete. Siggy was clenching her shortsword so tight she felt like she was about to crush the handle.

“Alright!” Hugo said. “The fish’s been hooked. Let’s go get the tainted rot-cock!”

He took off in a rush, and Siggy followed the group despite herself. There was only one thing worse than being in the dark with people she didn’t trust, and that was being in the dark entirely alone.

When they got to the source of the noise, Hugo twisted around a cargo container with a fire spell crackling in his left hand. Then, just as he prepared to unleash hell, his eyes widened, and he froze. Then, Hugo did something Siggy never saw him do.

He doubled over and *gagged*. A second later, his visor was lifted, and he was emptying the contents of his lunch onto the ground. The rest of the group learned why as they saw what he did. A scene of nightmarish carnage stood before Siggy. A dozen meters away, two containers had been slammed together—with an entire group caught between them. The remnants of their bodies were squeezed out from the edges of the container like paste. A twitching mechanical limb flopped like a dead fish upon a puddle of blood.

But that was only the beginning.

Beyond the containers was a slaughterhouse. The ground was cracked and destroyed. Several more cargo boxes were broken or dented. And dozens of bodies were pasted against the ground, spread out in smears of gore. Organic, mechanical, and dimensional corpses were caked against the shattered concrete as if they had been stomped flat by a giant's boot.

Nearby, blood and viscera coated the underside of a badly dented metal box.

“Oh, Broken Moon, oh shit, oh taint me, oh shit...” Siggy began to wheeze. Her heart was going faster and faster. She was... she needed to—

“Help!” A voice cried around another corner. Hugo looked up and had to fold back over to retch a final time. *“Please! Help me... Someone...”*

The cries were deep and desperate, and a trail of blood led behind another set of containers. Hugo growled as he summoned a massive torch of fire over them. “Let’s—let’s go see who that is. Siggy, on point!”

Siggy stared at him in disbelief. “What?”

He grabbed and shoved her forward. Siggy’s legs started shaking, and she nearly sprawled as the mage booted her forward. She wanted to turn and glare at Hugo, but she just kept her eyes open and peeled. In case the *spy* was out there, watching her in the dark. Siggy could feel Hugo’s breathing, could hear the mechanical whine of Coghell’s joints, and even Lies was muttering something to herself.

Oh, shit, oh gods, oh System, please...

Preparing herself, she rounded the corner with her shortsword raised. Only to find a badly injured man laying against a container. He looked like an elf—though his face was covered in so much blood she couldn’t be sure. His armor was like nightglass wrapped around by an enchanted gambeson or something, but even that was ripped up. His left arm looked pretty messed up too. Burned, even. But Siggy never quite recalled seeing burns like that on someone’s body.

“Hey, hey!” Hugo said, shoving Siggy aside. He knelt down beside the wounded elf and shook them. Because Hugo was an asshole and did asshole things as the first resort. The elf moaned in pain, but Hugo didn’t care. “Did you see him? The one that hit you? Did you see where he went? How fast was he? What do you think his Tier is?”

The elf whimpered. “Too fast for us. He’s going to be... too fast for you too.”

Hugo sneered. “Yeah, we’ll felling see about that.” A fire spell took shape over his head as he began summoning a dimensional. “Alright. Siggy, Lies! I need you two—”

“Wait! Look!” The wounded elf said, pointing up at the top of a nearby container. “There! He’s—he’s—”

Siggy turned first, a scream of terror leaving her lips as she prepared to face the *monster* with just a shortsword. But as she gazed up where the wounded elf was pointing, she saw no one. She saw nothing at all. Then, a splash of hot, *coppery* wetness covered her face. Siggy blinked and yelped. She stumbled back, swinging her sword blindly, but lost her footing and fell on her ass. Wiping a hand across her face, she realized what just blinded her was blood, and her heart started going *fast*, like it was going to rip out of her chest.

Then, something fell next to her. *Someone*. Siggy's mind was blank as she realized she was staring at Hugo. His eyes were open but unblinking, and he had a look of absolute confusion on his face. His armor was mostly intact, but there was a gaping wound through his chest that gushed out rivers of blood. And his heart... Where was his *heart*?

"Let go! Let go!" Lies shrieked. The Umbral was kicking and stabbing at the wounded elf. Her nightglass dagger speared straight into his right eye—and the dagger *snapped*. The wounded elf didn't react immediately. He just stared at the Umbral's face for a while longer, as if contemplating something, and then he spoke. "Yeah, Uva's right. I don't think I got the chops to pull off being a woman."

Siggy didn't understand. Her dread and confusion only grew as Lies suddenly gripped her chest, and then she went limp. The elf chuckled her aside too. Siggy was about to start calling for Coghell, but a sparking sound made her look up, and she saw the smoking remnants of an automaton flattened against the ceiling. Components began to rain down. Bolts, screws, and other parts that used to make up a mechanical life form. A second later, Coghell fell, and it broke apart just a meter away from where Hugo lay.

And now, Siggy was the only one left. The only one other than the elf. The spy. The *monster*.

Slowly, she looked up at him, and her breath hitched as a swirl of ash and fire lifted off his body, revealing his true form. A skeletal nightmare loomed over her. Behind him, a cloak of midnight black held together by faint threads of glistening silk fluttered, blending partially into the dark ambience. The figure stood tall, if judged by the standards of a human. He was *huge*, too, built more like that newborn orc Siggy killed that one time. The bones armoring the figure's exterior had a metallic sheen to it, and Siggy saw small grids of armor lining the surface with her Visual Calculus. Numbers flowed through her mind. The thing standing before her was probably just a bit over two meters tall, but the way the ground was starting to crack beneath him made her guess he carried over a ton of mass.

Then, suddenly, the cracks stopped, and her skill was confused. He was back to being maybe around two hundred kilograms or so. Still massive for a human.

And then she saw his eyes. Pools of black dotted with irises of gleaming white. And he was studying her too, looking at her face, holding a dagger of metallic bone in his right hand. His left, though, hung a bit limp by his side. Her Visual Calculus screamed at her, telling her that he was injured there, that she should target the limb. But she ignored the skill, because she was doing everything she could not to shit and piss herself.

"Well," the monster said, his voice sounding surprisingly... *normal*. A bit deep, but normal. "I guess it's just you and me on this floor, now. That took a while." Siggy tried to talk. She made a low whine instead. "Please don't scream. There's no one else left. Not on this floor. Or the one below it." He gave a bitter, tired chuckle. "Would you believe I tried to do this quietly? That I tried to slip out? Ah. I'm not really cut out for this spy or

infiltrator stuff. Even with an Adept Stealth Skill. So. I'm going to ask you a few questions, and you're going to answer. Does that sound good?"

Siggy failed. She really tried her best, but she couldn't help herself. It was all too much. She whispered to the monster, trying not to cry.

"What?" he asked, confused.

"I... I shit myself," she admitted, her lip quivering.

"Ah," he said, sounding genuinely apologetic. "Uh. I think there was another goblin I killed earlier—wait, here." A flash of crimson mana pulsed along his wounded arm. A Biomancy spell took shape, and with a gesture, he tossed a new corpse beside Siggy. It was, indeed, a dead goblin, as the figure claimed. A goblin with his skull caved in, and pants already soiled judging from the smell.

Siggy swallowed. "I... uh, I think I'll keep my pants."

"Why?" the monster said. "Just take his. It's only his head that's been destroyed."

"Yeah, but... I think he shit and pissed himself too."

The monster looked at her, glaring at her with those savage, white irises. Siggy prepared to die, begged the System and all the gods to give her another chance. Then, the monster *sighed*. "Shit. Right. People do that when they die. Sorry about that."

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

40 (II) Stealth

40 (II)

Stealth

Knife Proficiency > 38

Grappling Proficiency > 48

Intimidation > 45

Stealth > 32

Acting > 11

Shiv felt like an idiot. In his defense, though, he was still suffering from a constant, searing pain in his left arm. A pain that lingered while he was a Revenant and even after a few resurrections. A scar was imprinted on his arm—a scar that resembled the faces of three screaming children, as if the whole pain thing wasn't bad enough.

At least it feels like it's getting better, Shiv thought. He couldn't even move his left hand earlier. Now, he was capable of using it to shape spells again. It still hurt like a bastard, but pain he was used to.

It took him the better part of two hours to finally make his way out of the maintenance tunnels in the building. He figured out he was in some kind of long-term cargo storage or impound. Most of the containers here were covered in a thick layer of dust. The absence of rats also told him there were likely no foodstuffs to consume either.

Umbral Shadowwalker kept him from being noticed immediately when the hunting parties came. Confriga seemed to have at least an idea of where Shiv got blasted off to. But though the stolen skill kept him covered for a while, it was still just Adept-Tier, and more than a few of his adversaries had his Stealth beat by their Awareness. Unfortunately for them, finding Shiv was the easy part of the job. And he adapted to his enemies as well. After slaughtering the first group that found him, he ended up taking on a new Perfect Semblance and applying what he liked to call *aggressive stealthtactics* to the situation. Mostly, he would lure several groups between containers by misdirecting them, and while they were confused or searching, he would slam the containers together. Then, he would take on a new Perfect Semblance to keep things confusing, and then repeat the process with the survivors.

It worked out pretty great, all things considered. Really spiked his Acting and Stealth. But those skills paled before Intimidation—which was quickly becoming a double-edged sword for Shiv. It made people stop, made their morale break, and damaged their focus when Shiv was around, but it also made them go into shock.

Like what this goblin was doing.

Shiv gave her a moment to rinse out the *accident* staining her pants while he burned the fire mage leading her team, taking him as a new Perfect Semblance. *Hugo Vetti. And... oh, this is useful. I've been looking for a skill like this.*

Steal Initiate-Tier Skill [1/2] (Polyglot)

Polyglot 25 (Initiate)

A searing sensation rushed through Shiv's mind as he recalled years spent learning various languages—mostly towards the end of seducing women and men at various bars or reading diaries looted off enemy soldiers across various battlefields. As a result,

Shiv's language capabilities increased. Not substantially. The fire mage wasn't a serious learner, but he was a good bit above illiteracy.

As the flames reshaped Shiv's body, he found himself in the guise of the fire mage. Thankfully, this one was wearing heavy armor, but his left arm still looked a bit damaged. It was strange, like Perfect Semblance could mask everything about his original self—but it had to keep some part of his injuries.

Guessing the wound might be soul-deep. Broken Moon, I'm not letting that Gate Lord asshole hit me with a whip again. Even if it does spike my Vitality Drain and Revenant. If he got me in the head... I don't know, maybe I'd be dead for good.

Shiv noticed the goblin staring at him. Her greaves were back on, and she was back on her very shaky feet. She was a short figure, even for a goblin. A thickly-coiled ponytail extended out from a port built into her open-faced helmet. The rest of her armor was decent quality steel, but to Shiv she might as well have been wearing glass. Hells, she might as well *be made* of glass.

He only encountered one Master-Tier enemy in this place so far, and she was a Master-Tier at Awareness and Magical Resistance, but not Toughness. As a result, she managed to track him down pretty quickly after he ambushed and slaughtered a group of wolf-headed dimensionals. Her reward for being so astute was Shiv kicking her through a container and driving a bone dagger through her eye.

Adamantine could sink through Adept-Tier flesh pretty smoothly.

"So..." the goblin said, swallowing constantly. She looked him up and down now that he was pretending to be her former comrade. He wondered if that was going to be an issue. "I—I, uh—"

"I'm thinking," Shiv said, watching her face.

She nodded hard. "Sure! Take as long as you need."

Yeah, sparing this one was a good idea. I was trying to find an opportunity to get myself a hostage-guide. I might be able to read some of the words now, but I still need to know my way around this place.

"What's your name?" Shiv started.

"Siggy," she said. "No last name."

"Well. Siggy. We are both in a predicament. I think you understand that."

"I won't tell anyone—"

He stared flatly at her. “Really?”

She fell silent. “Are you gonna to kill me?”

“Not sure about that yet. You a slaver?”

“Not exactly?”

“That doesn’t sound like a no, Siggy.”

“I just do some transportation jobs sometimes. It’s business.”

“Well. That makes killing you people pleasure for me.” Shiv growled. Siggy shivered. “You wanna know something? This mess started because you people were bastards. I hate it. I hate looking at the slaves, I hate what you’re doing and who you are.”

“I was just trying to make some *mithril*, man,” Siggy whimpered. “I was gonna be done soon.”

“Yeah. And the slaves?”

“I—” Siggy was shaking. Shiv could almost feel the Intimidation bleeding out of his body, like a tangible aura.

Don’t know what that’s going to be like when it becomes Adept. But I am looking forward to it.

“You’re scum,” Shiv said simply. His rage flattened to his default state—which was pretty hateful when it came to slavers. “But lucky for you, I got an offer for you. Right now, I can feel your heart. I am a Biomancer—and not a very good one. But plenty good at killing. Do you understand?”

It took her a second, but she nodded. “Y-yes?”

“Alright. If something goes wrong, your heart might suddenly fail. To avoid that, you’re going to lead me out of this place and take me to the Yellowstone Republic’s Consulate.”

“The Republic Consulate? Huh? Why?”

“Because I want to go there,” Shiv said. “And asking more questions will result in heart failure.”

Her mouth slammed shut. She nodded. “I’ll get you there immediately. On the double. I know—I know the receptionist there. I got good—”

A case of literary theft: this tale is not rightfully on Amazon; if you see it, report the violation.

“Good. Better. You stay close to me. You lead me out. And at the end... you might just live. I don’t much like your kind, but I think I’ve dealt enough sloppy death out for today. To too many people who didn’t deserve it either.” Shiv thought back to his brawl with 811 and sighed. “So. You can make yourself a very lucky Pathbearer, and I can find it in myself to offer a little mercy. Does that sound good?”

“It sounds... like the best thing I’ve ever heard in my life,” Siggy choked out.

“Alright, then, Siggy. Get me out of here. And remember—every beat of your heart depends on it.” A tear fell from her eye. Shiv sighed. “We move once you’re done crying.”

Siggy nodded—and then immediately started bawling out of stress and terror.

Intimidation > 46

I probably should have taken a guide-hostage earlier, Shiv thought as the elevator ascended. He held his ribs and maintained a traumatized look, trying to act the part of a Pathbearer that had witnessed unspeakable horrors rather than the one that enacted them. Beside him, Siggy wasn’t acting. She was sniffled and shaking. Someone had given her a blanket as they got through the checkpoint. She did the bulk of the speaking, telling the small group of Pathbearers and dimensionals guarding the elevator about the slaughter they just survived—she also added that the spy was wounded, but they needed more manpower.

And so, as a small army of hunters descended, Shiv and his new “friend” went up. She glanced at him every few seconds. Her heart was constantly thundering, and her body was reacting in all kinds of complex ways he didn’t fully understand. Ekkihurst said stuff about cortisol and adrenaline and hormones. Lots of chemicals. Lots of reactions. Shiv needed to review those chapters of the *Odes* more if he wanted to fully grasp all the little details. However, the most important one was how vulnerable a person’s heart was, and right then, Siggy understood that lesson better than Shiv.

As the doors opened, a familiar figure approached. Shiv tensed as he thought he was looking at Confriga, only to notice that they had a lighter skin tone and far fewer head tentacles. Also, they were smaller than the Gate Lord, and led an accompaniment of automata with them.

“Well met,” the demonic being said. This one sounded female, and her vertical lips barely moved as she spoke. “I have received reports of the spy being contained? Is this true?”

Shiv just stared. He prodded Siggy from behind.

“Ah! Y-yeah! B-but it’s bad down there. He’s—we’re the only two survivors across several floors. He’s killed everyone else. And he is injured. The others are going after him but—”

“I understand.” The demon nodded. “You have served the Gate Lord and your contracts well.” She looked at their bloody, miserable forms and waved for the automata to enter the elevator. The bots were all holding huge crystal staffs in one hand and carrying strange torches in the other. “Go see treatment, if you require it. Should the spy be captured, I will ensure bonuses for both of you.”

“T-thanks,” Siggy said. Again, it wasn’t hard for her to fake trauma and terror. Not when the source of both was standing just beside her.

As they got off, the demon and her fire magi team got on. She eyed Shiv one final time as he made for the front door with Siggy, and he felt—

Foreshadowing: She was but twelve years old when she watched High Captain Confriga murder her clutch brother. It was an absurd thing to witness—a duel between a mature warrior in Lord Scorn’s army and a boy who only recently stopped being a tadpole.

Their sireess had begged, but Confriga wouldn’t accept it. The boy had dirtied his cape. And so the boy had to be punished. Murder was illegal, and peasants weren’t allowed to duel. So her clutch brother was marked as an ascended noble and loaned a blade.

The fight lasted less than a second. The torture went on considerably longer.

After the fight was over, Confriga took her brother as an effigy—she wasn’t even allowed to keep his body.

That had been three full centuries ago. Now, she was finally close. After burning her old name, her old identity, she was finally close...

Foreshadowing > 21

“The world is just full of godsdamned bullshit,” Shiv mumbled, chuckling.

“What?” Siggy said.

“Nothing. Consulate. Walk. Good job.”

The goblin nodded. And did as he asked.

The streets and bridges were devoid of people now. Floating eyes drifted above—dimensionals that projected their mind magic at various people and corners, scanning for anything out of place. As one turned to gaze upon them, Shiv tensed. He had a Mind Shield, but Siggy—

She held up a stack of bills, waving it. The floating eye blinked and then looked away.

“What’s that?” Shiv asked.

“Bribery,” Siggy said. “I know some of them. That one’s name is *Floats On Honestly*. They’re kind of a greasy shitbag but... they’re greedy. I smuggle some contraband through the gate sometimes, and I give them a cut. They probably think I stole something from a container or whatever.”

Shiv grunted a laugh. “Nice job. You’re really looking out for your heart.”

“Doing my best,” Siggy whimpered.

The Yellowstone Republic Consulate turned out to be pretty far away. After a good deal more walking and a few tense words exchanged with a Pathbearer team that recognized Siggy, Shiv found himself staring at a large building in the shape of a black oval. It had a chain connecting its summit to the gray sun floating at the center of the realm as well. Shiv still didn’t know what that was all about.

As Siggy let him inside, they passed through a series of wards, and a brief alarm went off. An armored guard approached. Shiv balled his fists—only to relax as the guard let out a dismissive snort.

“Siggy? What are you doing here?” The link to the origin of this information rests in novelfire

“Mira,” was all Siggy said.

“Really? You want to sell her some Drift *now*?”

“Yeah. Easier to do when half the city’s on lockdown and there’s no one watching.”

The guard sighed. And then looked at Shiv. “Why’s he with you this time?”

“Debt. Drinking. Whores.” Siggy shrugged.

The guard laughed. “Now there’s an old song. Well. Welcome to the business.”

Shiv didn’t quite understand what just happened. As Siggy got them into a new elevator, the guard swiped a crystal of some kind over the controls and tapped an icon. A few seconds later, they were going up.

“What just happened?” Shiv asked. “What’s Drift?”

“Serious?” Siggie asked.

“Yeah? What is it?”

“A drug. Makes you have really nice dreams.”

“You’re a *godsdamned drug dealer too?*” Shiv hissed. “Is there anything terrible you don’t do?”

Siggie stared at him. “You... tore a bunch of people apart. Mangled them... This bothers you? Some drugs?”

Shiv stared at her. “Yeah. It kind of does. I’ve seen what that does to people. Especially the ones who don’t have much to begin with.” The lower streets of Blackedge held more dangers than the obvious. There were dealers everywhere. And there were the poor and vulnerable. “First person I ever killed was a dealer. He was a goblin too.”

Siggie started shaking again. She kept shaking all the way to the front doors of the consulate.

As they entered, Shiv found himself staring into a luxurious space drenched in pleasant flavors, with nice and warm floorboards, and a row of cushioned seats for people to use while waiting. A single woman manned reception, and Shiv noticed she had a bit of Psychomancy—about comparable to his own. She wore a navy blue hat to go with her extremely form-fitting dress. It suited her dark, auburn hair, sapphire eyes, and red lips well.

“Good afternoon, but I’m afraid—Siggie?” the secretary blinked.

“Hey, Mira,” Siggie said, swallowing. “Listen—”

Shiv looked around. He didn’t see anything or anyone. No other mana fields either. He was tired of this stealth shit too. He reached across the desk and snatched the secretary off her feet. He clamped his hand around her mouth as she tried to scream and snarled for Siggie to watch the door—and mind her heart if she tried to run.

“Listen,” Shiv said. “I have an appointment with Master-Advisor Maxwell Oldsmith. I’m probably not on the calendar—but I’m about to be. Either you put me on, or I’ll find a way to do it myself. Do you understand?” Mira’s eyes widened in absolute terror, but she nodded quickly. “Good. I don’t think you’re an Adept in Toughness—maybe not even Initiate. Scream, resist, run, or use your mind magic on me, and I’ll pull your head off and show you your body from a new angle before you die? Got it?”

He didn't actually mean that with her. As far as he knew, the secretary didn't do anything that deserved death. But he needed her quiet and compliant until he got what he wanted, and right now, Intimidation was his best tool.

It was also... too good of a tool.

Mira blinked twice and then, her eyes rolled into the back of her head. Shiv blinked. The secretary was out cold.

"Oh, shit, oh felling shit, oh tainted felling shit!" Siggy said, clutching her head. "Is she dead? Did you kill her? Is she—"

"She just passed out," Shiv snapped. "She'll be fine."

And then, from around the corner, a voice came. A voice Shiv recognized as the automaton that was beating the child slave earlier. "Mira? Mira? Did the new servant arrive? Has this one brought the right pair of gloves this time?"

Shiv growled as red crept around the corners of his vision. "But the Master-Advisor won't be." He picked Mira up and advanced with her like she was a shield. As he dipped her shoulder around the corner, he heard the Master-Advisor speak again. "Ah. Mira. There you are! Wait, Mira?"

Shiv pulled the secretary away from the corner and waited. He listened to the sounds of the Master-Advisor's limbs whirring as he approached. *No one in the consulate today, it seems. Probably somewhere else because of the lockdown. Looks like I finally caught another lucky break.*

"Mira—"

Shiv grabbed the automaton by the head as soon as they appeared. The machine tried to struggle, so Shiv lightly bounced their head off the wall once and called for Siggy to catch. He chucked Mira at her, and he heard both women go down in a heap.

"What is the meaning—" Master-Advisor Maxwell Oldsmith stopped talking as Shiv dismissed his Perfect Semblance. Shiv saw his skull-helmet reflected in the automaton's visor. "O-oh, B-broken M-m-m—"

"Hello, Oldsmith," Shiv said. "We met earlier. But you might not remember me. Not with this face. But you were beating a child earlier. He's dead now. And unless I'm very, very satisfied with the conversation we're about to have, you will be too."

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