

Path of the Deathless (Book 2 Completed)

41 (I) Conspiracy

The Auroral Council cannot be trusted. The Prismatic Order isn't here to help us, but to enslave us. The faith has been compromised. They aren't actual gods! There aren't any gods. We've all been deceived! All of us!

The church is not a hall of worship but conversion. What we think we know of the world outside is a nest of lies! New Albion is not weak! The Abyss is not filled purely with monsters! And the Republic is not the strongest nation in the world—no! It is merely an instrument of twisted faith! Our gods have been stolen! And the Auroral Council is merely a facade! The priesthood and church are their eyes and ears, spying on us! The mind mages twist our very memories and infuse deceit into our history!

Look! Look into yourself! Look at your souls and your statuses! Do you have the Auroral Piety Skill? That skill born of faith? That skill that allows you to draw upon the gifts of the Auroral Ascendants, for only they can convert the awesome power of the thirteen and infuse in you the power to craft Blessings?

No! Faith is mana! Faith is an attunement of mana! And they don't want us to know because they want our devotion to be absolutely pure! Absolutely focused on their divinity and immortality—because they were too weak to seize it another way. They were fragile, until they found the means to siphon power from the System—making themselves more!

We do not live in a Republic, but a hierarchy of exploitation! Turn away from the Auroral Piety Skill! Turn away from the church! And turn away from the Ascendants! The faith is a lie!

It is all a lie!

-“Writings of a Heretic” (Recovered by Inquisitors of the Prismatic Order)

41 (I)

Conspiracy

The Master-Advisor's office was pretty cozy. It had a nice pond with a fountain in the middle filled with koi. The leftmost wall was covered in a grand painting. It depicted the Legendary Pathbearers comprising the Auroral Council, the ones who served as avatars of the thirteen Ascendants, looking powerful and dignified. The right side was

lined with bookshelves and leatherbound tomes. Another nice thing was the soundproofing Enchantments lining the walls and the black-tinted windows preventing anyone from peering in. And at the far end of the room was a grand, ivory table. One that doubled as a piano. One that sat just below a portrait of Master-Advisor Maxwell Oldsmith itself. One that shattered into pieces when Shiv swatted it in a demonstration of his displeasure.

The massive table tumbled into the air as if it barely weighed anything at all and crashed hard against the portrait. The piano burst into dust, fragments, and bouncing keys. The portrait was torn and mangled, much like the automaton it was meant to depict.

A little bit away, Master-Advisor Maxwell Oldsmith whimpered and wailed on its knees. Looming over it was Shiv—still in his Perfect Semblance. Nearby, an audience of two looked in petrified trepidation, doing their best to avoid Shiv's notice. Mira, the secretary, had woken at some point and found herself tied to a chair. Shiv had ripped rebar out of the walls and bent it around her. Siggie kept watch out of the door as Shiv told her to, but every time Shiv made a loud noise, she flinched, and her legs wobbled like the struts of a collapsing bridge.

"Oldsmith. If you say 'I don't know' to me one more time, I don't know if I can stop myself from driving my godsdamned fingers through your optics." Shiv's words were calm. His mood was far from it. This *thing* that knelt before him had been trying to beat a child to death with its belt for a misplaced pair of gloves. The kid was dead now, thanks to 811. As were hundreds more. But Shiv still had a promise of retribution to keep. It might not mean anything to the boy, but it did mean something to Shiv.

I don't even know the kid's name, Shiv realized. It didn't matter. It was the behavior that offended him. The hells was the point of being some high and powerful lord or Pathbearer and spending your time stepping on the small? It was *pathetic*.

"I—You asked me to be honest! So I am! Please, Master Pathbearer! Please! I can only tell you what I know." Gone was the haughty, oppressive demeanor that the automaton had earlier. The bot was just a beggar now, and it begged good and hard for its life. Its fine suit and nice hat were shredded by how roughly Shiv moved it around during the interrogation. "You asked me why I am here—I told you! Because I was assigned by the Prismatic Order! Straight from the capital at Yellowstone! I—I am merely doing my duties, as instructed by Inquisitor Szjik. Nothing more! I swear! I swear on the Ascendants!"

Shiv just glared at the bot. He took a moment to recap and process all the things he asked Oldsmith.

As it turned out, the Republic was even more full of bullshit than Shiv expected. Not only did the Master-Advisor here know plenty about the Five Faiths of the Abyss, it was also tasked with establishing new trade ties with Compact. There were also other consulates

in various other gates. With what Oldsmith described, business between the Auroral Council of the Republic and the Lords of Law over Compact was booming. Latest content published on novelfire

This led into another question: Why the Republic lied to their own people. When Oldsmith started claiming it was to protect the minds of the Republic's citizens from corruptive ideologies and dark realities, Shiv lost his temper slightly. He might have slapped the bot a little. The bot's head might have a pretty sizable dent as a result. That caused Oldsmith to update its answer from protection to control. Apparently, the Prismatic Order controlled something called a *Censorship Agenda* about things the people were and weren't allowed to know.

And then things got even worse for Shiv as Oldsmith started going on about the logistics of assigning proper mind mages to each of the Republic's territories to ensure that a *shared understanding of culture and national destiny* was maintained.

An ill feeling passed through Shiv after he heard that. He felt like he was starting to dissociate from himself, and a sense of paranoia swelled inside him. Had a Psychomancer peered into his mind when he grew up? Shaped his memories? How much did Roland Arrow know?

It was at this point that Oldsmith made a terrible mistake. It started complaining about how it didn't want to do any of this, how it deserved better for all its years of honest service rendered to an assortment of lords, and if it hadn't agreed to arrangements made by its most recent benefactor, Havel Van Stormhalt, it wouldn't be here trying to resolve the Blackedge problem for the Prismatic Order.

The names *Havel Van Stormhalt* and *Blackedge* brought Shiv's other thoughts to a crashing halt. And then the hits just kept coming.

"City Lord Havel has long despised Master Roland Arrow. He was practically overjoyed when he told me about a most important mission I was meant to help him accomplish. He admitted to me, then, that he was a high-ranking member of the Prismatic Order—and that he had received a divine duty from a member of the Auroral Council. The Republic in danger! And because of one of its great heroes, no less!"

"Stormhalt? As in... the father of Isabella Van Stormhalt?" Shiv asked, just to clarify.

"Correct. The Young Lady was—well, relations between her and her father have always been troubled since the death of her mother, and after her elopement with Town Lord Roland Arrow's son—"

"Wait, elopement? I thought they were formally engaged."

Oldsmith frowned. "If they were, City Lord Havel did not give his consent. Oh, his mood was ever so foul those final few days. And then, suddenly, he was overjoyed. Bursting

with happiness! And that's when he told me—that's when he informed me of what was to happen! Blackedge was to be sacked and occupied. Starhawk's Perch was to be secured and delivered unto City Lord Havel, along with Town Lord Roland Arrow, be he alive or dead, and with proof of his treason! For within him burns a Quest to bring down the Republic itself! And to lay low the Auroral Council!"

By the end of the speech, Shiv stared blankly at the automaton for practically a minute. There was so much in there for him to process that Shiv couldn't help but sigh. *Adam... is going to explode when he hears of this. Frankly, this is starting to seem like a plot on the System's part to get Adam to suffer an aneurysm from pure anger.*

Help support creative writers by finding and reading their stories on the original site.

Shiv, personally, was more lost than ever. He came into the office looking for a few answers regarding certain things that didn't fit about the Republic—and then to beat an automaton to death. He ended up plunging into what seemed like a cross-national conspiracy that went so deep he couldn't even see the bottom.

"Secured and delivered to Havel by whom?" Shiv asked.

"I—" Oldsmith hesitated.

"Speak. You don't need any of your limbs to do that."

"Vicar Sullain! The disgraced Vicar Sullain!" Oldsmith wailed, sounding ashamed and terrified. "Members of the Prismatic Order and the foul Necrotech vicar came to an accord for the greater good! No one in the Republic has enough authority or power to directly deliver justice upon Roland Arrow—not with the Starhawk's Blessing. But with all that is at stake, and his heresy threatening the stability of the Auroral Council, extreme measures had to be taken. And another means of accessing Starhawk's Perch was required."

"So, you guys..." Shiv paused as he tried to put all this together in his head. "Okay. Havel hates Roland. Havel is supposedly a member of the Prismatic Order—and he takes orders from one of the Council members. And they want him to deal with Roland Arrow?"

"Yes."

Shiv narrowed his eyes. "But Roland has the favor of the Starhawk, who is... one of Ascendants. The Ascendants that the Auroral Council serves as avatars for."

"I... yes, correct." The Master-Advisor nodded.

Shiv was starting to get a headache. “And because Roland’s been accused by a member of the Auroral Council of heresy and having a Quest... to destroy the Auroral Council?”

“Yes. That—that is what I have been told.”

“But he’s favored. By an Ascendant. An avatar of one of the Auroral Council members.” Shiv emphasized every sentence, trying to make Oldsmith realize how absurd and outrageous this all was.

“Ah, perhaps... perhaps the Starhawk is deceived? And does not know of his favored apprentice’s treachery?” Now it sounded like the damn bot was asking a question.

“You’re not sure?” Shiv asked.

“No,” Oldsmith admitted.

“And you didn’t bother checking? Or hiring a spy to slip into Blackedge or something?”

“I—that was not my assigned duty, so perhaps that has happened, but I cannot be sure.”

“Well, if it were me, I would have *felling* asked!” Shiv snarled. Oldsmith toppled over and began shaking as the Deathless leaned over the bot. “Tell me you’re not lying. Tell me this isn’t bullshit. Tell me. Because it sounds like bullshit. Siggys!”

The goblin jumped a full meter off the ground at the mention of her name. She was shaking when she turned to regard Shiv. “Y-yes?”

“Does this sound like bullshit?” he asked.

She looked at the automaton. “Yeah. Honestly, kind of.”

“No! It’s not!” Oldsmith cried.

“You!” Shiv said, pointing at Mira, the secretary. She gave a muffled cry of fear due to the rebar tightened around her lower jaw and body. “Does this sound like bullshit?”

She paused, considered it, and then tried to nod.

“I—I assure you, it is not! I have... I have evidence of this! I have communication records between me and Inquisitor Szjik! It was in a desk compartment! You can look!” Oldsmith crawled to the debris of the piano-desk and began digging through the mess.

Shiv watched the automaton and placed his hands on his hips while biting his lips. *What the hells did I just stumble ass-blind into?*

“Look!” Oldsmith said, holding up what looked to be a leather journal. A series of spell patterns danced over a lock, keeping the book bound. “This is it. Here.” It pressed the lock, and a clicking sound followed. The lock fell, and Oldsmith came rushing back, handing Shiv the book. As he opened the pages and started flipping through, Shiv’s jaw dropped. He could see Roland Arrow’s name mentioned hundreds of times. Other words that leaped out to him were “Quest,” “*Starhawk*,” “*Sullain*,” “*civil war*,” “*divine struggle*,” and more.

If Oldsmith was lying, he was the most prepared and prescient liar Shiv had ever met. And something told him the automaton had no skill related to Divination. “You got to be felling kidding me,” Shiv muttered.

“I’m not!” Oldsmith wailed. It fell to its knees and embraced Shiv’s legs. “Please... great Master Pathbearer. Spare me! I am just a servant. Just the hand of another! Let me go!”

Shiv looked down at the wretched machine. “Oldsmith. If you don’t let go of me, I’m going to kick you, and it’s going to be hard to figure out where your bits begin and your broken piano ends.” The automaton let go of Shiv and simply bowed in supplication. The Deathless tried putting more pieces together. Really messy and ugly pieces.

“So,” Shiv began. “Instead of doing anything to investigate or find proof through more subtle means... a literal Council member, a City Lord, and the secret guardians of the Republic decided to strike an accord with an excommunicated heretic of the Abyss to *murder* its own people, destroy a tripwire town, and capture or kill a national hero?”

Oldsmith froze briefly. “That... appears to be accurate.”

Shiv tried pinching the bridge of his nose—and felt his fingers bounce off his skull helmet. His Perfect Semblance completed the action, though. “It seems like you guys jumped several orders of escalation. This is insane.”

“Well... sometimes one needs to be insane to protect the Republic they love,” Oldsmith said, sounding slightly offended.

“Right. Where does owning a literal slave child and beating them to near-death with a belt in public fall into that?”

Oldsmith went silent again. Then, slowly, it looked up, staring at Shiv. “Why... *who* are you?”

Shiv glared down at the machine. And then he gave a humorless laugh. “You screwed yourself. You know that, right? If you hadn’t tried killing that kid, I would have just passed by. And maybe a lot fewer people would have died when I fought that big, cruel bastard.”

The automaton's optics flickered in a mechanical version of a blink. "The vampire... you're... oh, Ascendants, oh, gods, you're the *spy*?"

Shiv looked down and then decided to dismiss his Perfect Semblance out of spite. As he revealed his skeletal armor, Oldsmith let out a gasp of terror as Shiv snorted. "If I'm a spy, I'm a pretty shit one. Barely made it a few hours before I lost multiple cover identities. And now here I am bumbling ass-first into an international conspiracy because a Master-Advisor couldn't keep his shit together."

Shiv reapplied his Perfect Semblance. Suddenly, he was Hugo again. Some dead fire mage that Siggy knew.

"I—listen, please, listen! I have a great deal of mithril! There's—I can take you to a safe place in the capital. I—I can make arrangements. Introduce you to people of power! You would like that, yes? To accumulate more levels and power? To gain Blessings? I might even be able to have you greet a Council member and earn true favor! Please... don't—don't hurt me! A-all this can be bygones easily. Why, if you are interested, you can demonstrate your power, Master Pathbearer! All you need to do is help transport an object—t-the core of a weapon to the surface once the way opens again."

Now, Shiv was full-on laughing. "You got to be kidding me. The System spites, and the System bestows."

"What?"

"You have the Animancy Core? You tainted bastard, I came in the gate to find the damn thing! I thought what I ended up doing earlier might have killed my chances of finding the core, and here you are. A real System-sent blessing."

"What—what do you..." Oldsmith shook, and repeated a question from earlier. "Who are you?"

Shiv considered all the answers he could give. He chose the one that amused him the most. "I was an assistant chef. I worked at the Swan-Eating Toad."

"The—wait, the one run by Heroic Pathbearer Georges Archambault?"

"Yeah—wait, *Heroic*?" Shiv almost shouted.

"Yes. He is... a heretic, but his cooking skills were borderline *legendary*. Only a shame about his lack of faith. And his greed."

Shiv just kept staring at the automaton.

"But... how could that be?" Oldsmith said, looking at Shiv. "You are... you are here!"

“Yeah,” Shiv said, nodding. “What other obvious statement are you going to make?”

“You—Blackedge is encircled! There was no escape! We even intercepted the few Slayer teams that were dispatched by Master Roland Arrow to warn the capital of what is happening.”

“Yeah, that’s because I was thrown—wait, Slayer teams?”

Oldsmith nodded. “Six in total. Five were entirely eliminated. Two survivors in the last group. A Jump Mage and the leader. They—they are currently undergoing interrogation. But... the Inquisitors might be almost done...”

Foreshadowing: Jeffery Tran pleaded for death. The interrogator ignored him and ripped into his mind again. Tran screamed. He thought the wounds left on his body were bad. This was infinitely worse.

But worst of all was hearing Heather shriek beside him. She wasn’t better off than he was. He could hear her crying. He tried to reach out to her and hold her hand. But the distance between them was too far.

He didn’t deserve this. He tried to do the right thing his entire life. He didn’t deserve to die in a miserable cell like this, having his mind torn apart by the Inquisition.

But he knew there was no one coming to save him. He knew. And he despaired.

Foreshadowing > 23

Share to your friends

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

41 (II) Conspiracy

41 (II)

Conspiracy

“Shit,” Shiv cried, clutching his head. The visions hit him hard that time. That was Tran. And Heather. They were hurt *bad*. That meant the other two were... “Where?”

“What?” Oldsmith asked.

The automaton's annoying voice and the rising rage Shiv felt after the vision provoked him to violence. He clamped a hand around Oldsmith's left arm and *tore*. The limb came off with a spray of oil, sparks, and screams. Oldsmith whistled in notes of electronic agony no human throat could ever make. Mira thrashed and twitched, sobbing as she struggled to escape. Siggy was slumped against the door, her legs giving out under her.

"Where? Where is the Slayer team? Tell me where!" Shiv snarled. His heartbeats were like thunder, and his blood was on fire with the urge to do harm. He didn't like Heather. Tran betrayed him on some level. Didn't mean he was fine with some Inquisitor torturing them to death. Didn't mean Shiv was just going to let them die. Not when he still—Tran had been the only person outside the restaurant nice to him sometimes.

Even if it was fake, it still meant something to Shiv. Find the newest release on novel·fire·net

It took a while for Oldsmith to stop screaming. By the time it did, the automaton was full-on sobbing in agony and horror. "They're here! In the building! They're in a secret chamber in the sublevels. A blacksite! You could have just waited—my *arm*. You could have—"

Whatever else Oldsmith was going to say died as Shiv seized the bot by the neck and lifted it. "You. You're going to take me there, *right now*. Siggy. You're coming too."

The goblin Pathbearer tried to stand, but she couldn't. "I—you could just rebar me, like Mira."

Shiv glared at her. "You mistake order for request."

Siggy whimpered in response. "O-okay. You're the boss."

"You take... point. Stay ahead of us, but not that far. Tell me if anyone's outside or at the elevator. You try to run, and I'll push all the organs inside you out through your mouth."

"Oh, gods, oh shit..." Siggy shuddered as she pushed open the door.

"And you," Shiv said, looking at Mira. The secretary cried out in terror, clicking her legs and shaking her head. A feeling of self-disgust and embarrassment came over Shiv. "I'm... *sorry*." Mira blinked in surprise. "I was... I *am* really pissed off. About a lot of things. I shouldn't have threatened you so harshly. I shouldn't have scared you." Shiv frowned. "I'm not very good at tactics, stealth, or the whole complicated planning thing yet. I'll have to get better at that. Just stay here for a while. Someone will find you."

Done with his apology, Shiv gestured for the staring Siggy to leave, and he followed her out with Oldsmith still in his hand. "And you," he said to the automaton. "Start talking about this secret chamber. How many Inquisitors there are. Their Tiers. Everything."

And Oldsmith talked. And Oldsmith told him everything.

“I mean, how much could they really know? They’re just some Slayers—and barely small-time, at that. Up until the attack, their biggest problem was maybe clearing out some lesser vampires.” Den sighed as he took a sip from his coffee. “I just don’t see the point of working them that rough. If it were up to me, just wipe their minds and ship them off to re-education. Or kill them.”

“It’s not up to you,” Gewen said. She was judging him with those eyes again. He hated when she did that. It was just the two of them on guard in the entry room for the blacksite. The other two Questioners were in the cells, aiding the Inquisitor with the prisoners. Blacksite Theborn never saw much action—it was mostly just a reserve location in case they needed to take and hold a high profile target in the Blackedge area. This past week, though? They had their hands full. Two surviving rebels from Blackedge. Former Slayers. Apparently, Town Lord Arrow sent them off to the capital to deliver news and bring back aid.

They didn’t make it very far.

“They might not know much, but they can still reveal things about the town. And about any of Arrow’s weaknesses,” Gewen chimed. Den snorted at the automaton’s words. “What? Speak.”

“Did you read Roland Arrow’s threat profile?” Den asked.

She was silent for a moment. “I’ve been busy with the prisoners.”

“Yeah. Well. I did some of our *required* reading, and let me tell you—the guy’s a monster. Twenty. Twenty godsdamned Master-Tier Skills. With that kind of status, he’s practically Legendary anyway.”

Gwen scoffed. “What drivel. If the Prismatic Order mustered a single Purification Squad, we would see him secured in a day.”

“And here we are, two weeks on, and the battle is still raging.”

“Has a Purification Squad been dispatched?”

“No, but there is a Legendary Pathbearer from the Abyss that has been getting repelled time and time again by Arrow. You’re going to tell me a single Adept Purification Squad is going to be more effective?”

“Yes,” Gewen said. She held out her three mechanical arms and leaned her bulbous head backward. “Because we have the favor and faith of the Aurora. Because we are the only blessed in this damned world.”

Den wasn’t unfaithful by any means, but believing in the gods wasn’t synonymous with being delusional. He was also smart enough to know that it was stupid to debate a fanatical automaton. “You know what, Gewen. You’re right. A Purification Squad could totally do it.”

“I am glad you are so willing to learn and change your foolish thinking. It is your most redeeming quality.”

Den snorted again. Gewen was about to say something when a section of the wall clicked and hissed as the secret entrance to the blacksite slid open. Den blinked. He shared a look with Gewen. “Do we have another scheduled delivery?”

Gwen filled her hands with three maces and readied herself. “No. We don’t.”

But then through the crack squeezed the *annoyance*. The one they had to babysit. Master-Advisor Maxwell Oldsmith. It staggered through with a cough and a large coat around its body. “Ah,” Oldsmith began. “It’s absolutely miserable out there. The damned Gate Lord has—he has no sense of decency or understanding at all.”

“Oh, great,” Den deadpanned. “The only person I dislike talking to more than you is here.”

“A sentiment shared,” Gewen said, putting away her maces. “Master-Advisor. This place is not for you without proper notification. Please depart. We are engaged in highly delicate operations.”

“Well, that’s just the thing,” Oldsmith said. There was a slight quiver in its voice. “You seem to have missed a subject! Another one! I’ve been instructed to bring you another one! And you won’t believe who it is: The Town Lord himself! Roland Arrow!”

Den and Gewen shared a look. The Master-Advisor wasn’t known for its comedy, and so they both grabbed their weapons again and stepped toward the doorway to find out what the hells was going on. As they approached, Den frowned. “Hey, what happened to the lights? Why is it so—”

Something passed through the center of Den’s face. He took a step forward, and his head started spinning. Things felt weird, the Master-Advisor was turning away from him, talking to the darkness about how he did what someone asked. Behind Den came the sound of a falling body. But Den didn’t notice because he was reaching for his nose. There was a ticklish feeling there. But his fingers kept going and going and... his hand was all the way in his face. His nose wasn’t there. His upper lip and all the teeth weren’t

there. A gust of wind came from the dark hall and washed through the new exit wound left in the back of his head.

Den blinked one last time, and then fell over.

Stealth > 33

Marksmanship > 12

Shiv emerged from his Umbral Shadowwalker state to observe his handiwork. Two dead for a single bone drill. The shot went straight through the elf's face, but it took the bot's head clean off. Beside him, the Master-Advisor was babbling about how he did everything to the letter, that Shiv could trust him.

"Siggy," Shiv said. "Pick up a weapon." The goblin hesitated. He just stared at her until she complied. She chose one of the three maces the automaton was using, and she nodded at him. "Good. Close the door. If the Master-Advisor moves, beat it to death."

Slowly, the Master-Advisor looked at Siggy, but her eyes remained locked on Shiv. A nice thing about Intimidation: When someone was scared enough of you, they basically turned into a free assistant. Fear was a pretty wonderful tool. And that was why he dropped his Perfect Semblance. He was going to be taking a new identity soon anyway, and when he entered that cell, he intended to brutalize the Inquisitors in both spirit and body for what they were doing.

"I—I can help you get into the cell! It's spell sealed!" Shiv ignored Oldsmith's words as he picked the dead elf off the ground. He regarded the hole in the middle of the corpse's face and simply turned the elf sideways a bit.

The tale has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the violation.

There, Shiv thought as he chuckled to himself. *Practically like you're still alive.*

As he got to the reinforced door Oldsmith was talking about, he regarded the layered mess of shapes and colors flowing in a complex pattern. It looked like something he might see on a teleportation anchor. Maybe if he filled up his Momentum Core, he could eventually blast through, but right now, he felt like using his head a bit more. And a little more finesse. Those were things he needed to improve.

Shiv was ultimately a straightforward guy who liked straightforward solutions. He made a fist and hammered it against the dense, metal door. The active spells repulsed his hand and blared a note of alarm. Shiv prepared himself, holding up the dead elf. But not before sending his bone drill to burst every light nearby. He went invisible, just as the reinforced door cracked open.

“What? What is—” A bald, sneering human stuck his face out. He glared at the corpse. “Den? What is the meaning of this? I told you—”

Shiv’s Biomancy flooded the room. There were five people there. Two were extremely injured—probably Heather and Tran. Two more had no Magical Resistance or Biomancy. The last one felt like a slab of metal to Shiv’s magic. That poor bastard was going to end up suffering the most. But the Inquisitors were *all* going to die.

The Deathless twisted the spines of the two who had no Magical Resistance. Sudden squeals of absolute misery came from inside the interrogation room. The bald man offered one such squeal, and he fell over as Shiv yanked the door open. Not yet done, he tossed the dead elf inside and then exploded the corpse to create some kind of a blood-mist bomb to further obscure his approach.

He identified Heather and Tran bolted to a colorless, gunmetal gray wall on his right. The last of the Inquisitors cursed—but responded. She drew her curved saber—and its material gleamed like Lady Harkness’s rapier. Stellarite, Shiv remembered the composition of the weapon being called.

He stomped toward her, taking his time, the metallic white of his exoskeleton painted over by a thin layer of red. The Inquisitor he faced was armored as well, wearing a full set of emerald green armor—except for the helmet. “Stop!” She snarled, her brown eyes wide with determination—and no small amount of fear. “You don’t know who—”

Shiv launched his bone drill at her. She cursed and *parried* it aside. Shiv blinked as the Inquisitor practically zipped blade-first at his chest after she blocked his attack. Her saber flashed with the glorious brightness of the morning sun. Shiv felt it leave a cut on his bone drill—even with his Adamantine Adaption. And she was fast too—faster than him by far, with his Momentum Core empty.

The tip of her saber pierced his armor—and then it got stuck as bones grew denser, matching both the force and extreme heat. The woman’s eyes widened. Shiv grabbed her by the arm and laughed. “That’s a nice weapon skill. Evolution of Parry?”

She tried pulling herself back, cursing as she strained. Barely an Adept of Physicality, it seemed. A Low Master. A bit like him. Her blade ignited—turning white with how much heat it was releasing. But it didn’t cut any deeper. She was going to need a lot more force and heat to do anything. That, or try an attack he wasn’t adapted to.

“Fine,” Shiv said. “Don’t answer me. I’ll ask you again after I break you.” And then Shiv pulled her off her feet and started slamming her against the walls. Her armor was of damn good quality. Her limb shredded and dislocated. She screamed. The armor didn’t even scratch. He was going to take that after she was dead.

Maybe Uva could use this, he thought.

He dashed the Inquisitor over and over against the wall—until the spell patterns started flickering in places and the metal began to dent. She went limp after the twenty-second swing, and he bounced her head against the walls twice more before he stopped. By this point, the limb he clutched could rotate three hundred and sixty degrees, because the socket didn't exist. Her face was also unrecognizable.

"Adept Toughness too," Shiv grunted. "Should keep your helmet on, then."

She let out a wheeze and twitched.

Grappling Proficiency > 50 (Skill Evolution Imminent)

Might of Mass > 94

Momentum Core > 74

"My legs... I can't feel my legs," the bald Inquisitor moaned. He was trying to crawl out of the room. Shiv walked over and dragged him back in. It was then that he noticed the front of the Inquisitor's legs was opposite to the man's torso. *Looks like I twisted him a bit harder than expected.* The Inquisitor howled with pain. Shiv's Biomancy helped him feel Siggy shiver in fright.

"Bastard! Bastard heathen!" the bald Inquisitor howled as he was tossed beside the other Inquisitor. That one was a pale, raven-maned man wearing a heavy focus crystal helmet. He was the Psychomancer of the group. He had also blacked out from the pain, earning Shiv's disapproval. "You will burn for this! The Auroral Council will know of your deeds! Whatever you do to us, they will punish—punish—"

"Yeah. Sure. But I was already Omenborn so... not much of a threat to me. But we'll talk more about this soon."

Shiv turned away from his three disabled enemies. He was going to question them and Oldsmith some more in this room after this. No sense being wasteful. It also might make for a good temporary base of operations, come to think of it.

Now, it was time for the harder part of the operation: Saving Tran and Heather. He focused his Biomancy field on them and groaned in discomfort. Frankly, he didn't need the field. Both of the Slayers were barely clothed—stripped down to their undergarments. Heather was badly burned. One of her legs was a blackened nub at the knee. She was also running an extreme fever as her body suffered multiple infections at once.

Tran wasn't better. Both of his legs were broken. A crude set of stitches held his chest together, and he was bleeding internally from so many organs that if he wasn't an Adept, he probably would've been long dead already.

“S-stop! Hu-hurts... Please. Just... just kill me. Just kill me.” Tran’s whispered plea made Shiv feel sick. And that sickness turned to burning rage.

“What in the *felling* shit were you people doing?” Shiv snarled. He snatched the bald Inquisitor off the ground and made the man look at his deeds. “Was it your intention to leave your prisoners near death? What was your plan? To have them die during torture? For what?”

The Inquisitor’s face struggled between fear and defiance, but finally, he spat on Shiv’s helmet. “To purify them. Because they turned from the glory of the Aurora. Because they were traitors to the Republic.”

“You’re the ones working with a rogue Necrotech priest!” Shiv shouted.

The Inquisitor sneered. “Working. The fool is just a tool. We are the masters. And we will take this world, for the glory of the Council.”

Shiv stared at the man for a long moment, and realized he was talking to a uniquely *stupid* specimen of humanity. “Fine. Potions. Potions of Regeneration. Where do you keep them?” The Inquisitor spat on Shiv again. “You better start talking. I don’t need all of you alive. I just need to speak to one.” He made the man look at the coughing female Inquisitor. “Talk. Or I’ll go over and count the stomps it takes for her head to come apart.”

The bald Inquisitor hesitated. And then spat again. “Again with the spitting,” Shiv grumbled.

“Our lives are already taken!” The Inquisitor breathed. “Given freely to the Republic and our gods. Do what you will. And it is pointless as well.” The bald man laughed. “We do not use potions. We had a Biomancer as one of our Questioners. But she died earlier today. Caught in the wrong place crossing a bridge—struck down as two monstrous Masters born of this degenerate Abyss tore her apart without even noticing she was there. I saw... I saw...”

And Shiv noticed the sorrow in the bald man’s eyes.

Godsdammit! Shiv raged internally. He knew—he knew there was—he wasn’t thinking during his fight with 811—he didn’t expect—*There are always consequences. Always. The System loves strife. It rewards us for it. But we’re damned by it as well. I should—I need to use more caution. I need to fight more carefully...*

He looked at Tran and Heather and swallowed. Shiv might have just unwittingly killed them.

Slowly, Tran blinked and lifted his head. He looked around the room, saw the carnage, saw the blood, saw the three broken Inquisitors, and the skeletal brute standing across from him. And he coughed. “Well. This is a damn weird dying dream.”

“Not a dream,” Shiv replied, reaching into both Tran and Heather with his Biomancy. He—he wasn’t ready for this. He could maybe close a cut by this point or reconnect a bone, but actual healing for all those wounds and all those organs was—he needed a lot more time to study.

“Are you death?” Tran gasped. “You look like...” He sagged. “Thanks. For hurting them. I—I really wanted someone to hurt them. I started calling out to gods I didn’t believe in. Maybe you were one of them.”

Shiv lifted his helmet and took off his mask. “Come on, Tran. Talking like that’s going to give me an ego problem.”

Tran blinked. A hard feat to accomplish with a swollen eye. “*Shiv?*”

“Yeah.”

“I... how? They... they found your bodies. So many bodies. What... what happened to you? How are you here? And... how the hells are you so godsdamned big?”

“Long story,” Shiv said. He glared at the clamps holding Heather and Tran in place. “But I’m getting you and Heather out.”

Tran laughed sadly. “Don’t think so, kid. I’m—I’ve been a Pathbearer long enough to know I’m good and tainted. These wounds are...”

“I’m a Biomancer,” Shiv said, gritting his teeth. “I can... I can *try*.” And that was all he could do. So close to a Skill Evolution for Biomancy, Shiv needed a miracle. Something from the System that would allow him to keep these two alive without much knowledge of medicine or biology. And so Shiv reached out. He reached deep into their wounds, and—

The bald Inquisitor laughed. “You’re just going to watch them die. I see what you are now! Another traitor come to save his people! But they are lost to—aghghhgh!” His voice trailed off as Shiv turned his Biomancy on the man in a rage. His field remained connected to Heather and Tran, and instinctively, he began *imprinting* their wounds onto the bald Inquisitor.

“No! Stop! The Aurora! The Ascendants will avenge me! They will punish you—” His voice turned into a rising howl of primal torment. His legs turned to burned nubs. His chest ripped open as if he was cut. His organs burst and ruptured, bones breaking in accompaniment. And so consumed by focus, anger, and impotence, and Shiv didn’t notice the System answering his plea.

Skill Evolution: Biomancy (Initiate) > Woundeater (Master)

Woundeater > 52

A swirling vortex of crimson mana exploded out from Shiv as his field practically tripled in size and strength. Spell patterns twisted out of him, turning into twin wyrms of twisting red that dove through Tran and Heather. The wyrms swam. The wyrms ate. The wyrms devoured the bleeding, ruined, and broken parts of the Slayers' bodies. When the wyrms emerged, they twisted and danced around Shiv's outstretched arms, their bodies containing a series of wounds collected and crystallized in mana.

The room was drowned in red. The Inquisitor looked up, and his eyes widened in absolute disbelief. "My... my gods."

Intimidation > 48

And then Shiv cast both wyrms into the man—transferring every wound he just stole into his enemy. The Inquisitor gave a final howl as he was biologically sundered.

A new blossom of blood erupted in the room, drenching Shiv and everyone else. Only then did the Deathless realize what he had done in a rage. He looked at his hands, and he realized his magic had *changed*. A small, twisting wyrm continued circling his damaged arm—his left arm, nibbling away at the harm that had been done to him—but to no avail.

The soul damage still needed time to heal.

Tran and Heather, however...

Heather inhaled sharply as she opened her eyes, her fever dying down. She took in the bloody horror show that was the interrogation room, Shiv looking at his hands, the remains of the dead Inquisitor that just assumed the debt of her injuries, and then at Tran, who was as dumbfounded as she was.

"Well," Shiv said, looking at the Slayers and grinning. "Looks like all that self-mutilation and cancer gave me something useful."

Heather just gawked. "What the *fuck*?"

Share to your friends

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

42 (I) Reunion

Fighting the orcs always leaves you scarred. From weakest to strongest, the damned beasts are surgeons of cruelty. And they're damn smart about it too. They study us, they learn what damages us the most, and they take it to new heights. I served the Lone Star Kingdom for three tours, and all I can say is that every warrior there deserves a medal for manning the trenches year after year against the unceasing orc onslaught.

This part is hard for me to write. Hard because I have to remember what I saw in the orcs' black camps... What they did to the people they captured... My comrades... Torture is a foul thing. Anyone who does it will be tainted by it. Anyone who enjoys it is a monster waiting to be killed. But the former doesn't apply to the orcs. The pain and violence they inflict heals them. It's like their version of food. They're perfectly able to maintain a normal conversation about weather and art as they force you to watch them dissect your friends while they're still alive.

And do not fall for the propaganda! Especially what the Republic puts out. Orcs are not stupid savages. They learn fast. They level faster. They usually end up as incredible mages as well as physical juggernauts. Just a small blessing they're willing to kill each other as much they're willing to kill us. Doesn't take much to get some of them to turn.

But even after the orcs are dead, the wounds remain. On the survivors. Because no one endures that kind of butchery or misery without experiencing wounds within. And even with a good Psychomancer, some of those marks never truly heal...

-Memoirs of a Master-Tier War Mage

42 (I)

Reunion

"Hey, Oldsmith? Is there a kitchen in this place? I'm more than a little pent-up after getting what feels like half a small nation killed, and I want to cook. I *need* to cook."

Shiv's sudden request practically made the automaton slam headfirst into the ceiling in terror. He stood at the doorway of the interrogation room, coated in splattered biomass and drenched in blood. Behind him, the barely-dressed, physically healed, but now extremely disturbed duo that was Heather and Tran gagged at what Shiv had done to the Inquisitors. There wasn't a single patch of the interrogation chamber that was untouched by blood or damage. The remains of the bald Inquisitor now resembled spilled porridge, and his two surviving comrades whimpered and wept from their wounds.

Both Siggys and Oldsmith gawked at the sight of the Deathless. A small, glowing wyrm composed of drifting constellations of spell-shapes orbited his left arm. But more importantly, his helmet and mask were off, leaving his face the only thing unblemished by viscera in that general area. And then there was the *smell*.

Siggy gagged. Oldsmith's legs gave out as he began to pray. "I... oh, Ascendants, oh dear sweet gods, please protect me! Oh, Aurora!"

Shiv frowned and turned to look at the blood-meat sludge that was the bald Inquisitor. He grunted a dark laugh and grinned at Oldsmith. "Yeah. That one was a lot more faithful than you were. Didn't help him much." Shiv stopped to consider something. "Actually, I'm not sure if my new Biomancy Evolution will work on you or most automata for that matter." Shiv hummed. "I got some thinking to do. And that's why I need to cook. So again—before I lose my temper this time—kitchen? Where?"

Intimidation > 49

"N-not here b-b-but I-I-I—" the automaton started clutching his chest. Shiv narrowed his eyes.

"What the hells are you doing?" Shiv asked.

"Core... it's misfiring and sparking..." Oldsmith groaned. "I need a moment."

Shiv reactively pressed his Biomancy into the automaton and chided himself when he realized there was nothing organic to manipulate. *Guess that probably means I can't eat or move wounds on automatons. Hm. Wonder if I can just have the wyrms hold my wounds indefinitely or...*

"Oldsmith," Shiv said. "If you die from the bot equivalent of a heart attack, I'm going to steal your face and pin these murders on you." He was already planning on doing something like that, but Oldsmith didn't need to know all the details beforehand.

Suddenly, the Master-Advisor was feeling much better. "Y-yes, I'm—I have a penthouse! At—at the top of this building. We can... all we need to do is..."

"Wow, you hear that, Tran? Penthouse." Shiv chuckled. Tran stared at Shiv with a traumatized expression as he soothed Heather while she struggled not to throw up. The Deathless winced. "Right. The Psychomancy and interrogation probably did something bad to the both of you. Let's get you guys out of here and then... Well, I guess I could take a look at your mind. I'm an even worse Psychomancer than a Biomancer, though."

That cracked something in Tran. "Well, that sounds pretty good to me considering what you did back there."

Shiv laughed. “You have no idea what it took for me to develop that Skill Evolution.” Shiv paused and then shot the dead, soupy Inquisitor another look. “Actually, it was doing a lot of that. To myself and everyone else.”

Heather lost the fight against her rebelling stomach, but only ended up dry heaving over a puddle of blood. When she was done, she started sobbing quietly, prompting Tran to kneel down and hold her. Shiv just looked at them for an awkward moment.

“Alright, Oldsmith. Let’s go see this penthouse. After I try doing something about all this blood first.” Shiv examined his newly evolved Biomancy—*Woundeater*. He called the blood-colored mana wyrm to his hand and studied it for a moment. It moved and danced to his whims. His standard Biomancy was still there, but this thing was attracted to injuries and physical harm. Shiv looked at the moaning Inquisitors, the Slayers he just rescued, and back at his wyrm. “Well, new friend, I think we’re both going to be eating good real soon.”

It took a while for Shiv to gather all the blood together. As powerful as his Biomancy was now, he still wasn’t any good at the very detailed operations. He accidentally flayed one of the Inquisitors a bit, and thus one of his wyrms got to feed a little earlier than expected. This was when Shiv encountered the first limitation of his new Skill Evolution. The Woundeater wasn’t a feed and forget magical skill, but rather concentrate and carry. The injuries and damages the wyrms consumed became crystallized within them as a new pattern to their overarching spellwork, and that demanded some pretty deep focus from Shiv. New novel chapters are published on

The narrative has been taken without permission. Report any sightings.

As for the penalties of getting distracted—well, the consumed wounds needed to go somewhere, and these wyrms were anchored to Shiv’s mana and soul. This was how Shiv accidentally peeled an entire strip off his own back. Such was the second limitation and consequence of Woundeater: it made Shiv the wielder of wounds, but also the default recipient if he didn’t pass them on to another organic entity. Pair that with the constant mana strain when channeling the Woundeater wyrms, and this was proving to be a very potent magical skill, but also a delicate one.

It was also something that Shiv was going to be constantly experimenting with, since he now had an easy means of casting his injuries at enemies or taking them from allies.

“This is awesome...” Shiv chuckled as he stole another wound from the female Inquisitor he beat down earlier. A wyrm rushed through her face, drawing away a mess of swelling wounds and fractures before diving back into Shiv. He felt most of his teeth shatter, his skull crack and balloon, and his brain throb with explosive agony. After a slight wince, he nodded to himself. “Alright. Three out of ten. But the concussion is

useful. I think I'm going to start memorizing the effects of certain injuries. I think if I can capture a specific state of brain damage—wait, let me try something.”

He pulled one of his old corpses out from his cloak and cast a new spell. A wyrm surfaced from under his skin, swallowing all the damage he just inflicted on himself. A second later, his teeth were back, the inflammation and broken bones were gone, and the brain damage vanished. He cast the injuries into the body and to his delight, he watched the corpse shudder and twitch as it inherited all his wounds.

“Yes!” Shiv cheered, laughing gleefully. “Organic tissue. That’s all we need. I think.” A second later, the wyrm splashed back into him, and he grunted with discomfort. A bit of the concussion had returned. Not all of it, but some, leaving a pain in the back of his skull. Shiv frowned. He used his Biomancy to examine the corpse again and saw, though it sustained some damage to its brain, a few other parts were long-ruined by a lack of oxygen since death. In essence, he couldn’t inflict wounds on something incapable of suffering any additional damage. “So. Availability is an issue too. I guess the next thing is seeing how many wounds can be contained in my wyrms and if they pass through multiple targets at once... But they’re already pretty godsdamned awesome, if I do say so myself. What do you think? Tran? Heather?”

Shiv turned to regard the recently-rescued Slayers with a wide grin. The grin faltered slightly as they offered him slack-jawed, wide-eyed stares. “What?” Shiv said, unsure if he did something wrong. He cast the remaining head trauma still stuck inside him back to the slowly rousing Inquisitor. She gave a sharp cry and blacked out again—more from the shock of him blasting through her broken Magical Resistance. And was another little experiment he conducted. His field was three times wider in area, but a *lot* stronger. Previously, smashing his Biomancy against someone’s Magical Resistance felt like using a chisel to crack through a wall.

Now, he had a proper hammer, and godsdamn was he going to use it. But that roused a different question too: Why Magical Resistance didn’t seem to evolve like the other skills. It just seemed to get stronger...

“What the hells happened to you, Omenborn?” Heather whispered, breaking the silence. She and Tran were both seated on Oldsmith’s couch now, each wrapped in a blanket, wearing a set of overly luxurious but ill-fitting robes “donated” by the automaton. Two untouched cups of steaming tea were placed on the masterfully-carved stone table in front of them. Meanwhile, the two surviving Inquisitors lay shivering on a spread of plastic sheets that Siggy managed to find.

It was a temporary arrangement, but that was okay, because to Shiv, the Inquisitors and Oldsmith were just *temporarily alive*. He would keep them around until he learned everything he needed. After that, Shiv would deal with them for good. Siggy’s fate was still to be determined.

Her compliance was mostly because she was piss-terrified of Shiv, but aside from being a slave runner and a drug dealer, she had been mostly cooperative—even useful during his shoddy attempt at an infiltration. Meanwhile, Oldsmith was sitting on the ground beside the Inquisitors, trembling and muttering pleas and prayers under his breath.

Having someone to contrast your virtues did wonders for how you looked.

“What do you mean, ‘what happened to me?’” Shiv said, frowning at Heather. “I got my Path. That’s what happened. I got killed. Got my Path. Got thrown down into the Abyss. Got killed a bunch more. Ran into some new people that are—” Shiv thought of Valor, the Composer, Uva, and all the others. Even Adam. “Well, let’s just say I like them a lot more than most of you assholes from Blackedge. And now I’m here trying to take this gate, stop a weapon from being delivered, and go save Blackedge. Even if it is filled with assholes like you.”

That left a lot of very details out, but he thought it was good enough for now. He’d give them the full story later. Right now, though... “Siggy! What’s the situation with those potatoes?”

“I-I-I—” a high-pitched series of stammers came from the kitchen. And a pretty good kitchen at that. Oldsmith was understating when it said penthouse. This place was a literal mini-mansion crowning the building. The penthouse’s wardrobe was practically as large as the tiny consulate the Republic had here. And that wasn’t going into the library, the recreation room, the machine-foundry—used by Oldsmith to maintain and improve its chassis. And the kitchen. Practically twenty full meters filled with every appliance and utensil Shiv could want. And a mana freezer and pantry with all sorts of ingredients. Ingredients found in both the Abyss and on the surface.

“I, uh...” Siggy finally managed. Shiv examined her using his Biomancy and sighed. She sliced her hand open again.

He sent a wyrm to handle that. The spine-broken Inquisitor Psychomancer wasn’t going to be using his hands much anyway. The goblin cried out again as the wyrm slipped into the kitchen and rushed back out before splashing into the Inquisitor. He gave a weak cry—and Shiv caught Heather clenching her jaw in what looked like hateful satisfaction.

“If you can’t go fast, do it slow. And clean the food. I’ve tasted enough blood for a day.” Shiv shook his head. “Now I know how Georges feels all the time. Basic things people can’t do right. And then they get too scared and start being stupid too. Still. Assistant chefs really take the load off of the general prep—ah, who am I kidding, I’ll probably have to throw out her potatoes and do it again myself. Can’t put up with terrible work.” He eyed Tran, and the man was still staring at him, unblinking, absolutely stunned.

Shiv sighed. “Alright. Cut that out.”

“What?” Tran said, snapping out of his stupor.

“The “shocked” thing. Is it so hard to accept that I’m a Pathbearer now? Is that it? You can’t imagine the Omenborn finally having a little power? Or are you just dreading the report you’re going to need to give Roland Arrow now?” Yeah, Shiv was still a bit pissed about that.

“No, what—wait, how did you know about that?” Tran asked.

“The Town Lord told me during the Festival of the Eclipse. As he admitted to me that he didn’t want me to take a Path—that he couldn’t let it happen, and that all the times you two showed up, it was to make sure I was still just a Pathless.” Shiv sneered. “And all that time, I thought you were nice because you were from the capital. Not like the other bastards. Guess I hoped a little too much.”

Tran had the decency to look ashamed. Heather, however, had to be *Heather*. “No. This... this is impossible. You can’t be... You can’t be him.”

“I can’t be *Shiv*?”

“Shiv’s an Omenborn—and, and he’s... I saw his bodies. There were so many of them...” She blinked, her wide, purple eyes staring off into someplace distant. “He died. Over and over... But... even if—no one progresses that fast. It’s been... two weeks? Maybe? Two weeks since the attack. You—you’re more than a Master. That one—” Heather swallowed, staring viciously at the badly beaten female Inquisitor. “She tore through us like we were nothing. She killed Glide and Alice like—like she was crushing *bugs*.”

A tear fell from Heather’s right eye as she bit down on her bottom lip. Shiv was surprised. Heather Hawgrave had always seemed aloof and arrogant to him. Uncaring, even. But now she was openly weeping over the death of her teammates. *I guess I don’t really know her that well. Not that she was interested in knowing me either.*

“And you...” Heather whispered. “What you did to her—the way you beat her—who are you? What are you?”

Share to your friends

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

42 (II) Reunion

42 (II)

Reunion

Shiv was getting very tired of this question. “Right now, I’m just someone that really wants to cook. But, honestly, I’m Shiv. Up to you if you want to believe it.” Shiv let out a breath as he considered letting his own grievances go. He failed immediately. He wasn’t that noble. “Also, Heather: Go taint yourself. Really. I’ve never liked you—I never liked the way you treated me like vermin, I never liked the way your stupid hat and armor looked. And I especially find it goofy and stupid how you decided to become an elf.”

She blinked rapidly, as if he lightly slapped her across the face.

“I get that I was an Omenborn,” Shiv muttered, trying to keep his anger from going somewhere unreasonable, “but what the hells did I ever do to you? What did I ever do to earn your scorn? Huh?”

Heather swallowed. Tran was looking worried.

“That wasn’t a rhetorical question, Heather. I want to know. I would like to know. Was there something wrong with me? Or were you just an asshole too?”

Her expression twisted between extreme discomfort and building fear. Shiv scoffed. “Really? Now you’re silent? Is this it? It was easy to look down on me when I was just some Pathless, but now that I beat and broke the woman that butchered you guys, suddenly there aren’t any words.”

“How?” was all Heather managed. “How did you become this powerful?”

“Death,” Shiv answered casually. “I fought. I died. I fought. I died. I fought. I died. My Path demands it. The System rewards it. And I...” Shiv grinned, his expression turning just a bit feral. “I’m really starting to enjoy it. But it also brings up the stress in me, so—*Siggy!* I feel you bleeding again! So, all the gods help me, are you peeling the potatoes, or are they peeling you!”

“I-I-I’m trying,” the goblin cried out in anguish. Shiv sent another wyrm. The Inquisitor Psychomancer wasn’t going to have a hand at this rate.

“You’re the first damned Pathbearer to lose a knife fight to a bunch of potatoes,” Shiv snapped. He took in a breath and let it out. “Broken Moon, I’m starting to understand Georges. Where was I? Oh, yeah. Eat shit, Heather. You too, Tran. But you eat less shit. Just a little less.”

Both Tran and Heather flinched and shrank a bit before him. Shiv wanted to keep going, but with his mask off, he could feel their minds and—*that’s a lot of hurt echoing out from them. The Psychomancer did a number on them... Shit. I might have picked a bad time to vent.*

Shiv grunted. “Drink your tea. It’s getting cold.”

Heather shook her head and swallowed. “If you hate us that much, why did you even save us?”

“Wait,” Tran said, his expression growing confused. “How did you know where we were?”

“I didn’t.” Shiv chuckled. He pointed at Oldsmith—who jerked back in terror at Shiv’s sudden movement. “Bastard-bot here decided to beat a child slave half to death in public. I decided to return the favor, and after fighting the smartest, weirdest orc I’ve ever met...” Shiv paused. “The *only* orc I’ve ever met, I came by to pay him a visit. Also, the gate’s under lockdown, and I plan to murder the Gate Lord and most of the slavers here. You guys I discovered by accident. Along with the world’s stupidest conspiracy. A conspiracy I ran head-on into without knowing.” Shiv eyed Oldsmith. “That’s your fault too.”

The Master-Advisor clutched its face with its remaining arm and began to do the bot equivalent of weeping.

Shiv didn’t like the sound. “Oldsmith. Cry more and I’ll discover how much human flesh I can force into your joints using your friends here.”

The crying stopped, replaced by uncontrollable shaking. Shiv could live with that.

Intimidation > 49

“Holy shit,” Tran muttered, going a little pale himself.

Shiv looked at the Slayers and—after seeing their faces and sensing how traumatized they really were—started feeling bad. “Look. I’m—not exactly sorry. I meant every word. But I wasn’t going to ever let you guys die. Even you, Heather. You’re an asshole, but that doesn’t mean you deserve to be tortured and killed. The same doesn’t go for the Inquisitors, the slavers, or Master-Child-Beater here.”

“I should have never ordered those gloves...” Oldsmith whispered as it slumped tighter into a ball.

“The point is,” Shiv continued, “I was always going to come for you. Always. Because that’s who I am. That’s who I want to be as a Pathbearer. Not some psychotic Omenborn monster that butchers and tortures people for pleasure or to complete some ritual.” Shiv mentally cursed his parents. “I won’t be like them. I won’t be... What are you two looking at?”

Heather and Tran were staring at the Inquisitors with pained expressions on their faces. “Two people who look pretty butchered and tortured,” Heather managed to say. She then sneered viciously. “But they had it coming. They deserve more. And worse for what they did—for what they did!”

A spatial distortion shivered around her. Tran reached out and took her by the arm.
“Heather... Heather—”

“They ripped so deep,” she continued, trying not to sob. “They kept pulling my memories apart and cutting deeper and deeper and I couldn’t stop, and they wouldn’t listen and I—” Tran held her, and for the first time, Heather Hawgrave seemed human to Shiv as she started weeping. Her entire body shook. And then Tran started crying too. Shiv stared at them for a bit longer, coughed, and decided to check up on Siggy in the kitchen. This wasn’t for his eyes. And he was kind of regretting venting his repressed anger on them earlier.

Might not have been the best time... Shit. I’m making a habit of this mistake. I don’t think ahead enough. Valor might have stopped me there. Uva definitely. Felling hells, I’m starting to miss them something bad. Well, her a lot more than him. Even Adam. He’ll probably be happy to see the Slayers, but the other stuff—I better get my wyrms ready to eat a possible heart attack he might have.

Whatever the case, I need to start getting a hold on my anger here too. Weave was practically relaxing, but this place, the slavers, the pointless cruelty, 811, and almost everyone here makes me want to go on a killing spree. But the slaves and weak have paid enough for that recklessness. No. We do this with more control. More focus. I need time to prepare and plan. And also to find the damn Animancy Core...

“Siggy,” Shiv said, resolving to be more mindful and controlled. His resolution died immediately as he did a double-take at the potatoes. *Red* crept in from the corners of his vision as he nearly lost control and beat the goblin to death in a fit of blind rage. “What—you—godsdammned what is this shit you felling shit are you trying...” At this point, Shiv stopped being capable of human speech as he stomped over to squint at the potatoes.

His hands were shaking. His hands were shaking so much, and only the sweet sensation of pulling a goblin apart would cure this affliction. Beside him, Siggy was shaking, sobbing, and backing away.

“Peel... peel the skin... just skin.... Peel.” Shiv managed, his right eye twitching. He picked up a potato—barely one left. Most of it had been carved practically to the core. So much good stuff had been chipped away. “This... this is not peeling. This is... this is... *atrocit*y.”

“I’m sorry—I’m sorry,” the goblin breathed.

Shiv took in a deep breath. Later. He could always kill her later. Slowly, even. *What did Georges do in this situation? How did he, oh... oh right...*

“You... godsdamned... walking *cesspit*,” Shiv forced out between clenched teeth. Siggy flinched as if she was struck. “Give me that knife. Never touch a knife again. Get out of

the kitchen. Forever. Never come back in. If I see you in a kitchen—any kitchen—again in your life—in all the lives to come and across existence—I will return, and I will make the potatoes peel you.”

She chucked the knife on the table while nodding so fast her head blurred. “Okay—please, don’t—okay!”

This novel is published on a different platform. Support the original author by finding the official source.

“Out,” Shiv growled. “Watch them. Listen to what the Slayers tell you. And close the door.”

She practically achieved Master-Tier speed with how fast she fled.

Intimidation > 50 (Skill Evolution Imminent)

Skill Gained: Culinary Berserker (Adept)

And the red-rage burrowed deep into Shiv’s flesh, infusing him with more strength, a single-minded focus, and an insatiable need *to peel and cut and cook until it was done*.

He slapped the mangled potatoes off the cutting board. This... this was his fault too. He should have never entrusted such a sacred duty to a drug-dealing, slave-running, pants-shitting *bastard*. He needed to do this himself. He was the only one that could do this...

“The kitchen...” Shiv snarled. “...will *fear me!* I will be *chef!* I AM THE CHEF! THERE IS NO GOD IN THIS KITCHEN! BUT THERE WILL BE A HELL! THERE WILL BE A MONSTER!”

His primal declaration made the walls shake and doors rattle. Outside, his Biomancy detected Siggy shaking and crying uncontrollably. She deserved worse for what she did.

Shiv gathered new potatoes—knew exactly where they were as he blasted into the pantry. He seized them like a wolf ripping into flesh, and took carrots, spices, peppers, and a jug of water. With each step, his rage radiated out from him, seeping into the kitchen. His rage became *preternatural*. Every ingredient in the kitchen glowed, and all the appliances sneered and taunted him, mocking his skill.

“I’ll show you,” Shiv growled, pulling the chef’s knife Georges gave him from his cloak. He stared down at the potatoes and imagined them to be Confriga, Harkness, 811, and so many others he hated. “I’ll show you all. I’ll teach you true pain. There is no god for you... not *even the System will protect you from me...*”

Strangely, the potatoes began to tremble.

Cooking > 31

Culinary Berserker > 3

Skill Evolution: Intimidation (Initiate) > Dread Aura (Adept)

Dread Aura > 55

When the red mists of absolute fury broke and sense finally returned to Shiv, he found himself and all the others seated before a massive dining table filled with food. Shiv blinked. On the other side of the table, Oldsmith wept mechanically as it inexplicably rammed a chicken drumstick against the vox-slot it had instead of a mouth. It was especially silly because it couldn't actually eat anything. Newest update provided by NovelFire

And then there was also something else. Shiv could *sense* how broken the automaton was—*feel* its terror. It was like a shell inside the bot's being, and it rattled and broke some more as Shiv tentatively reached into Oldsmith. The bot squealed out in terror as its crying intensified. Shiv shivered slightly as he felt a rush of *something* flow around him. It was like a mana field, but not quite—it was far more shapeless, and emanated out from him more like an odor. It also couldn't be directed like a magical skill, but he could strengthen or lessen the aura if he focused enough.

The others at the table were equally petrified. Siggie felt more fear-broken than even Oldsmith. Her hands shook as she fed the paralyzed Inquisitor Psychomancer spoonfuls of diced and seasoned potato. The Inquisitors were next to her, and they weren't much better off. The Psychomancer recited a litany and refused to meet Shiv's gaze. The female Inquisitor he had used to redecorate the interrogation room wall tried to put up a facade of strength as she glared defiantly, but her courage was a fragile thing as well. Even Heather and Tran were partially cracked.

And everyone was eating food. Food Shiv could only very vaguely remember preparing in a fit of all-consuming rage.

"What just happened?" Shiv muttered.

Tran eyed him and swallowed. "You, uh, you made everyone food. And you told us to eat."

"It wasn't actually a choice," Heather whimpered.

Shiv blinked as he counted twelve different dishes on the table.

"I can't eat anymore. Please..." The Inquisitor Psychomancer gave a broken sob.

“Strength, Inquisitor Wilson.” The female Inquisitor swallowed. She looked mostly healed. The other Inquisitor was still paralyzed. “Don’t let this beast know your—”

Shiv glared at her and focused on magnifying his Dread Aura as much as he could. Her words became lodged in her throat as she choked. Her courage burst like a crumbling pillar. She looked away and began eating as fast as she could, foregoing dignity and scarfing things down with her hands.

Shiv blinked. “I... I made you all eat?”

“Yeah,” Tran said, watching Shiv as if he was a mana bomb about to explode. “You, uh, you were in the kitchen for about two hours. You were... pretty mad. And then you came out with dish after dish, and, well... we started having dinner. You *demand*ed we all eat before anything else.”

“I... did?” Shiv said. He rubbed his face. He could barely recall anything. The potatoes were—his hand started shaking. *No! Don’t think of that! Control!* Shiv pushed the memory away, but glared at Siggy. She refused to meet his eye.

“She tried defying you at first,” Heather said, sneering at the female Inquisitor. “She even tried to fight you. But then you took her into the kitchen and there was so much screaming... A while later, she came crawling back out, crying and begging for mercy. There’s, uh, a pile of your bodies in the kitchen now. Most of them are missing ears, eyes, noses...”

Shiv suddenly felt a little sick. He looked at the female Inquisitor. “Did—did I cut you and use the wyrm too—”

She burst into tears as she shoved more food in her mouth. “I’ll eat,” she mumbled through the food. “Just don’t show me the proper peeling method again! I’ll eat!”

Broken Moon, what the hells did I do? Shiv thought, swallowing. “I—I tortured you? I—” He looked at Tran. “Why didn’t you stop me?”

Tran did a double take. “Stop you?”

“Yeah! Just... I was mad. But I didn’t need to do that! I—why didn’t any of you tell me to stop?”

“Shiv, man... I... *tried*,” Tran managed, looking extremely uncomfortable. “I came into the kitchen and... what you were doing to the food and her eyes and... I tried to get you to calm down and...”

“You threatened to *impregnate* him with her wounds,” Heather breathed, shuddering.

"I... did? What?" Shame and horror swelled up inside Shiv. This wasn't... he didn't want... he wasn't thinking. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "All the fighting and things I've seen... I was already beyond pissed. And then I went into the kitchen and saw the potatoes—" Rage exploded inside Shiv as the memories returned to him. He clenched his fist. "Those *godsdamned* potatoes. You!" Siggie fell back, trying to flee. "Stop!" Her courage shattered into dust as she turned to look at him. "I'll never forgive you for what you did to those potatoes. I..."

Shiv took a breath and fought back the red creeping across his vision. "I—I'm sorry. I'm just... Very stressed. I was... I was hoping to vent some of that pressure and rage through cooking." He sighed. "I do feel a lot better now."

Everyone stared at him. "That's... good." Heather nodded. "I'm very glad to hear that."

"Yeah," Tran said, forcing a slight smile on his face. "Yeah... Good. We all need to... to let off some, uh..."

The crippled Psychomancer gagged. And then froze. Shiv narrowed his eyes at the man, and found himself curious. "I heard that cough before... Was there too much salt?"

"No... *no!*" he cried.

Shiv snarled. He flared his Dread Aura, and the Psychomancer's courage was ground to ash. "Don't lie to me! The truth: Too much salt?"

"Yes! It's so strong! Too strong! It's the saltiest thing I ever ate..." He started wheezing.

The Deathless paused. He got up. He walked around the table. Siggie blacked out in terror at his approach. The Inquisitor Psychomancer began to shiver and sob. His female comrade wept as she cursed at Shiv. "Damn you, monster. Look at me, Inquisitor Wilson! I'm here! The Aurora is here! You will be embraced soon!" She reached across the table to take his hand, her own courage on the verge of breaking again.

Shiv reached down. Everyone tensed. And he took a bite of the diced potatoes. "Ugh!" Shiv gagged, and started coughing too. "It's like I'm eating a desert—like I'm eating sand. What—" He thought back to his rage... He didn't use that much salt. At least he didn't remember using that much. So how could... He studied the food and noticed the dishes glimmered with traces of the hateful redness that possessed him earlier. Shiv blinked. *Is this... Culinary Berserker's doing? Is it magnifying the flavors and tastes? What even is Culinary Berserker? What kind of skill is that? It just felt like it was amplifying my rage in the kitchen... amplifying everything... Maybe even the taste.*

Shiv shook his head. "I'm... I'm sorry. My cooking is usually better," he said, a bit stunned. He eyed the Inquisitors staring at him in shock. "That said, you're still finishing this. It might be your last meal, so make it count."

They both started weeping and praying together.

Sighing, Shiv walked back to his seat and shook his head. “What a long, godsdamned day.” And then his eyes fell on the Inquisitors again. And also the Master-Advisor. “And it’s still not over. Tran. Heather. There are few stories we need to hear. And these fine folks are going to tell them to us after they finish their food.”

Shiv leaned in closer and pushed his Dread Aura as hard as he could. “And they’re not going to lie or leave a single detail out.”

He pulled his bloody chef’s knife out of his cloak and slammed it into the table.

The Inquisitor Psychomancer went cross-eyed, and then he promptly passed out.

Dread Aura > 56

Share to your friends

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

43 (I) Fever

The orcs are savage, but do not confuse them to be savages. In my years fighting them, the only consistent weakness of their people has been their overwhelming urge to fight and die. They care nothing for true victory. They care little for each other or an overarching war effort. Their kind cooperates, but they do not ally. Likewise, they butcher each other as much as they do us—and their forces are less an army and more a horde of hyper-intelligent serial killers that simply enjoy the finer aspects of bloodshed.

But this does not leave them without culture. Indeed, the orcs are a curious race. Should you capture one, they will compliment you, they will speak to you, discuss the music and culture they have experienced across all the realms. And should they find an opportunity, they will break free and brutally kill you. But until then, they are perfectly capable of being affable.

Because this is just a matter of passing enjoyment to them. Every orc returns in some fashion—inheriting memories from their previous incarnation. It is not uncommon for orcs to reincarnate over and over, raiding the same world purely for pleasure or obsession. This is also how we have discovered the strangeness of their skills, which is shaped by their bestial nature, but also a mimicry of another’s cultural expression...

And this is the more insidious danger of facing an orc. And of earning one's favor. Because they are imprinted upon by an adversary they find worthy, and, under rare circumstances, an orc may choose you as their "Vaketh-Bakal."

This can be loosely translated as Nemesis-Beloved.

This occurs when their God compels the System to bequeath an "Orcish Attunement" on the Vaketh-Bakal. An attunement which, if nourished further with violence, inflicts a state of ever-building rage and eventually even bestows the Pathbearer an Orcish Skill—one that mirrors a skill the Pathbearer already possesses.

This could be anything, like an Adept-Tier Sword Proficiency Skill, or something not even remotely violence-focused. Whatever the new skill may be, it will, in a sense, be like the orcs themselves. Immense. Heavy. Crushing. But cultured.

The dangerous thing here is how the skill grows and influences the Pathbearer. Minor annoyance is magnified into anger. Rage builds and constantly grows. Then comes the casual urge toward bloodlust, which becomes an itch—a need. Only by going on a prolonged fast from violence can the Pathbearer be cleansed of the influence. That, or in rare cases, mastering their rage, bending the skill to their will, and fusing the Orcish Skill to the original it infests. This creates something that retains the strength of the Orcish Skill while cleansing the constant urge toward brutality.

Failure to do so will eventually end in madness and a new template being formed. From there, a new orc is born in their miserable "Tutorial" dimension, and they take the title of 1...

-To Slay the Warborn: A Primer on Orc Combat

43 (I)

Fever

Skill Evolution: Hypersense (Adept) > Seer of Horizons (Heroic)

Skill Evolution: Toughness (Initiate) > Repulsion Shroud (Adept)

Seer of Horizons > 101

Repulsion Shroud > 51

Hydromancy > 44

Deadeye > 91

Bowslinger > 88

Skybearer's Strength > 56

Tactical Overseer > 77

Wings of the Starhawk > 90

The world returned to Adam as the last fragment of his broken mind snapped back into place. His consciousness came alight as notifications about Skill Evolutions and levels rushed through him. Adam shouted in pain and tried to clutch his head, but he found himself restrained—held in place by dense bands of metal.

Skybearer's Strength was a thing that granted immense aerial agility and gave one the ability to resist the lurching pull of gravity when performing flying maneuvers. It was the result of him attaining Wings of the Starhawk as a Skill Evolution first. But Skybearer's Strength wasn't that great when it came to breaking out of what felt like titanium bands clamped over his body.

"Adept—Adept Adam. Stop struggling. You have not been captured." The voice was firm but calm.

Adam blinked several times as the last of the blurriness shrouding his eyes cleared. Several thick metal restraints were holding him in place. He looked up and saw various Weaveresses, Umbrals, and automata gathered around him. A few of them were Biomancers, he could tell that by the white coats they wore, but there was also Uva and two Weaveresses that bore focus crystal helmets looking down at him. His body felt like a nest of pain and agony. There were patches of his mind that still felt fractured, memories that he couldn't access without severe pain.

"What... what happened?" Adam groaned. He blinked and looked around. White room. Webs holding items and machinery in place. Yeah, this was Cradle. *Broken Moon, back here again... They should get me a permanent room at this rate.*

"Your idiocy came bearing ill consequences," Uva said flatly and coldly. "You distracted the Jealousy and led it on a chase around Compact territory for about fifteen hours with all your clones. Then its Psychomancy field briefly touched your mind, and I almost broke mine trying to stop it from hollowing you out completely. But thankfully and coincidentally, my team and Still Water's Shadow Cell were not near the gate and did not set off a series of explosives, luring it back to its original position, making it assume the gate was under attack."

"Ah," Adam coughed. "Thank you, Sister Uva. And thank the Ascendants none of your people were anywhere near that gate." Her stare was piercing and unblinking. Adam was starting to feel a building sense of discomfort. "I, uh, I suppose I should explain my reasoning."

"Cherished Sister," one of the Biomancers said. "This patient needs—"

“He is fine,” Uva said, her tone hard. “He can rest in a moment. I have things I need to discuss with him.” The Weaveress Biomancer wanted to object, but Uva’s cold glare made her squeak. That glare was promptly turned on Adam, and he suddenly felt very, very vulnerable again. The Jealousy might have torn his mind asunder and was far more powerful than Uva, but with the way she was looking at him... Adam didn’t like his odds of survival. Especially not in his current state.

Then he heard a music note from afar. The Composer was playing again. This song... It played at midnight. Adam tried to focus his Hypersense—but his senses felt alive and *unbound*. Suddenly, his mind cleared more, and he pulled the notifications back.

Skill Evolution: Hypersense (Adept) > Seer of Horizons (Heroic)

Skill Evolution: Toughness (Common) > Repulsion Shroud (Adept)

The Young Lord froze. *Heroic. Even father doesn’t...* “Sweet gods... I must have... I didn’t expect this for months... Years.. ” Uva cocked her head at him briefly, but he narrowed his eyes and focused. A second later, his senses slipped free from his body and began drifting through the air. The feeling was uncanny. The speed at which he could move and the details that were offered to him were overwhelming. In a second, he pierced through the entirety of Cradle, with every sense mapping out the many rooms. There were patches of darkness—places that didn’t give enough detail, but overall, he had an almost perfect picture of the place.

And then he kept going. He drifted through the structure and shot toward the Composer’s Symposium. Along the way, he perceived everything across the vast city in absolute detail—could instantly accelerate toward anything he could hear, see, or smell. And that was when Adam realized the extent of his new skill. It was like a traveling chain for his Awareness. He could instantly lock on anything that could be perceived by sight, sound, or taste. He could immediately cast his Awareness to that position, and from there... he could jump again.

The feeling was absolutely liberating. It was like his senses were unchained from his body—

“Adept Adam,” Uva called again, this time sounding unsure.

Adam paused. His Awareness drifted just over the Composer’s Symposium, and he considered going in, but he decided to respect the goddess’s privacy. It was inappropriate to enter another’s home without being invited. Even if Adam could hear and see practically anything. With this Skill Evolution—to *Heroic* no less—he was practically a Diviner. Well, not really, but functionally. Google search Novel Fire

Support the author by searching for the original publication of this novel.

“Adept Adam,” Uva said, worry evident in her voice now.

Adam recalled his Awareness. His senses shot back to him immediately. He was taken aback when he saw himself. His irises were now a clash of colors, halfway between a rosy, rising dawn and the curving blue of a distant horizon. And it was all because of how hard he strained himself trying to track the Jealousy—planning his flight to evade the damn thing for hours and hours.

He spawned so many clones with the owl's rapier—lured off entire enemy cavalry teams and shot some of them down. It was stupid. It had nearly killed him. But it pushed him like never before.

The System desires strife. And the System rewards true struggle.

Adam blinked as his Awareness settled back in himself. He swallowed and couldn't help but laugh. "It's... It's Hero Adam, now, I'm afraid."

Uva was about to say something else, but at that, she went quiet. "Truly?"

"Truly," Adam breathed. He felt like he was floating. "I thought—I didn't expect this for a few months... No, I didn't expect this at all. I thought I was going to get a Master-Tier Skill Evolution. But this..." He remembered how much sensory detail he fought to process—tracking every single enemy hunting him, cutting through impossible routes and hidden paths to survive just a while longer.

Madness. Absolute madness. And it was rewarded.

"My congratulations," Uva said, briefly astonished.

"Thank you," Adam said. "My... Toughness evolved as well."

"That, I am not surprised about. I had to kill several riders who had you at the end. Each one was trying to twist your limbs off. You actually lost your right arm inside your armor."

Adam blinked. He stared at his right arm and swallowed. "Ah. Well. I... I owe you my life, Sister Uva. I am forever grateful."

She nodded, her face unreadable. "And I am *beyond* furious with you. What part of patience and planning is not taught at your surfacer academy?"

"It is taught, I just decided to ignore it. This once." Adam paused. "Did he make it in?"

"Yes," Uva practically hissed. "He did. And now the gate is closed. Even with slaves and goods piling outside. Intelligence has intercepted reports of an internal state of emergency for the gate. It is under lockdown. We do not know what happened, but there are some assumptions I can make. And most of them... drive me closer and closer to anger and disappointment. What were you thinking?"

“That I had a chance to save my home and I was going to take it,” Adam said honestly. He looked at Uva—really looked at her. Her face was cold and unmoving, but his Awareness was Heroic, and he could practically feel how tightly she was clenching her jaw. She wasn’t lying about being furious, and it didn’t take a genius to figure out why. “The Animancy Core cannot get to Blackedge. I couldn’t allow it. We didn’t have time, and I made a choice—”

“Without consulting anyone else,” Uva cut in.

“Yes,” Adam said, keeping his own rising rage in check. “Because it’s my home. And Shiv’s. I understand this wasn’t a rational thing to do, but I had no choice. The information we got regarding the core’s transport was wrong, and I took the only shot I had to stop it. I had to make sure he made it in.”

“And now, he is inside, and the gate is sealed.” Uva went quiet for a moment. She breathed three times. Deep breaths. “We can only pray the Gate Lord doesn’t take notice of him. Regardless, we don’t know what he faces, or how many Masters there are, or if he has been captured.” A sigh escaped her. “Do you know what a mind mage can do to someone?”

“Shiv’s practically unkillable,” Adam said, doing his best to justify his confidence. “Hells, he probably wants to be killed. I wouldn’t be surprised if he has another Adept or Master skill by the time we find him.”

“Or,” Uva said, almost too quietly. “He could be completely hollow. No more mind. No more Shiv. And Compact could have a Deathless Pathbearer who adapts to whatever killed him. Who gets stronger based on whatever kills him. And then they will use him as a weapon against the other Faiths, and then we might need to kill him for good.”

Adam blinked. “I—”

“Would you like that?” Uva asked. “Would you like to see him dead? Would it please you to finally take revenge on his existence? For the things he never did?”

“No!” Adam shouted. The anger in him spiked. “Never! Never question my honor that way. I am not that kind of person! You can say many things to me, but never accuse me of scheming to do such a thing. Even against someone... someone...”

“You hate?” Uva asked.

Adam closed his eyes. “I don’t bloody know. All I know is he was there, and I had an opening. Shiv... He would understand. He went in willingly.”

“Because he’s practically fearless,” Uva snapped. “Nothing shakes him. Not for long. But that is *not* a good thing. Not always.”

The Young Lord studied her features. “You... I’m sorry. I know you care for him—”

“This is about more than my feelings or relations, Hero Adam—” Adam winced. Mostly at the title. And that was the problem of entering the Heroic Tier—the sheer awkwardness of your title change. Uva continued. “This is about the security and the safety of Weave. If they dig through his memories, think about what they can discover on top of having a human weapon like him. Think about what we have to do if he ‘*somehow escapes*’ and reaches this place. Has he been compromised? Has he been turned? Someone will need to delve into his mind. Someone who isn’t me. And this is the best case.”

She scoffed. “I do. I do care. But I am a Sister of the Arachnae Order, and now my worries are personal, professional, *and* existential.” She let out another breath as her demeanor softened. “I am... I do not know how I might act if Weave was under threat, and I was in your position. I cannot claim to be more steady of heart. But the consequences of this action are bigger than just us.”

“And so will be the consequences if the Animancy Core gets to Blackedge,” Adam replied. “The Republic—if my home falls, we will be at war. I assure you. And I don’t—I don’t think I have the strength to fight any of you.”

At that admission, Uva’s coldness thawed completely. She shook her head and rubbed her face in exhaustion. “Composer. I just—we just didn’t have enough time.”

“Yes.” Adam grimaced. Then paused. “There is another possibility you aren’t considering.”

“What’s that?”

“That Shiv is currently wreaking havoc within the gate and enjoying all the brutal, nasty, tortuous deaths that he wants.”

Uva blinked. “The thought did cross my mind.”

“Then why didn’t you present that as a damned possibility?”

“Because I prefer being cynically surprised than hopeful and disappointed,” Uva deadpanned.

Adam laughed weakly. “Captain Irons would have loved you too. That’s something exactly like what he would say.” Then, Adam felt a shiver in the air and heard— “Ah. Valor. I was hoping we didn’t lose you.”

The skull floated in from the outside, hovering just over Uva’s shoulder. “*Adept—*”

“Hero, now,” Uva corrected.

Valor stared at Adam. *“Truly? Well. Nearly dying at the hands of the Jealousy has done you some good. Apparently Master Shiv has inspired you—and awoken a competitive spirit.”*

“Well, don’t say that yet,” Adam grumbled. “Last thing I want to discover is that he’s a Heroic Pathbearer too, somehow. I... just hope Uva’s worst expectations prove false. In fact...” Adam looked at the Biomancers. “I will endeavor to make them false. Release these restraints. And where is—I need my bow and armor. And rapier.”

“Exalted Guest,” one of the Biomancers called. “You still need more rest...”

“I can rest in the wilderness,” Adam said. “I’m going to put my new Skill Evolutions to use.”

“Compact has expanded their patrols in the area and summoned an army of dimensionals. Still Water has encountered several war demons in the dark. She claims they are lying in wait—prepared to strike at anyone who approaches.”

“That’s fine,” Adam said. “My Seer of Horizons Skill doesn’t need me to be anywhere near the gate. I just need to be in the same realm.”

Uva’s eyes widened slightly. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that if I listen a bit harder and transition a few times, I can project my Awareness into the Composer’s Symposium. Or close enough before I encounter the proper wards.”

“From here?” Uva asked.

“Yes.”

“How fast?”

“Well, you saw how I didn’t react when you were calling me by my name earlier, yes? Well, my senses were actually on a very, very brief walk.”

“That sounds... staggeringly potent. And invasive.” Uva seemed conflicted.

“Worry not, Sister,” Adam said. “I’m not the kind that peers into other people’s privacy. I’m just the one that suffers the unwanted details because the world around me is too loud and too obvious.”

Uva proved very good at hiding her embarrassment. Adam proved to be better at spotting the muscles on her face contracting in a very specific way. She did a thing where she channeled her nervousness or tension by pressing her tongue hard against

the roof of her mouth—and Adam could hear the sound. If he focused, he could project his—*No, absolutely not doing that.*

“Thank you, Hero Adam,” Uva said mentally. He cringed in place.

“I’m sorry. I’m still getting used to it.”

“It’s fine... It’s more than fine...” Her expression then took on a thoughtful quality. “Much more than fine. Do you want to go out hunting alongside me again, Pathbearer-Hero Adam? I think you just gave me an idea.”

He liked that phrasing a lot more. “Adept Sister Uva, there is nothing I would want more in the world.” Adam grinned. “And this time, we might be the ones who get to save Shiv.”

Share to your friends

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

43 (II) Fever

43 (II)

Fever

Dread Aura > 57

The Inquisitors proved to be more knowledgeable than the automaton by far. Apparently, they knew about the attack on Blackedge months in advance. The woman was even the one that reached out and hired the raven and crows that appeared during the festival. It was as Harkness claimed: The ones he fought were rogue New Albion assassins turned freelancers. Apparently, there was a whole network of them across Integrated Earth.

The Inquisitors were operating directly under Inquisitor Szjik back at the capital. Apparently, the notebook Oldsmith gave Shiv earlier was something called a Sync-Letter. That made it one of two books bound to each other, and what he wrote on one page would appear in the other. Apparently, Master-Advisor Oldsmith and Inquisitor Szjik updated each other nightly about what was happening on their side.

City Lord Havel Van Stormhalt, meanwhile, was above both of them on the totem pole, and was apparently second only to the Auroral Council members, one of whom set this whole thing into motion.

The final bit of essential information had to do with the Animancy Core. Presently, the Gate Lord held it within his personal vault. With how much danger the Animancy Core posed to all lesser forms of magic and even the fabric of someone's soul, an agreement was drafted between Oldsmith, Vicar Sullain, Compact, and Lord Scorn for Gate Lord Confriga to hold the weapon for the duration of its presence within the gate before it would be handed back to the Inquisition on the surface.

Apparently, the exchange was scheduled for tonight. Due to Shiv's brawl and subsequent encounter with the Gate Lord, however, that likely wasn't going to happen anymore.

Which was good for Shiv, because it gave him more time to deal with the problem.

Unfortunately, this was where the good news ended for Shiv. Also, in part, because of his fight with the damn orc. 811's final words weren't just some creepy reincarnator's promise, it was also practically a Curse. Except it wasn't entirely detrimental, since it also spiked his Cooking levels. Probably because Culinary Berserker was connected to Cooking. He couldn't level one without affecting the other. Unfortunately, having Culinary Berserker also meant that his original plan of "find a way to kill all the enemies while trying to avoid killing the slaves" was probably going to end with him experiencing mindless bloodlust.

And the only way out is to either not kill for a month—which I don't think I could do if I tried. Confriga's a Heroic-Tier Pathbearer, and there are probably more than a few Masters under him too. I'm not nearly strong enough to fight them all at a non-lethal disadvantage. Well, maybe if it was purely physical, but if someone targeted my mana fields enough or broke my mask and used Psychomancy on me...

Shiv sighed as he considered all the problems ahead of him. *Shit. I felling miss Uva. She could've stopped me from going into that blind rage earlier if she was here. Probably would have stopped me from casually torturing the Inquisitors too.* He looked at his left arm and watched a wyrm drift to and fro. The Necromancy wound was fading slowly, but it was like waiting for an injury to heal naturally while he was Pathless. *And that's what I have to deal with. Need to find a way to fight the Gate Lord without him blowing my head apart with Necromancy.*

That being said, he wasn't alone anymore. Both Tran and Heather were Adepts—and reliable. The former had a lot more experience, and the latter was a Jump Mage. That greatly increased his options. There was also Siggy, who knew this place's underbelly, but... she was mostly doing things because she was afraid of Shiv. Which worked for him, but didn't make her reliable.

The three people from Blackedge sat inside Oldsmith's personal study. Shiv kept a watch over his unmoving Inquisitorial prisoners using his Woundeater mana. After the Psychomancer tried reaching out to his fellow Inquisitor once, Shiv reflexively took all

the man's fingers. That sent a rush of relief through Shiv—but also most definitely made his Orcish Skill worse. This was why he ended up choking the prisoners out.

Even then, it took Tran pulling at him to make him let go of the Psychomancer.

"Well, I won't lie," Heather said, rubbing her eyes. "Things are looking absolutely abysmal right now. But that doesn't mean there's nothing we can do. Or that we can't get out of the gate."

That caught Shiv's attention. "What do you mean? The gate's under lockdown. The paths to the Abyss and the surface are both closed—and I didn't even get to see where the surface's exit gate is."

"Correct," Heather said, a bit of condescension seeping into her tone. "However, locked is the key word here. A gate is a minor world between worlds born from bridging mana. It cannot truly be sealed, because if mana does not pass through, then there is no space between. A bridge must remain connected, after all. This means that given enough time and focus, I *might* be able to activate one of the exits. Maybe."

Stolen novel; please report.

"You can do that?" Shiv said, impressed.

"Maybe," Heather emphasized again. "My Portomancy has evolved into Dimensionality. I'm not that advanced yet, but considering the size of this place... It's bigger than Blackedge, but not by that much. I'd say we're in a Category Eight Gate."

Shiv stared. "Does that mean the gate's Heroic-Tier, or..."

The Jump Mage opened her mouth and clearly almost said something disparaging, but then she seemed to remember Shiv's current temper issues. "No, that's not exactly how it works. Gates output a lot more mana than most Pathbearers. As such, they are rated like mana storms. This is a mid to low gate, I believe. Which means I should be able to slip through. Should. Maybe. With time."

"Nice, Heather," Shiv said, grinning. "Glad I saved the two of you." Both she and Tran eyed Shiv. "It's not the only reason. You want me to apologize for all the torture and butchery I did again?"

"No, no," Tran said, raising his hands. "We know. We're not blaming you. But... It is weird. With it being you. We're not used to... the new you yet."

"I haven't changed," Shiv said. "I'm just bigger, stronger, faster, a little wiser, and I got some kind of Orcish Skill virus that's compelling me to torture and kill people by turning slight annoyance into explosive rage." They kept staring at him. "Alright, yeah, I guess you two have a point."

“You said you had a mask that could disguise you?” Tran asked.

“Yeah,” Shiv said. He pulled out the Mask of False Paths again, handing it to the Adept Slayer. “It’s a bit damaged from when I came in, but it’s also one of the few reasons I got this far.” Shiv frowned. “I’m probably going to go down and kill Oldsmith in a while. I was thinking about beating it to death with a belt, for obvious reasons, but now maybe I should do it quickly. And then I’ll see if I can take its face.”

Tran shook his head. “No. Don’t. That’ll still feed the skill. You’ve done more than enough for me and Heather, so, I think you should leave some of the, uh, liquidation work to us for now.”

“Liquidation?” Shiv asked.

“We’re gonna *fucking* kill these people,” Heather seethed. “That sword-bitch especially. And then the Psychomancer. Slowly.”

Shiv frowned at Tran. “Hey, does the Orcish Skill spread between people?”

A dark look came over the Slayer. “No. But getting mentally tortured after being physically mutilated doesn’t help one’s resentment.”

Shiv nodded slowly. He didn’t know how he felt about this. Aside from being frustrated, because a small part of him really, really, really wanted to experiment on them using his Woundeater and—Shiv froze. “You said the Orcish Skill spreads and multiplies to other skills as well.”

“Yeah, it grows through you,” Tran said. “Why?”

“I think the next skill of mine that might turn is my evolved Biomancy,” Shiv muttered. “I can’t stop thinking about using it on people. It didn’t even occur to me that I was torturing them earlier.”

“Yeah...” Tran nodded. “Orcs, man. They’re a real nightmare. System bless the hard bastards at Lone Star for holding them at bay.” He bumped a fist against his chest in salute. “Anyway. Here’s what I think the plan is now. We kill the prisoners—there’s not much more we’re getting out of them, and I’m not risking anything with Master-Tier Inquisitors. You see if you can take the bot’s identity. Then me and Heather are going to do some scouting when we can. You should... stay here for a while and try to fuse your Orcish Skill with your original skill. I’ll try to think of something else in the meantime.”

“What you want us to do about the goblin?” Heather asked. “Because I think I’m just about mad enough that I can make killing her personal for me, too.”

Shiv considered that and then grunted. “Leave her alive for now. She knows things about this place. Oh, and Heather. When you kill the female Inquisitor, bring me her armor and weapon. There’s someone I want to give it to.”

Heather blinked. “I... kind of wanted to take that off her. Especially since they destroyed my gear.”

Shiv laughed and pulled some of his reserve corpses from his mantle. Both Tran and Heather backpedaled, their expressions shifting into confused terror. Shiv ignored them as he used his Biomancy to start assembling two new sets of armor. “If you need armor, I got some diamond-hard ones—and if you give me some time, I think I can get you two some Master-Tier Adamantine-strength bone armors as well. That can harden in response to all kinds of physical trauma. It’s pretty good. I just need to die a few times more to harvest enough bone for that. I’d give my Adamantine exoskeleton to Uva too, but I want her to have something else in case she’s not comfortable wearing my bones.”

Shiv peeled away the skin and extracted the flesh as he spoke. Nearby, he heard Heather and Tran both gag and look away as two new sets of skeletal armor came into shape. “Here,” Shiv said. “Step in.”

Dread Aura > 58

He frowned. He wasn’t using the aura right then, so why’d it level?

Tran swallowed. “I, uh... W-who’s Uva?” he asked, trying to shift the topic.

“Girlfriend,” Shiv said, a slight grin flashing on his face. It dimmed a second later. “She probably would have kept me from doing some of this stuff.”

Heather’s eyebrow rose. “Huh. You sure were busy the past...”

“Two weeks or so?” Shiv guessed. “Yeah. But me and her went through some stuff together, and, uh, I guess one thing led to another. I hope she’s fine.”

“And you would rather us wear your bones? As armor?” Heather blinked. This chapter is updated by novelfire

“It’s good armor,” Shiv said. “Trust me. Now. Who wants to get fitted first?”

Share to your friends

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

44 (I) Struggle

A Skill Fusion is born of existential and experiential alchemy. There is no universal law to how it is achieved, or techniques to ensure the process, but what is needed is struggle.

Extreme struggle across two skills, at the very least—and with both of them pushed to the breaking point. The fusion will not come with a spike in levels for one skill and the slow progression of another. It cannot be one skill taking the lead while the other languishes. It cannot even be the incremental development of both skills—one after another.

No. There must be a moment where both are driven to the very edge together. At once. Utterly. Completely. Absolutely.

Consider our heroes. Consider one such as Michelle “Skysplitter” Katagiri, who melded Aeromancy, Reflexes, and her Sword Proficiency to achieve the Heroic-Tier Sky Splitting Blade Skill. Such a thing only became possible during the Battle of the Broken Shores as she dueled and repelled Lie Tian Hu, the Storm Titan who reigns over the Vast Atlantic. Or our martyred champion, Jackie Hawgrave—better known as Mad Atlas, who fused his Physicality with his Geomancy and carried the entire city of Delphia away from certain destruction when the Great Midwestern Gate manifested.

The truth is that only skills driven to a breaking point can be merged—as their fragments in your soul coalesce, and are finally seared together through a surge of levels... or better yet, with an ascension of Tiers...

-The Paths of Ascension, Essential Reading at Phoenix Academy of The Yellowstone Republic

44 (I)

Struggle

There were a lot of screams and sounds of violence coming from inside the other room since Heather and Tran went in. Shiv absentmindedly thought about how he would have liked to murder and experiment on the Inquisitors himself, but... He quickly shook his head, frowning. That was the orc skill messing with him.

“I guess I need something to set me off,” Shiv muttered. He spent a few moments thinking back to how fast his rage spiked earlier, how thoughtless some of his actions were. The Orcish Skill didn’t drastically alter his mind that much, it just amplified his aggression and anger to extremes and made committing acts of violence on people feel even more rewarding. Shiv sighed and took a sip of tea. “You know something, Siggy?”

About a few days ago, I was telling my... Well, I can't really call him a friend.... My *responsibility* and mentor, Adam, about how I was harvesting my own bodies. I used them to experiment because I didn't like torturing animals or captives that much."

Shiv stared at the spot just beyond his table. There was a spread of plastic across the ground, and it was stained deep with blood. So much blood. And more than a few severed fingers. He ate and then implanted wounds between himself and the Inquisitors over and over again. It didn't even seem that bad to him at the time, even with Tran and Heather growing more terrified by the second. Shiv was pretty casual about testing his Biomancy on himself, but that was just a pragmatic option. The learning was the pleasurable part.

The blood on the plastic wasn't learning. He didn't need to learn this way. It was like the beginnings of a terrible habit; a foul addiction to violence. Shiv wasn't against fighting. Hells, he kind of loved the adrenaline and the chaotic struggle that came with pitting his skills against a rival Pathbearer. But afterward... Usually he just wanted to cook. That was a place of peace and restoration. A place where he could gain tranquility and find his center.

Be a *pillar*, like Georges called him.

And now the damned Orcish Skill was twisting his sanctuary of peace into a nest of rage and bloodlust. He went into the kitchen twice while Heather and Tran "*finished things out*" with the Inquisitors. The first time, Shiv saw the cutting board and almost charged back out to rip Siggy's head off just to soothe the building earthquake of rage trembling through his muscles. The second time, he made it all the way to the pantry before Culinary Berserker flared up again. He ended up preparing thirteen different styles and flavors of noodles over four hours. By the time he returned, both of his skills had climbed again, but his anger got worse. Worse because he tasted every dish he made, and they were all *shit*.

There wasn't any defending it. There was no avoiding the truth. Every single noodle dish he made over those four hours was absolute trash on a plate. A chef who made that was no chef at all, and deserved to be torn in half. "I'd rip myself in half right now," Shiv muttered, staring morosely into his tea, studying his own miserable reflection in the water, "but that would just end with me draining your vitality. And I don't think you'd like that. It would also probably make everything worse, because only hurting people feels good anymore. Hurting people, breaking things, and making shitty food!"

Shiv snarled as he flung his tea cup against the wall. The cup shattered. The wall cracked from the sheer force of the impact. Both Siggy and Oldsmith flinched nearby, unable to look at him.

What the hells am I becoming, Shiv thought, clenching and unclenching his fists.

Cooking > 35

Culinary Berserker > 6

Dread Aura > 60

A sheen of sweat was building on his forehead. Every few seconds, his thoughts drifted toward experimentation. An unscratchable itch was growing somewhere inside him, and the only way he could calm it was by applying a series of brutal and painful wounds to a certain goblin. Because she had it coming. Right? She was a slaver. She was a drug dealer. She was the enemy.

But Shiv restrained himself. He even restrained himself from breaking Oldsmith—was waiting for Tran or Heather to do that.

Shiv didn't have a problem with killing, but it was usually a matter of necessity or pragmatism. It wasn't something he enjoyed. Hurting people wasn't something he constantly obsessed over—even when he was studying Biomancy. Likewise, the pain and torment he got from the Odes wasn't the thing he enjoyed or fixated on. Rather, it was a price he had to pay to receive the best education, and he paid it without regret or misery.

Now Shiv was pretty miserable. And he was increasingly not himself.

Godsdamned orc, he cursed mentally. When I run into you again, I'm going to... Is there any way to kill the thing for good? Doesn't he just reincarnate? Dammit. Am I going to deal with this asshole forever?

"B-brave Pathbearer," Oldsmith whimpered. "Great, powerful Master Pathbearer. I can see you are a man—no, a *champion*—of immense internal fortitude. I also understand that what you did earlier wasn't something you desired. That—that, despite your grievances a-and the misunderstanding between you and my City Lord, you are a good person. Who resists the darkest impulses. Dark impulses unrighteously foisted upon you by the foul hand of the orcish r-race..."

If you spot this narrative on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

Oldsmith trailed off at this point and broke down into incoherent sputters as Shiv unleashed the full strength of his Dread Aura on it. There wasn't even a conversation, just a cold, hard glare. That was one thing Shiv enjoyed about Dread Aura. It let people understand him pretty well, even when he didn't say anything.

Too bad he couldn't use the aura on himself. That would have been convenient. If Shiv could have scared himself using the Dread Aura or even done something to his mind with Psychomancy... *Could I? I think Uva said something about a Psychomancer learning to control their own minds first. I have a bit of Psychomancy. Maybe I should...*

That consideration died as he considered his initial misadventures with Biomancy—how quickly he gave himself cancer and ended up dead thereafter. That wasn't too big of a deal for the Deathless, but if he broke his mind somehow, or gave himself a thought-cancer he didn't know about, that wouldn't be good. He didn't want to be some undying vegetable or insane person.

Broken Moon, I miss Uva, Shiv moaned internally. And he realized the aggression was spiking another urge in him to the extreme as well. *At the same time, I'm glad she's not here. I don't think she would like to see me. Adam definitely wouldn't. What would Valor say? What would Georges do?*

Wait, I know what Georges would do.

It had been a hard day. Lots of customers. Lots of rushed orders, mistakes, and accidents. Shiv listened to Georges raging behind him, spitting endless curses while rushing from station to station, stopping things from falling apart. Several people hit their breaking point. They just dropped their aprons and left. Shiv thought Georges was going to completely lose it by that point, except the head chef just shrugged in response.

"The world isn't going to be sunshine and happiness all the time," Georges said, hacking at the lettuces like they murdered his family in front of him. *"Terrible felling shit happens all the terrible felling time. The customers are pricks, the people you work with COOK LIKE DICKHEADS, and you're an asshole."* Georges snorted, and then his expression flattened. *"You're an asshole. Because you don't know what it means to walk out."* He looked at the door where the chefs who quit left through. *"You can't quit. Because you know you'll destroy yourself some stupid way if you don't have this. So what's left? What's left is this!"*

He buried his knife in the cutting board. *"Decide. Decide what you shits want to be first, yeah? Decide if you're chefs first, if you like this job, if you want to cook and make something good for all the miserable, inconsiderate, mentally-ruined, mouth-breathing idiots we call our customers, because you are the chef. Because that's who you want to be first and above everything else. Or, you can be your feelings first. You can be every bad day you had. You can be that passing mood that makes you felling quit, knocks you down, keeps you there, and that's your life. It's up to you. World doesn't care, the customers don't care, and I don't care. Better get used to the struggle. Better felling make friends with it. Because the only one that really cares all the time is the System, and it only cares about you suffering until you win. And then it lets you suffer some more."*

Georges somehow managed to finish five different dishes over the course of the rant. Shiv could barely follow what the man was doing. *"So. If you can't take it today, run for the door. I won't dock your pay. Stay, and I'll treat you like shit until you stop being shit. That's my only promise. Get burned. Get bled. Get better. Get harder. Deal with the heat."*

Shiv looked down at his shaking hands in the present, at Siggy and Oldsmith, who he increasingly wanted to kill, and then at Tran and Heather, both looking more haggard than when they went into the room.

The Jump Mage wordlessly dropped the female Inquisitor's armor and sword on the ground. She held up a glittering necklace threaded through three glowing crystals. "I'm keeping this," Heather said, voice hoarse. "It's useful for me. For my Dimensionality. It's like a small teleportation anchor. The bitch used it to keep me and Tran from escaping."

Shiv's first impulse was to tell her no and take the item from her. He didn't like the Jump Mage much, and that dislike was boiling hotter inside him with every passing second, bubbling into loathing. She sneered at him for years when he wanted to learn about being a Pathbearer. She treated him like he was a diseased creature, just like most of the town. Now, he was powerful, and she was far weaker than he was, far slower. He could spite her in any number of ways. Shiv didn't even need to hurt her to make her give him the necklace. Dread Aura was more than enough.

But he didn't. Even when it made the growing itch inside him get even worse.

"Yeah, sure," Shiv grunted, trying to keep an eye on his anger. He walked over and examined the weapon and armor.

Equipment Obtained: [Shroud of the Unyielding Jade]

Tier: Master

Condition: Perfect

Composition: Celestial Jade

Enchantments > Temporal Warding; Spatial Warding; Magical Resistance 110; Self-Mending

Shiv smirked slightly at the armor. His exoskeletons might be able to adapt well to direct physical attacks, but this armor was warded against time, space, and even had Master-Tier Magical Resistance imbued into it. That was probably a lot better for Uva than just his bones. *And frankly, I can add some of my bones to this armor as well. It's self-repairing, and my bones are adaptive.* This text is hosted at novel·fire

He examined the saber next. It gleamed bright, like a rising dawn on a clear day.

Equipment Obtained: [Fragment of Fallen Morning]

Tier: Master

Condition: Perfect

Composition: Stellarite

Enchantments > Self-Mending; Portomancy 55; Binding; Conduit of Dawn

“Conduit of Dawn?” Shiv muttered.

“Yeah,” Tran said, nodding at the sword with undisguised envy. “It basically allows the sword to absorb light—especially sunlight—and then get so hot it practically melts through anything. It also lets the cuts be channeled out as beams.” The Slayer scoffed with disdain. “The equipment of these bastards is *insane*. You could probably buy a good portion of Blackedge with the armor alone.”

“It’s that good?” Shiv blinked.

Tran gave him a stunned look. “You can’t tell?”

“Not really. My armor’s free because I just die and harvest bones from my corpse.” Heather and Tran stared at him like he was a freak. Shiv resisted a shuddering desire to scream that he wasn’t. “I’m basically tough enough that I don’t really need to buy or loot armor from people.” Shiv gave a proud grin as he thought about how durable he was now. “I think it worked out pretty well.”

“So,” Heather breathed. “This entire time you’ve just been...” She gestured at herself and the gleaming skeletal armor Shiv fused around her. “Wearing this?”

“Well, it’s kind of recent. Originally, I just kinda took it, you know?”

“Took it?” Tran blinked.

“The beatings. The deaths. I just dealt with it.” He considered all his encounters and smiled fondly as he thought back to how much difficulty he had against a cave biter or the feral weavers. *Let’s see some of you bastards even tickle me now. Except for the mind mage. I’m going to need the mask for that.*

“I...” Tran was speechless. “What about weapons?” Heather nodded next to him, also curious.

“Well, I started out using the kitchen knife Georges gave me,” Shiv said, pulling out *Halspur’s Perfect-Edged Chef’s Knife*. “It has self-sharpening and self-mending Enchantments, so that was useful. Can be soul-bound, too.”

“And then?” Heather asked.

“Well, I had a spear for a while that let me do Cryomancy, but that broke when I got incinerated with what felt like half the world by a dragon. That was also how I achieved Diamond Shell, actually. And got Foreshadowing.”

“Dragon? You fought a dragon?” Tran breathed, his eyes widening to a ridiculous degree.

“What? No. I just got killed by a dragon. A Dragon-Knight, in fact. A Legendary one. He burned an entire mountain out of existence—ah, it’s a long story.”

“Wait,” Siggy said, her curiosity briefly allowing her to overcome her mortal terror. “Was this Sir Marikos?”

Shiv looked upon the goblin in surprise. “Did you run into him too?”

“What? No! But you met him? The Fortress That Soars? And you survived one of his tantrums?”

“Survived isn’t the word I would use,” Shiv said. “It’s more like I didn’t stay dead.”

Share to your friends

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

44 (II) Struggle

44 (II)

Struggle

Siggy’s jaw dropped. “Holy shit.”

Tran and Heather were flabbergasted. With each exchange, Shiv could feel their *courage* shrinking and growing more brittle in his presence. Part of him liked it. A large part of him wanted to see if he could do some *stuff* to them with his Woundeater, while the tiny bit of control he had let him keep himself in check.

“So... what are you using as a weapon right now?” Heather asked.

Shiv called a bone drill out of his cloak, then shaped it into a few daggers, a sword, and then back to a drill. “Frankly, I mostly just try to stab people with a bone knife, launch bone drills or lances at them, and when things get messier, I usually grab, throw, slam, or punch the problem until it stops moving, or I die. Actually, my Grappling Proficiency is about to get to Adept, so I’m looking forward to seeing what becomes of that.”

“Adept?” Tran repeated. “Wait, what’s your highest weapon skill?”

“Does Grappling Proficiency count?” Shiv asked.

“Uh, sure,” Tran said, though it sounded more like an allowance and less like a fact.

“Then, Grappling Proficiency.” Google search novel_fire

“What the felling hells are your skill levels, Shiv?” Heather breathed. She looked stunned and doubtful at the same time. “You use your own corpse as armor, your Toughness is your highest skill, you don’t have a dedicated weapon or even supporting equipment.”

“I mean, I think I’m doing okay,” Shiv said, clamping one shaking hand over the other as he held back the urge to *make Heather and Tran stop questioning his power by grabbing them and—*

“My Biomancy got a lot more powerful when I saved you two, and my Toughness and Reflexes Skill Evolutions are really good too. I think my Physicality will reach Master soon as well.”

“But you still don’t have any Weapon Skills,” Tran said.

“I thought you said Grappling Proficiency counted?”

“It’s more of a supporting thing.” He looked absolutely astonished. “Shiv... I... do—do you even have a team with you?”

“Sometimes,” Shiv said. “Started out pretty much alone, but I got some people with me back in the Abyss.” And he suddenly realized something he neglected to tell Heather and Tran. “Including Adam! Adam’s been helping me too.”

“Adam? Adam Arrow?” Heather practically hissed. “He’s here? No—in the Abyss?”

“Yeah, the asshole who threw me off Blackedge took him and then got captured by some Weaveresses. I ended up killing said asshole and then stopped the spiders from killing Adam when he held a hospital spider hostage.” It was at this point that Shiv realized he sounded completely insane to the two Slayers. “Look, I’m not having a stroke, you’re just missing some context.”

“A lot,” Heather murmured. “A lot of context. But still... Shiv, you... You’re a *monster*.”

“Heather,” Tran chided.

“No, but he is!” the race-switched elf said, gesturing at Shiv. “I’m not insulting him. He’s literally leveling like a monster would! He’s... Nothing about his skills makes any sense for a non-monster Pathbearer. We develop our technical skills first. We’re naturally

vulnerable, so we wear armor and use Enchantments. He's done almost none of that. Shiv, do you even know what *Sigmund's Law* is?"

Shiv shook his head. "No."

"It's a law regarding Enchantments. Namely, how many can be infused into each Weapon-Tier and the exceptions. You probably haven't read any of the essential texts or looked at any of the primers—do you even have Practical Metabiology to go with your Biomancy?"

"Yeah," Shiv said, trying to mask his violent anger as disgruntlement. "I got that."

Heather nodded. "What's the level?"

"Isn't it rude to ask another Pathbearer this directly?" Shiv replied defensively.

"Is it even Adept?" the Jump Mage pressed.

"It's growing fast," Shiv snapped.

Heather threw up her hands. "He's a *monster*. He's even using his magical skills like a monster would. Just ripping people apart and blasting things instead of building up something like Medicine or Applied Physics first." She caught Shiv's hardening glare and flinched. "I—it's not an insult. People are afraid of monsters for a reason. You're just... built like one, now. It's strange. Dread Aura is also a skill used by monsters."

Suddenly, Shiv realized why Valor made Adam his teacher—most of the academy education was still recent for Adam. All this stuff would have been covered alongside tactics, strategy, and general education. A searing blast of anger swept through Shiv as he gritted his teeth and began to shake. The world turned red, his Dread Aura spiked. Siggy and Oldsmith cried while Heather and Tran began slowly backing away.

If you discover this tale on Amazon, be aware that it has been unlawfully taken from NovelFire. Please report it.

And then, in the middle of that mess, Georges flashed into Shiv's mind. *Get burned. Get bled. Get better. Get harder. Deal with the heat.*

Shiv *struggled*—he endured the heat of violence and rage even as red swelled over his vision, even his blood turned to liquid hate coursing through him. "I am..." he said, through clenched teeth and quick breaths. "*We* are going to save Blackedge. We are going to save Blackedge from the damn snake and whatever *stupid political bullshit* is happening. We are going to save Roland Arrow from whoever wants to kill or capture him. And then *I* am going to *beat the godsdamned shit* out of the Town Lord! In front of the town! In front of Adam! For breaking my entire godsdamned life!"

“Shiv! Shiv. It’s happening again.” Tran said, swallowing as he retreated. “The skill is affecting you—”

“I know, asshole! I felling know it is! And don’t worry! You finally have something to report to the great Republic hero Roland now! Oh no, the Omenborn has a Path! But what were you going to do when I got a Path? Were you planning on killing me? Capturing me and holding me down while some bastard applies a Curse to me? Maybe one of the priests? Or maybe you would just sell me to the Republic Inquisition and have them mold my mind into something *docile*.”

When Shiv next blinked, he found himself clutching Tran by the shoulder with a shaking hand. Heather was pulling at him, trying to get Shiv to let go despite her naked terror. Tran, meanwhile, was absolutely petrified. But most of all, he looked *ashamed*.

Shit! Shit! Shiv thought. The look on Tran’s face cut into him. He was pretty sour and bitter about what Tran did before, but not to this degree. He certainly didn’t want to rip Tran in half as punishment, then implant the eaten wound onto Sigg. If he did that, he might just lose his damned Biomancy to whatever this orc bullshit was too.

And that was the thing that fully tipped the scales for him.

That orc bastard... He’s taking my skills from me! He’s twisting my levels! He’s trying to cage me, to shape me into being him...

Shiv didn’t realize he could get angry at his own anger. He also didn’t realize there was a difference in sensation between his natural anger and the orcish rage. Both spiked his aggression, but one was focused, hard, and pinned to a specific thing. The other was a constant, swelling explosion that grew unendingly.

With a staggering effort, Shiv pulled away from Tran and quelled his Dread Aura. His hands shook, and so he needed to fill them with something. He needed to *fight* something. But there was no one here who could survive that.

“Sorry,” Shiv managed, forcing the word out through gritted teeth, even if he didn’t mean it. “Tran... Do you need a weapon?”

“What?” Tran blinked, his lip trembling, his heart was pumping hard and fast.

“Weapon,” Shiv repeated, gesturing to the Inquisitor’s saber on the ground. “I changed my mind... You don’t have anything on you. And that’s better than even an adamantine bone weapon. I’ll loan you that for now.” The next words, Shiv spoke out of spite against his orcish rage. “And Heather. You can use the armor. But I’ll need it back once we’re out of this gate. Got it?”

The fake-elf Jump Mage just nodded slowly. “I—I need to... Shiv? Are you okay?”

“No,” Shiv whispered. He was losing this fight. He wanted to cook. He wanted to hurt something. He *needed* to hurt something while cooking with his Biomancy.

If I do that, I'll lose another skill! The rage will get worse! I won't be myself! It'll be like surrendering my mind and self.

And there was nothing more disgusting than surrender to Shiv at that moment.

“Watch her,” Shiv croaked to the Slayers as he pointed at Siggy. “Don’t do anything until... until I come out.” He marched toward Oldsmith, and the goblin practically launched herself out of his way when he got close. The automaton fell to its knees, but Shiv picked it off the ground before it could start begging. Then, he started walking to the kitchen with a new and determined purpose.

He was going to start cooking again. He was going to make a good, godsdamned dish like he used to. That, or he would die for good in the attempt. But first, he needed means to trap himself. To make it hard for him to break anything or escape from the kitchen.

It was a good thing he was so much tougher than he was strong right now. And that his flesh and bones adapted to escalating magnitudes of damage. He had the perfect cage for himself. He just needed to die a few times to harvest some bodies, and to have someone he could drain from.

“Please, Master Pathbearer,” Oldsmith wailed, pushing at Shiv with its one remaining arm. “Please!” It reached out to the Slayers.

“You’re already dead,” Shiv told the automaton. “You were dead from the moment you beat that kid. I’m just going to make your death serve something more than pointless cruelty.”

Tran followed after Shiv, but Heather held him back. “Shiv,” he called. “What are you—” His words turned into a yell of pure panic as Shiv opened his own throat with a gesture. “Oh, *oh, shit, oh felling—fuck!*”

Blood splattered down across Shiv’s chest, down his armor, down onto Oldsmith. The automaton was screaming. Shiv was on the verge of complete psychosis. But as he crossed into the kitchen, he chunked the Master-Advisor deeper inside. Then, Shiv started pulling himself apart. He layered the walls and utilities with his skin. Armored the way out with his bones. He came apart faster than he bled out, but even as Shiv disassembled himself, he could feel Culinary Berserker thunder inside him, burrow into his every urge.

He needed to cook. He needed to break. He needed to *war*.

And that was fine with Shiv. But he was going to war against himself. He was going to see where this orc skill began and his own Cooking ended. And in the end, either he would break this rage in the kitchen, or he would die and let his Revenant fade out of existence out of spite against 811 and whatever twisted god created the orcs.

As Shiv gurgled on his own blood, he could feel Tran and Heather frozen in the living room—Siggy huddled in the corner, holding herself as she shivered in terror. The cage he was building in the kitchen wasn't complete, but after a death and a resurrection, it would start getting there. Even so, no one was coming in; Shiv wasn't leaving until he won.

And so there he lay, death fast approaching, Oldsmith as his vitality provider, and a kitchen coming aglow with the colors of his rage.

It was time to get burned. Over and over. It was time to cut himself and die. Over and over. And he would do this as many times it took. Until he made something he could accept. Until the rage no longer stained his food. Until he was his own man again.

Shiv's pillar was shaking. By the end of this, it would either crumble completely, or prove to be unbreakable.

Attention: You have attracted the notice of [The Challenger].

Share to your friends

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

44 (III) Struggle

44 (III)

Struggle

The pantry was empty. So was the mana freezer. So were every condiment pack, bottle, and drink in the kitchen.

Several appliances had been destroyed. A small heap of ruined cutlery lay piled high, surrounded by broken plates, bowls, and shattered glass. Crude bone-adamantine replacements occupied their places on the tables and shelves. Bloody smears painted most corners of the room—left by someone slamming their fists and head against the walls. A dense cage of nigh-unbreakable bone layered the existing architecture, holding any actual devastation at bay.

In the center of the room lay a lifeless automaton. It had been screaming a day ago. It even tried to fight for its life when it felt the last sparks of its vitality slip away. But Master-Advisor Maxwell Oldsmith wasn't a martial Pathbearer. And so, it died as unceremoniously as the slave-child it brutalized two days prior.

When it died, the worst of Shiv's rage truly came on, and he experienced a new kind of suffering.

Two days. That's how long the kitchen had been sealed now. Two days of hell. Two days of torment. Two days of a chef warring against his own madness as he twisted and writhed, trying to contain his rage, driving his natural skill against its twisted counterpart again and again in desperation to make something edible. He didn't know how many things he cooked in those two days. Everything he could. Hundreds of dishes. Hundreds of meals. He tried all of them—and spat the food back out.

At one point, he nearly broke down crying. Instead, Shiv did the much more rational thing of sculpting a crude flesh replica of Georges from his corpses and imagined the man yelling insults at him. Or maybe Shiv had been speaking in his place. He wasn't sure anymore.

“What is this shit? Did you mix shit into these eggs?”

“No, chef!” Shiv shouted, sweat gushing down his face as it contorted in a wrathful, feverish delirium. “I’m just incompetent!”

“Wrong!” flesh-replica Georges snapped. *“You did mix felling shit in the eggs, because your hands are shit! Everything you touch turns to shit! Do you like eating shit, Shiv?”*

“No, chef!”

“Then make it not shit!”

Shiv's hands trembled. He dropped the bowl and plates and clutched his head as they shattered on the floor. He reached out to strangle the fake Georges. He ended up wrapping his arms around the flesh creature and burying his face in its shoulder instead. *“What are you—get off of me, you bloody simple shit! Stop hugging me and get back to cooking!”*

“I don't know...” Shiv's breath was coming fast. “I don't know if I can beat it. The rage doesn't get tired... but I do. I'm so tired...”

“And the dumb-twits that eat at our restaurant don't stop coming either. Day after day, they come in with their bird brains, idiot tongues, and pig stomachs. ‘Oh, it's too hot.’ There are no spices in it, you stupid, fucking idiot! How's it hot? But fine. We take it back. ‘Oh, it's not enough—the dish is too small.’ That's because your stomach is the

Abyss! All the monsters are hiding in there, stealing your food from you because they don't want you to ever be full! Was that easy?"

"But I could control myself, then," Shiv almost sobbed. "I could—"

"You could what? When I found you, you were a feral street rat fighting actual rats for scraps. What did you control then? How good were you when you started?"

"I wasn't..."

"And how many times did I call you a felling idiot? For how long did I tell you to peel the potatoes again and to stop bleeding on the food?"

"Years..."

"Was it easy then? Did you forget? So, it's a little harder now. Aw, an orc gave you a new skill and made your cooking shit—Wrong! It was always shit! Always! That's the default state of the world and life, Shiv: Shit! We're all walking pieces of shit doing stupid shit that barely amounts to shit until finally, the time is right, our preparation comes together, and you, for that brief moment, stop being shit. And it's enough. Are you telling me you can't even make a scrambled egg right?"

Shiv shook. And sniffled. "Just that?"

"You're clearly not good for anything else. Fuck the sauce. Fuck the tomatoes. Fuck the rest. Plain, scrambled egg. Go. I want to see what kind of mess you'll make."

Shiv stumbled away from Georges and did just that. Eggs. Scrambled eggs. It was barely cooking. But it was also the start. He remembered the first egg Georges had him make. He remembered the chef asking him if he knew what scrambled meant, or he had some kind of personal vendetta against eggs.

Remembering the sheer incredulity on Georges's face made Shiv chuckle, even through the red, bubbling rage. "Egg. Scrambled. Plain. Let's do this. Come on."

The mana stove was ruined and smashed, so he resorted to using his own Pyromancy to heat one of the few pans he hadn't ripped in half yet.

"Just eggs," Shiv whispered, his focus threatening to snap. He bit down on his lip and invoked the Song of the Vigilant, bestowed upon him by the Composer. It didn't do anything for the rage, but it helped with his focus. And maybe right now, that would be enough. "Just good enough. I just need you to be good enough."

But that required absolute perfection when Culinary Berserker was in effect. It amplified everything he did in the kitchen. Everything. From cutting to frying to the taste of the flavoring. Everything. So he countered that by being *measured*. By cracking egg after

egg until he didn't simply crush them between his fingers, then stirring egg after egg until they stopped being charred, then turned acceptable, and then, by the end of those two days, he bit down, and a distant memory swept through him with the taste.

It tasted... good. The rightful source is Nov3lFire.net

It was...

"Not shit," the real Georges had said with a grin, then. All those years ago. *"Barely. But not shit. Look at that. Only took you two—"*

"—bloody days," flesh-replica Georges finished, grinning.

Two months. Two days. And Shiv finally made something he could tolerate again. And a feeling rose above the constant rage—a dot of light spreading through the red.

He could still cook. Maybe not well yet, but he could get there again. Even if he was going to be angry forever. He might not be able to beat it, but he could master it. Learn to use it. Work around it. And that was how he felt as he took another bite.

The author's content has been appropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

Then, *two* things inside his soul shattered. Shiv shivered as he felt a jolt of power rush through him.

Culinary Berserker > 50 (Skill Evolution Imminent)

Skill Evolution: Cooking (Initiate) > Tireless Gourmet (Adept)

Tireless Gourmet > 51

Skill Fusion: Culinary Berserker (Adept) - Tireless Gourmet (Adept) > The Chef Unwavering (Master)

The Chef Unwavering > 51

A single tear rolled down Shiv's right cheek. And he laughed. The rage inside him shattered with the breaking and merging of the Orcish Skill. It blended with his Cooking—the two grinding against each other... But it was his Cooking that evolved first. And that was enough. *It wasn't shit. I was enough.*

The pillar endured.

An indescribable rush of cool relief and excitement flooded through Shiv, and he almost collapsed then and there. He did it. The orc taint was broken before it could twist him

further, before it could turn him into a monster. More than that, Shiv had a *Master-Tier* Cooking Skill. Master-Tier. At the previous rate, it would have taken... months? Years?

He almost wanted to thank 811 for this, except the next time he saw 812, he was going to kill the orc immediately. Shiv could endure a lot of pain, but this torture was beyond the flesh. He'd rather get cooked alive in the teleportation anchor again, and that was saying something.

You better not ever let anyone touch my Cooking Skill again, Shiv mentally threatened the System.

This proved to be a mistake.

An Orcish Skill has been broken and reforged.

Attention: You have earned the curiosity of [The Challenger].

The Challenger has Cursed you!

You have earned a new Feat!

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

"What? Oh, great!" Shiv hissed. The damn orc god himself just had to piss on his triumph. "Really?" Shiv looked up at the ceiling, lined in bone and flesh as padding. "Really, System?"

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

Shiv blinked at the Feat—but he couldn't really feel any changes. That was when he remembered a small problem with Feats: there was a capacity.

Feats [1/1]

He Who Rises From Ash Eternal (Unique)

In Reserve

Master of Rage (Master)

“Well, that’s something,” Shiv breathed. It was like the ever-building rage had been harvested from the Culinary Berserker Skill and then shaped into a Feat that Shiv could use. Channeling his anger and the exaggerated effects that he got from Culinary Berserker was much better than just being consumed by it.

“Well,” Shiv said, taking a deep breath and feeling no more particular urge to hurt anyone. He spent a moment thinking about Heather. He still didn’t much like her, but that was fine. Maybe he might taunt her a bit with his power, but he didn’t want to hurt her. And she wasn’t even wrong earlier—he was kind of leveling like a monster. 811 had also said something like that. Shiv didn’t even mind. “Gods, that’s a weight off of me.” He shuddered as he remembered how casually he hurt the Inquisitors. They deserved death, but with what he did to them with the Biomancy and his kitchen knife... Shiv cringed. “Yeah. I think I hate the damn orcs now. All of them.”

Shiv paused and looked around. Flesh-replica Georges was gone. The kitchen was pretty much ruined. Oldsmith was dead. All this adamantine bone, though... “Yeah, maybe I should offer some additional weapons or a shield or something to the Slayers as an apology. And then maybe make myself a few more sets of armor.” Then he paused as he remembered another thing. “Shit, they were in there with the Inquisitors too... I think they tortured the bastards out of revenge. And I was too busy having a psychotic break from my Orcish Skill to really notice.”

Shiv groaned as he rubbed his eyes. “What a felling mess I made.”

He got up and put on his mask. A moment later, he successfully assumed Oldsmith as his Perfect Semblance. It wouldn’t be perfect. He didn’t really know how to walk like a bot, but with the constant anger, frustration, and urge to do violence receding, he could think again.

And he had an idea. One that didn’t require Tran or Heather to even risk themselves that much. In fact, they were all going to meet the Gate Lord to discuss Shiv’s death soon. Shiv grinned as he reached into his cloak and pulled out one of his reserve bodies. Confriga didn’t know about how he couldn’t die, and if Oldsmith and two of his personal bodyguard’s slew the “Aviary spy,” that might just allow the Gate Lord to activate the exits again anyway.

It was a pretty obvious plan once he thought about it. The damn rage really made him less of himself. Gathering all the usable biomass and bone with his Biomancy, Shiv staggered out from the kitchen—only to find Heather sitting on a couch while Tran tied a tourniquet around her left leg, the limb looking mangled. Both of the Slayers looked pretty beat up, and they were still wearing the skeletal armor Shiv made for them.

Heather bit back a scream of pain as Tran called for Siggy. The goblin came running, holding up a half-empty Potion of Regeneration. Which she promptly dropped as she noticed Shiv stepping out of the kitchen, wearing the guise of Oldsmith. While holding

onto one of his old bodies. The Deathless, meanwhile, cast a wyrm out to consume Heather's wounds.

"So," Shiv said, studying the group as he dismissed his Perfect Semblance, revealing his true form. "I managed to make some scrambled eggs, fused a skill, got Cursed, and earned a Feat. What about you guys? You look like you were... *busy*?"

Siggy held up a shaking hand and pointed at Heather. "T-t-trying to run away was her idea!"

"Oh, you little shit," Heather hissed.

"Run away?" Shiv said.

"These two had me take them through the smuggling routes to find the surface exit! She tried opening it back up but ended up alerting half of the guards in the district instead! We barely got out! I-I didn't want to leave you here! You got to trust me!"

"Huh," Shiv said, observing the shameful expression on Tran's face, and the terror on Heather's. More than a bit of annoyance and anger swirled in the pit of his stomach. But Shiv remained decidedly composed. "It's a good thing I managed to fuse that skill, guys. A real good thing."

"We—we weren't—" Tran started to explain.

"Tran, you know what? I don't even care that you were planning on escaping without me." Shiv looked back into the kitchen. He then realized they most definitely heard him screaming, pounding the walls, wrecking the kitchen, and talking to flesh-replica Georges for two days. Now that he thought about it, he actually couldn't blame them *all* that much. "I was getting a bit volatile. Sorry about the, uh, *rage*."

"It—it's okay?" Tran said, sounding sure. "You're really fine now?"

"I *am* mad at you. And disappointed in you for being a bastard-coward who tried to escape without me. But hey, I was already disappointed in you for being a bastard-informant for the Town Lord."

"So," Heather said, the fear bleeding away slowly. "What now?"

Shiv narrowed his eyes at Heather. And applied just a bit of his Dread Aura as he glared. She looked away. Shiv chuckled.

Yeah, I was never that forgiving...

“Now, we return to the actual plan of killing the Gate Lord alongside all his forces, freeing the slaves, securing the Animancy Core, opening the gate back up to the Abyss and the surface, and then getting back to Blackedge.”

Three sets of eyes blinked at him.

“We’re actually going to do that?” Tran asked in disbelief.

“Yeah,” Shiv said, not sure why the man was confused.

“I thought the ‘kill them all’ thing was just the Orcish Skill affecting you.”

“A bit. But they’re still slavers and child-killers, Tran. I wasn’t going to put up with that out of principle. And we need to end the lockdown. Now.” Shiv chuckled one of his old corpses on the ground. “Let’s talk about how you two cowards managed to kill me. Somehow. While protecting your client, Master-Advisor Oldsmith, of course.”

Dread Aura > 61

Share to your friends

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

45 (I) Deception

Rejoice when you are faced with a target that is arrogant or spends far too much time in their own mind. These are easy prey, for if you occupy their attention with something obvious, they will become utterly consumed by what is before them and miss your machinations entirely.

But the bait you prepare is essential in these situations. Hastily prepared lies can backfire on you when dealing with an obsessive thinker, as they will examine things from every angle—and notice inconsistencies or points of illogic.

Hence, give them a good story. Refine it. Give them tangible, hard evidence that will occupy their attention. And then, when their focus is drawn, shape the conditions for the next phase of the operation.

Success builds on success, after all.

-Manipulation and Other Weapons (Essential Reading for Agents of Aviary, New Albion)

Deception

Name: Tanner “Shiv” Lowe

Age: 18

Race: Human

Path:

Deathless

Feats [1/1]: He Who Rises From Ash Eternal (Unique) - Allows the Pathbearer to quickly learn new Skills and advance existing Skills through repeated deaths.

Reserve

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

Skills:

Knife Proficiency 38 (Initiate)

Grappling Proficiency 50 (Initiate)

Stealth 32 (Initiate)

Marksmanship 11 (Common)

Baking 9 (Common)

Striking Proficiency 28 (Initiate)

Barter 10 (Common)

Alchemy 2 (Common)

Acting 11 (Common)

Engineering 1 (Common)

Pyromancy 9 (Initiate)

Spear Proficiency 10 (Initiate)

Parry 41 (Initiate)

Awareness 10 (Initiate)

Disease Resistance 8 (Initiate)

Practical Metabiology 13 (Initiate)

Psychomancy 8 (Initiate)

Might of Mass 94 (Adept)

Foreshadowing 23 (Adept)

Dread Aura 61 (Adept)

Silver Tongue 5 (Adept)

Adamantine Adaption 106 (Master)

Momentum Core 74 (Master)

Woundeater 52 (Master)

The Chef Unwavering 51 (Master) This chapter is updated by novel—fire

Vitality Drain 18 (Legendary)

Revenant 10 (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 as a web and form a Resonant Perimeter.

Curses:

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

Shiv finished re-examining his own status as he waited for the Gate Lord to arrive. Oldsmith's somewhat repaired office was quiet at that moment, aside from the ticking of

a clock and the presence of four Pathbearers standing around a corpse. One of Shiv's corpses.

Then, Shiv let out an exaggerated breath and loudly proclaimed the pride he had for his own growth. "Yeah, you know what, Heather? I don't think I've done too badly for myself. I mean, I might not have gone to a nice academy or even had any actual parents, but achieving four Master-Tier Skills in around two or so weeks is respectable growth, right?"

"Stop, please," Heather moaned. She was finally wearing the Shroud of Unyielding Jade at Shiv's insistence, and her face was turning as green as the armor. "Shiv, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for abandoning you—after you saved us. I'm sorry we tried to escape without you. I'm sorry I was such a bitch to you for all those years. I'm sorry about my existence. So stop telling me about your skills. I'm—I want to throw up."

Shiv nodded, and his Perfect Semblance gave off a series of mechanical noises. That was the annoying thing about pretending to be a bot. Even a humanoid bot. Most organics moved differently from machines, and the way Shiv moved meant his illusory joints and limbs whined every few seconds. Most automata were capable of holding perfectly still. Perfectly. Shiv didn't have that kind of stillness, mainly because he still needed to breathe every now and again.

I might be able to hold my breath for a long time, though, with my current Physicality. But I'll probably just forget and start breathing again. I'll just pretend I got badly damaged. Because I technically did. Secretary Mira will attest to that. She doesn't actually know about what's going on either, so it'll add to the lie.

"Still, Shiv. Two feats. Four Master Skills." Tran shook his head in utter disbelief. "This is beyond monstrous. Even a genius takes... years? Decades to get to Master. Most people get stuck at Adept. I've been an Adept for ten years."

"Ten?" Shiv breathed, blinking. "Really? You have?"

Tran looked borderline offended. "What you're doing isn't really normal. And I mean that about more than the part where you can come back from the dead. Your skill growth is terrifying. And the way you casually mutilate your own body for parts is... Shiv, are you sure you're alright?"

"Yeah. Like I said, Tran, the Orcish Skill has been fused. I don't feel the rage anymore."

Tran winced. "No, not that. Are you traumatized at all? Does dying and getting hurt not bother you?"

Shiv was very tired of having this same conversation with a bunch of different people. "Tran. If getting killed and hurt spiked your skills really fast, would you do it?"

"I... Maybe?" Tran said, sounding genuinely uncertain. "That's just the thing, Shiv. Even if I did have your ability to resurrect, I don't think I would come back after dying just fine. I don't think I would casually open my own throat or... or use my bones for armor." The Slayer looked at the corpse and then back at the actual Shiv—still alive and in disguise. "This doesn't bother you at all? Just using your bodies?"

"No," Shiv said, tone flat and certain. "I get stuff from the bodies. They're pretty useful for a variety of things, and I didn't grow up being wasteful. A wasteful street rat was a dead one. But you know that about me. Better than most."

Help support creative writers by finding and reading their stories on the original site.

Tran bit his lip. The Slayer felt bad about trying to flee and leaving Shiv in the penthouse to work out his issues alone. On a logical level, Shiv could kind of get it. He'd been rapidly devolving into a violent rage monster that neither of the Slayers could stop. His last interaction with Tran before he exiled himself to the kitchen danced on the borders of violence. Pair that with all of them being petrified by his very presence, and yeah, he could see why they took that chance to run.

Not so rationally, they were all cowardly rat bastards, and he would never let them forget that. Shiv eyed the sword that was currently hanging from Tran's hip. "Hey, Tran?"

"Yeah?" Tran said nervously.

"Tell me again why you left the sword and why Heather left the armor when you guys tried to run earlier. I want to laugh again."

Tran looked like he wanted to run himself through with the sword. Heather looked like she wanted to wrestle the sword away from him and do herself in first. "Shiv, come on, man," Tran said.

"Tran. I want to laugh." Shiv's declaration was final.

The Slayer gave a miserable sigh. "We were afraid that since you thought those items were valuable, there might've been a chance of you coming after us at some point if we took them with us. Out of revenge."

"We... also felt bad," Heather added, trying to make their motivations seem more sympathetic.

Shiv laughed. It was the fakest laugh in the world. It was so fake that Shiv briefly worried the System might take away one of his Acting levels in retribution. "Ah. Classic. Another great bit in our relationship. Right next to you spying on me for Roland Arrow. And right after I rescued you two from torture and healed all your wounds! Hahahaha!"

Siggy, who was assigned to guard the door, started laughing with him out of raw sycophancy. Poor idiot didn't even notice he was doing it sarcastically.

"I'm sorry," Tran croaked. The man's expression was one of pure self-loathing and regret. And being able to do that to him and Heather brought Shiv no small amount of joy.

"But that's okay, Tran," Shiv said, sighing. "I *forgive* you. You more than Heather because it was her idea. But I forgive you both because I am just so, so great and powerful. Because it's just what Master Pathbearers do." He sighed again, even deeper this time. "Real Masters. The ones with four Master-Tier Skills. And two Feats." As Shiv watched both Heather, Tran, and even Siggy shudder in absolute disgust, he chuckled genuinely this time.

Ah. I'm still pissed at them, but this is pretty fun...

"But... you can't slot the second Feat yet, right?" Siggy asked.

"Oh, right," Shiv said, remembering that he wanted to ask someone that question earlier. "How the hells does someone get another Feat Slot?"

"Five," Heather breathed. It sounded like every breath she took caused her pain. "Five Master-Tier Skills. Or two Heroic."

"One Legendary-Tier can work too," Tran added. "But I think that was obvious."

"Oh," Shiv said, developing a beaming smile as he looked at his Might of Mass. "Well. Ask me again in about a week or less, Siggy. If you're still alive by then, I might just have two functional Feats."

"Absolute monster," Heather choked.

"Right. And never forget it, Heather." Shiv grinned. Then, the smile vanished from his face as he felt a powerful presence enter the building. A second Biomancy field crashed against his own mana. It was larger than his by a bit, and the nature of the other field felt a little different—like it was more layered than his was, but also weaker on some level. And then Shiv sensed an *armored* presence entering his Biomancy field. Shiv recognized it as the Gate Lord in an instant.

No one else was that impermeable.

I wonder how long it would take me to crack his Magical Resistance with my Woundeaters. Guess I'll have a chance to find out soon, if all goes well. He looked at the others in the office and rolled his shoulders. "Alright, Inquisitors. Confriga is on the way up. And he's got... maybe eight other people with him. One Master Biomancer as well. I expect they'll have a Psychomancer too, but I'll keep an eye on them. It won't be

wise for them to try to scan the mind of an Inquisitor regardless. That'd bring *trouble*. But keep your damn helmets on, even if you're sure nobody saw your faces during your little *mishap*. We don't need one of Confriga's underlings recognizing you."

Heather and Tran grimaced before slotting down their visors. Neither looked overly pleased to play the part of the ones who were torturing them earlier, but they put up with it. Especially since their failed attempt at an escape got them demoted from co-conspirators to minions. Now, the only person beneath them on the totem pole was Siggy, who assumed the vaunted position of expendable henchman.

Speaking of which... "Siggy," Shiv said. The goblin Pathbearer nearly leaped out of her skin. "Go tell Mira to get ready. And make sure she doesn't snort anymore of that stuff. It's bad for her. I felt it in her blood when I came in. We can't be greeting the Gate Lord with a drugged out secretary."

Siggy nodded vigorously. "Yeah, sure, boss. She's just stressed out because... you know."

"Because she was one of the many people I threatened with violence during my orc-tainted rampage?"

"Yeah."

"I still kind of feel bad about that," Shiv said. "I'll leave her some money or something, I guess. Explain things to her if this whole thing works out. Just tell her to get ready and pretend she isn't scared." He grunted. "I still can't believe there aren't any other employees. I thought the reason why there weren't any people here was because of the lockdown I caused keeping them somewhere else. No, I guess this consulate is just running a skeleton crew."

So much of a skeleton crew that Shiv found Mira still trapped in the same rebar binds he left her in after two whole days. Thankfully, even someone with Initiate Physicality could go a few days to a week without water. That didn't mean it was healthy for her.

"Shiv," Heather said. She sounded a bit apprehensive, like she wasn't sure about the question she was going to ask.

"Just spit it out," Shiv replied.

Heather turned slightly to Tran before speaking further. "So. Well. I'm definitely not criticizing your plan, and I'm not saying it'll go bad, but, like, what if this thing goes bad? What if their Psychomancer does try reaching into one of our minds? Or if one of them has Foreshadowing too."

Shiv clenched his teeth. He had not considered that. He probably should have, seeing how he'd run into that exact problem once before already. The automaton assassin

pretending to be a member of the Arachnae Order had the Foreshadowing Skill as well. From what Shiv understood, it was a very rare skill for non-Diviners to have, but Confriga probably had a Diviner in employ. And a small army of other specialized Pathbearers to support him.

Hm. Shit. Such were Shiv's sage thoughts after considering the problem for a few moments. Maybe there's some larger holes in my plan than I thought... But this is a risk either way. I don't think I can avoid a Diviner for very long—I just need a good opening. Maybe something to get this place's exit gates back open and deal with the Animancy Core first. After that, I'll focus on killing Confriga and his elites. That'll be a larger issue. The Gate Lord is pretty damn tough, and Necromancy seems to set me off like a bomb and leave lingering wounds. And he hasn't even used that sword of his. He already hits like a heavy-handed bastard without it, too...

What Shiv required was more information. Or a chance to catch the Gate Lord off guard. Maybe if he could hit the bastard when he was resting or without his armor, there was a better chance. Frankly, Shiv was even considering figuring out how to use the Animancy Core on the Gate Lord—but he didn't have the first clue on how to do that, either. No clue about Animancy, no clue about how this place worked, no clue about much at all, actually.

Confriga was now exiting the elevator. And there were about eight others with him. Shiv coughed. "Tran. Heather. You know I'm mostly making shit up as I go along, right?"

"I kind of got the feeling," Heather replied, sounding more than a little worried. "I still think we should focus on escaping rather than fighting this Gate Lord. There are only three of us against..."

"Siggy, how many people does Confriga have?" Shiv asked.

The goblin blinked twice. "I—I don't know, I was just a merc, man. They don't tell us this type of shit."

Shiv looked at Heather and nodded. "We don't know. We'll find out. One way or another. And really, 'we' should focus on escaping? There's a 'we,' now? And how'd it work out for you last time?"

"Last time, I was—I understand the mechanics of this dimension now. I can probably open it this time. I had to jump us out because the guards came for us. We weren't strong enough to fight them. But you—"

"Will probably end up dead after running into a few groups of magi or a trained Master in a lore I don't understand. I don't have any Magical Resistance, guys. Physical damage I can probably soak all day. With the mask, I can comfortably ignore most mind mages beneath Master. But I'm sure Confriga has more than a few Biomancers under him. Enough to strain my field and pull me apart if some other Master doesn't find a way to

kill me first. When I die, I'll lose my mask's protection, and they'll smash through my meager Psychomancy and make a vegetable of me."

Shiv's summation of events left Heather and Tran silent. "I might be making this stuff up and planning by instinct, but I'm not stupid. Or delusional. Or desperate. I think you and Tran are the latter, Heather. I think you guys want out of here and will take the chance to run the first opportunity you get. I want you to understand that I don't think that's possible until we deal with the Gate Lord somehow. This is the best play I can think of, and I don't trust either of you anymore after what you pulled. Just stating this openly before whatever's about to happen so you can get your heads on straight."

Shiv rolled his neck. Confriga was in the consulate, striding past Mira. At the speed the Gate Lord was going, he didn't even stop to check in with the secretary. Or greet her.

What a dick, Shiv thought.

"But if things go wrong, just run," Shiv said as a final statement. Heather and Tran looked at him. "You're two traumatized Adepts who don't want to be here, and my Momentum Core really doesn't care about collateral damage." Tran swallowed. Heather paled. "Yeah. That's probably appropriate. Now, try to be imposing. Who knows. This might just turn out better than we think."

A few seconds after Shiv finished saying those words, Lesser Marshal Confriga practically smashed through the front door with a small entourage in tow. It was a good thing the room had sound-suppressing wards. Shiv found himself suppressing a smile when he took in the enemy. Eight biological people with Confriga exactly—plus an automaton. Shiv's Woundeater field covered practically the entire building and didn't lack for detail when he focused. A pretty cool Master-Tier Evolution. Pretty good indeed.

"Where is he?" Confriga snarled. "Where is that *vermin spy*!"

Share to your friends

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

- 45 (II) Deception

45 (II) Deception

45 (II)

Deception

“Gate Lord!” Shiv said, doing his best imitation of Oldsmith. The automaton was such a pompous prick in life that it wasn’t hard to get some of the traits down. “I am so very, very glad that you came!” He rose awkwardly from behind his chair and temporary desk, trying to sell the appearance of internal damage. “Can you imagine? After he dared to attack you, he stole a new identity and came after me! Why, if it weren’t for Pathbearer Siggy finally managing to escape from the assassin’s foul clutches and warn my personal bodyguards...” Shiv gestured to the disguised Tran and Heather. “I shudder to imagine the, uh, the—the disaster!”

Shit, I need to learn more words or something, Shiv grumbled internally. My rich jackass vocabulary isn’t large enough.

The Gate Lord ignored Shiv altogether and glared down at the corpse. A few seconds passed as Confriga just glared at the body with his single, black eye. Shiv noted that the Gate Lord had ivory-bright skulls planted against his radiant chestplate where three children once were once impaled. Thing was, these skulls were pretty small too...

Absolute disgust rushed through Shiv, and he fought to hide it. *What is with this psycho and child-murder? Is killing kids part of his Path?* He studied the Gate Lord more carefully, and to his pleasure, noticed parts of the Heroic Pathbearer’s flesh were still burned as well. *Looks like I wasn’t the only one that got a good licking.* The latest_episodes are on the novel fire net

Shifting his attention away from the Town Lord, Shiv took in his entourage’s magical display first and foremost. Most of them seemed to have a uniform degree of Magical Resistance—which made Shiv realize they probably had Enchantments on their armor instead of the actual skill. Most of them wore plates that were similar in design to Confriga’s, but theirs glowed far dimmer, more like a sunset than a solar flare.

Besides the automaton, the eight biological signatures flanking Confriga were of the same race as him as well—all single-eyed, vertically-mouthed, tentacle-headed humanoids with varying tones to their odd, slick skin. While they were clearly all of the same race, their builds differed greatly.

There were two Psychomancers, a dedicated Pyromancer, and the Biomancer who had a far wider and layered mana field compared to his own who he’d sensed earlier, all of whom were of the tall and thin variety, like Confriga. There were also two massive, 811-sized bodyguards who each had two thick, corded whips hanging off their hips, a demon with a prosthetic focus crystal lodged in place of their original eye, a six-armed automaton who was entirely torso aside from the limbs, and someone Shiv had encountered before.

He recognized her immediately. Wearing the guise of the dead merc from Siggy’s search party, he’d passed her as he and the goblin left the long-term storage building, while she went down the way he came alongside a dedicated team of Pyromancer automata.

He also remembered the glimpse Foreshadowing gave him into her history, then. Considering she was brought along by the Gate Lord, Shiv suspected Confriga really didn't know anything about her personal vendetta.

Her armor was the dimmest of all the demons, and Shiv noticed how she didn't seem to carry any weapons. Still, something told him she was armed and more than ready for a fight.

As he studied her, she was glaring back at him. Her bright-red eye gleamed ominously in contrast to her dark-pink skin. Something hardened inside Shiv as her gaze lingered. He could practically feel her gaze burning through him. A second later, her eye flashed once with a spark of mana. He knew she used her Analyze Skill.

Shit. She's definitely suspicious already. Also, I need that skill at some point.

After regarding him a moment longer, one of her head-tentacles twitched, and she began observing the corpse on the ground.

At the center of the room, Confriga still stood over Shiv's body. Shiv couldn't read the Gate Lord's facial expression very well, but the asshole's body language was definitely a rage-tremble people did when they were trying to keep themselves in check. Slowly, Confriga reached down and picked the body up by the face. Shiv applied a series of horrific wounds to the corpse—but mostly left the face spared. That way—

Confriga roared and tightened his hand. After a split second of struggle, Shiv saw channels of force surge through the Gate Lord's clenching arm, and, with a sickening noise, the corpse's Diamond Shelled head came apart. The skull lifted off like a lid from the pressure and shot into the ceiling as everything inside came spraying out everywhere. A jet of viscera hit Shiv's shoulder, and one hit Heather's face and splashed through her visor.

And this was when the first major cracks in Shiv's great deception began to show.

The disguised Jump Mage froze, convulsed for a second, and then began a desperate struggle not to heave. Several of Confriga's entourage eyed her with vague interest, while Shiv wanted to leap over the table to strangle her. If he still had that Orcish Skill, he probably would have.

Godsdammit, Heather, Shiv thought. He needed to lure their attention away from the elite bodyguard who was bothered by a little gore.

"Yes, truly," Shiv began, talking to Confriga as the Gate Lord was focused on squeezing every bit of red out from inside the headless corpse like it was a length of toothpaste. "I felt like doing that as well, Great Hero Confriga. You truly have avenged us—"

The Gate Lord snarled and launched the ruined corpse at Shiv. The sudden explosion of violence took even Shiv by surprise as his old body crashed and folded against him. Diamond was hard, but adaptive adamantine was practically unbreakable in comparison. The already ruined corpse splattered apart against Shiv, but he didn't even stagger.

More accurately, he forgot to stagger. *Oh*. Oldsmith would have staggered—the poor bastard was only an Adept in terms of Physicality, and not even that when it came to Toughness. The difference in Shiv's true skills and the ones used by his Perfect Semblance were so absurd that Confriga stopped mid-step to do a double-take, and the attention of several of the other demonic tentacle-headed bastards snapped to him as well. Especially that of the suspicious one that analyzed him earlier.

Shit,shit, shit, shit, shit, Shiv thought. His mind raced. A second crack had formed in his great deception. A suppressed groan sounded from the side, and Shiv saw Tran sliding down to clutch his right knee. A single step away, a large fragment of the corpse's pelvis lay in a small puddle of blood. *Shit, godsdammit, Tran!* He must have gotten hit by a piece of shrapnel when the corpse broke against Shiv's body. Using his Biomancy, Shiv sensed that Tran's inner leg band-things were pretty sprained from the impact and starting to swell. *Why didn't you level your natural Toughness? Dammit!*

Now, both his "bodyguards" looked like they were on the verge of collapse, "Oldsmith" looked like he was made out of adamantine while resembling an aluminum can, and the Gate Lord was swinging his eye between all three of them.

Shitshitshitshitshit!

"Ah, uh, yes! Good throw, Gate Lord! Truly, your strength is magnificent. You have completely dismantled the miserable cur! So much that even a-a-a... even a *bot* of my... *bod...y model* could withstand the impact."

Confriga went back to staring at Shiv exclusively. His pitch-black eye narrowed slightly. "Did I give you permission to talk to me, Master-Advisor?"

"I—no?" Shiv said, not understanding what the Gate Lord was implying.

"Then why are you talking?" the Gate Lord growled.

Shiv wasn't sure what the hells was happening. "To... offer you details? One must speak to do that, yes?"

The Gate Lord fell silent, but never stopped glaring. "Did you find a spine with this body, *machine*? This—this *fake* body you brought me." And that was the third crack in Shiv's plan. "I faced the assassin. I struck him twice, and it only moved him. He has Master-Tier Toughness. Not Adept. He also *threw* a fake body at me during our encounter! One like this! One that was easy to break and shatter!"

Huh. I didn't really consider that part either, now that he mentions it... Confriga stormed forth with fists balled. Shiv choked back a sigh but rolled his arms as he felt a surge of an adrenaline rush through him. *Well, I wasn't good at this stealth and spy Aviary shit anyway. Alright, asshole, let's pick up where we stopped last time. Best to see if I can kill most of your guys first, though...*

Just as Shiv was preparing to kick the table into the Gate Lord to start off the fight, a voice came from the back of the room. "Lesser Marshal. Wait. Something is wrong!"

The Gate Lord stopped just a step away from Shiv's desk, and both of them turned to face the speaker. It was, to Shiv's immediate dissatisfaction, the damned pink-skinned, red-eyed one. Because of course it would be.

"There is no need, Guardshead Leu," Confriga said, his tone sharp and sibilant. "I noticed the problems as well. I noticed that *this machine* is lying to us. Everything in this room is a lie! These are not *bodyguards*." Confriga sneered at Heather and Tran. "Clearly no bodyguards worthy of you, Master-Advisor. But what was that you said to me before? That you were just a thinker? That your Physicality and Toughness have always been lacking due to your peaceful and diplomatic nature?"

This book's true home is on another platform. Check it out there for the real experience.

The Gate Lord let out a vicious breath. "And yet, you remain unbroken. Unscathed. Even after I flung an Adept-Tier body at you. How *curious*. Is this not curious, Guardshead?"

The female demon bowed slightly. "Indeed, Lesser Marshal. But I fear the situation may be even worse than we feared. For how would they have access to the spy's body?"

"Perhaps the true spy is *right* in front of me," Confriga said.

The second time, Shiv prepared to hit the bastard first.

"That cannot be," Guardshead Leu said.

The second time, Shiv stopped. *What the hells is her game here?*

"Just what are you implying, Guardshead?" Confriga said, impatience seeping into his voice.

"I suspect the Republic is lying to us. But in a different way. This is not the Master-Advisor. That much is obvious. But he is no New Albion spy." She added a scornful laugh to her remark. "Just look upon this scene. Think of it, Lesser Marshal. Would a trained agent of Aviary do any of this? This... poorly thought-out ruse? These bodyguards who are Adepts and no more. This singular body that is in such ruined

condition, but whose wounds do not match what could be delivered by a Stellarite blade. And this imposter, whose acting is so poor even a tadpole could see through it."

Shiv felt both offended and embarrassed by this point. This was his first and only time doing a spy thing, and it turned out a lot harder and more complicated than he expected. Worse, he didn't even have reliable support. Now, he was getting mocked by some squid-head to serve System knows what end she was trying to achieve.

But then he remembered she wanted to kill Confriga. And where inexperience failed him, his intuition picked up.

Okay. We're not good at the whole planning thing yet. Time to go back to what works for me: Instinct and making more shit up as I do it.

"Godsdammit," Shiv said, holding up his hands. He didn't exactly know where he was going with this, but anything to confuse the squids more was a win in his book. "You got me. Fine. I'm not Master-Advisor Oldsmith."

Confriga went still before turning to glare at him. "Then, who are you?"

"I'm... a *body-double*, dumbass."

The insult made Confriga stomp forward. Shiv smashed his own table in half before the bastard could toss it out of the way. Splinters shattered and bounced off both of them. The Gate Lord towered over Shiv, but the Deathless just sneered. Compared to 811, this bastard was *tiny*.

"Insult me again," Confriga growled.

"If you insist, asshole. But the Republic doesn't pay me to talk shop to felling squids, so let's start dealing in the truth, yeah?"

Silver Tongue > 6

"The truth?" Confriga said, his voice high with outraged disbelief. "That you are the spy?"

"He is not," Guardshead Leu said. Confriga turned towards her, and she continued. "No spy of Aviary would allow this to happen. This one is..."

"I'm here to make sure the Master-Advisor stays alive, the Inquisition stays happy, and you stay ignorant. Well. So much for the last part." Shiv was just trying to go with what Leu was doing. She seemed to be making a way out for him, and right now he would take it. Not that he still didn't have half-a-heart that wanted to finish his fight with Confriga right here, right now. But if a fight did start, he didn't think he could keep Tran

or Heather alive. Definitely not Siggy. Confriga was a Heroic Pathbearer. Shiv guessed the others were all Masters.

This would end with more than a few deaths. A good portion of them probably Shiv's own.

"What is your game?" Confriga hissed at Shiv. "What is the point of this deception?"

Shiv thought about it for a moment. And decided to go for a modified version of the truth. "Because the New Albion rat was going for the core, you dipshit. He was trying to steal *our* core."

And suddenly, something in Confriga's posture changed. He took a step back, the air of hostility replaced by confusion, and... was that tension? "What? And how does he know?"

"Do you think I would know that? Why do you think the Inquisition had Master-Advisor pompous prick moved out and me put in? Because some Aviary face-taker is in the area, and they needed a harder target. Someone that could actually put the bastard down." Confriga wanted to keep talking, but Shiv spiked his Dread Aura. Cracking his aura against Confriga felt like running into a steel wall as a mortal, but even if the Gate Lord wasn't scared whatsoever, he was briefly stunned. "And before you flap that ugly head of yours, no. We weren't going to tell you. Because this is your fault."

"My fault? My fault!" the Gate Lord snarled.

"Yeah. You let him in. You were supposed to keep this place secure. But hey, considering how fast your security responded to his little brawl, I don't know what I expected."

"Silence!" Confriga roared. "You will not demean me."

"And you will stay out of the Republic's way while we finish this thing off. You'll take the body, announce the gate lockdown's over, and you'll give the core to me."

"Impossible." Confriga let out a laugh. "You... you have already greeted me with one flimsy deception. And you expect me to simply offer you my trust? My *submission*?"

Shiv got the sense that he might end up in a fight with this guy anyway, no matter what he said.

And then, once again, Leu stepped in. "I have a solution, Lesser Marshal. The Republic has breached our trust and broken the contract. We are no longer dealing with the Master-Advisor, but forces from the Inquisition itself. As such, this one is not protected. But we can still make use of him."

Confriga's rageful stare never left Shiv, but he replied to Leu all the same. "What do you have in mind, Guardshead?"

"Leave me with them. I will discuss the price of their infraction. They must pay greatly for offending the honor of those who signed the contract. Your's. Compact's. And Lord Scorn's. But now we also know what the agent wants: The core."

The Gate Lord let out a growl. "Indeed. Wise, Guardshead. Who knows what we might obtain through *interrogation*."

"Interrogation best handled by a colder, lesser heart," Leu said. "You stand righteous and offended, Lesser Marshal. You would be right to strike these deceivers dead, but I beg of you to grant me the pleasure of extracting results and delivering pain. They know more than they reveal—and I suspect that, since they have the agent's body, they experienced an encounter but failed to slay or seize the true agent. And we all know how desperate Vicar Sullain is to finish his retributive war. Thus, this one must have come up with the plan to use a decoy they obtained from the assassin—like in similar circumstances to the one the assassin used on you, Lesser Marshal—to deceive us and bid us to open the path and hand over the core."

She turned her glowing, red eye on Shiv. "Tell me, *double*, do I speak true?"

Shiv regarded her for a moment. He wasn't sure if he wanted to kill her first if a fight broke out or give her a big hug for handing him a ladder out of this spy mess. He held up his hands. "You got me. Was it that obvious?"

Acting > 12

"The deception? Yes. But the other details are mostly guesswork," Leu said. "I suspect you will have a good deal more to tell. Cooperate, and the penalty will only be financial."

"Fine. The core's the thing that matters. No expense spared." Shiv chuckled bitterly, trying to sound like some of the veteran soldiers that ate at the Swan-Eating Toad. "What the top says, goes, right?"

Confriga considered the situation for a moment. "I will not forget what the Republic has done to me today. When the true Master-Advisor returns, tell him this consulate will be *demolished*. Your people may infest a different gate than mine."

"Yeah, looking forward to forgetting you soon too," Shiv said.

"You—" Confriga whirled. But Leu was already headed for Shiv, both arms clasped behind her back. The Gate Lord let out a vicious snort. "Make them understand their folly, Guardshead. That is an order."

"It will be done, Lesser Marshal," she said.

Confriga shot a final look at Shiv before twisting on his heels and commanding the rest of the group to follow with a snap. The Psychomancer stared at Siggy—who had stayed remarkably quiet during the entire conversation—for a moment before calling out to Leu. “Guardshhead, should we—”

“I will see them delivered to you soon after, Truthseer Huview. I wish to uncover what I can through gentler means first, so that you may conduct your work with higher efficiency.”

The Psychomancer’s head-tentacles curled as he bowed. He left the room alongside Confriga and the rest of the entourage. Now. The only one of their number left was Leu, and Shiv wasn’t sure if he was out of the frying pan or into the fire. The Guardshhead walked over to close the door, which thankfully hadn’t been blown entirely off its hinges when Confriga entered, so the wardings should still be in effect. He kept an eye on the others in the meantime, using his Biomancy to track their progress. If Confriga wanted, he could probably tear through the entire building in an instant and get back to Shiv. The bastard had the temper for it, too.

Need to watch that one. Don’t want to get ambushed by someone that hits that hard. But first... what’s her deal.

Shiv folded his arms and regarded Leu. “So. How do you intend to extract results and deliver pain?”

She just stared at him. “I have a question first: Are you genuinely stupid or just incompetent?”

“What?”

“Because only a fool would believe the second story you made up on the spot. A fool like Confriga. Truly. A *body-double*. A conspiracy to combat a conspiracy?”

Shiv stared at her. “It... How do you know that’s not true?”

“Because the Inquisition would still make sure a proper body-double is supplied by adequate guards.” She eyed Heather and Tran. “There are still many, *many* parts that don’t fit. And you are *greatly* fortunate that I was here.”

“Right.” Shiv nodded, becoming annoyed with this condescension. “Listen, I’ll be honest with you if you’ll be honest with me.”

She laughed. “You assume you hold any position of power here. Why should I give you anything?”

“Just to satisfy my curiosity,” Shiv said. “I want to know: How does it feel to work for someone who butchered your brother in front of you?”

Every last bit of confidence vanished from Leu's posture. She staggered as if struck, and her eye widened. "I... You... How..."

"So. Can we be honest? Because I'm actually curious."

Silver Tongue > 7

Share to your friends

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

46 (I) Allies

Not all demons and dimensionals are hostile. Do not make that mistake. Do not do something stupid and attack them preemptively. Do not! For original chapters go to novel~fire~net

There is a book I have with me. On the cover, the title "Names of Dumbshits Who Died Dumbshit Deaths" is carved. I got this book from an old veteran, and some new kid will probably get the book from me someday. It's not something used to mock the dead, though. It's about what dumbshit thing they did, and why they did it.

For example, the first Master-Tier Pathbearer I served under was a glory-seeking jackass called Haven Summers. She thought she was the greatest godsdamned Aeromancer in the world and loved dropping storms on people. It was practically her only strategy. Thing is, most people don't handle getting hit by a storm very well, so it worked pretty well for her.

And then came the day we found ourselves trying to seal a gate connected to the Evergrave.

*Slight tangent: The Fae might look like and be related to all the elves that found their way over to our world, but they are **not** elves and they really, **really** do not like us. Fortunately, they also find the idea of butchering us to be abhorrent, since most of us don't just pop back into existence after getting destroyed.*

Connecting this back to the main bit: It takes a lot to get the Fae to kill you. Dropping a storm on someone is a felling lot.

There wasn't even an attempt at a dialogue on Summers's part. We got the gate's core. A Fae team was already there. We saw them. They saw us. They tried to talk to us. And then Summers launched a storm at them and commanded us to attack.

Second problem: Being a Master makes you better than most people. It does not make you the biggest fish in any pond by far. Summers learned that the hard way when one of the Fae parried the storm back into her. And the Fae Pathbearer, being Fae and reluctant to kill a human, showed Summers her version of mercy by “shield-bashing” the shape of her mind. Summers lives on soup and thinks she’s twelve these days. Her family spent a fortune trying to get the best mind mages to fix her, but nothing’s really worked, last I heard. My guess is that you’ll have to get a Fae to fix what they broke, but honestly, good luck getting those capricious lunatics to do anything.

But back to the point—don’t just attack any dimensional, demon, or unknown you can find, because after the Fae beat the perpetual childhood back into Summer, she felt bad and decided to just give us the core as an apology, on the condition we invite her to dinner and play her a song. The rations we had with us were shit. None of us could carry a tune. But the Fae loved it.

And that was how I got my first Blessing.

-Memoirs of a Master-Tier War Mage

46 (I)

Allies

What remained of Guardshead Leu’s arrogance vanished, and in its place, anger emerged. That was a good benefit Shiv’s Dread Aura offered. It didn’t just allow him to magnify and strike other people’s courage, but also gave him a guess as to how scared they were at baseline.

Right then, Leu was terrified. But her terror was a different kind compared to Siggy, Tran, or Heather’s. Her terror was something that pushed outward, like a cornered snake driven to bite and fight. It fed her anger and fury; provoked her to action. Leu moved fast—about as fast as Shiv with an empty Momentum Core. Her stance shifted, and the air began to swirl fast around her as she clutched at something initially unseen. As Shiv narrowed his eyes, he caught sight of something—an outline revealed in the light. She was holding a near-invisible blade.

Awareness > 11

No wonder I felt something was off. She was armed. Just couldn’t see it. That’s a useful Enchantment. Or skill. Hmm. Come to think of it, I should push my Stealth harder. Absolute invisibility will be great for me. I might not be the best at spy crap, but after my little misadventure in the storage, I can still get pretty far with misdirection and ambushes.

“Who are you?” Leu said, her voice a low growl. “How can you know?”

"I ask you to speak with me honestly and your response is to draw a weapon?" Shiv asked, slightly annoyed.

"I wear divination-blocking Enchantments on me at all times. So, how? How do you know?"

Shiv paused. If that was true, why did he know? He wasn't sure exactly, but he had a guess. "Because the System demands strife. It might want you to kill Confriga because that'll be a nice moment of bloodshed and violence. And it let me have a glance because I might not be an active detriment against your plan. Maybe your counter-divination Enchantments only apply to people who don't want you to succeed."

She hesitated. By this point, the other three Pathbearers in the room were reacting in different ways. Siggy was terrified and stuck between staying and escaping; Tran had his saber drawn, its edge gleaming like a rising star; Heather was preparing to shape a spell and get everyone out of there.

Shiv, though, was curious. He was fascinated and wanted to see where this opportunity led. His plan might have ended in utter disaster, but it seemed the world wanted him to keep playing this subtle game for a while longer.

After a moment's consideration, he dropped his Perfect Semblance. Leu's grip on her blade grew visibly tighter as his true visage was unveiled. Shiv decided to keep both his helmet and mask on. Because he didn't need mind-blowing surprises. Confriga was still in the process of leaving the building, and Leu thought she had all the variables under her control to assume an aggressive posture.

Dread Aura > 62

"My name is Shiv," he began. "Part of what I said wasn't a lie. I am looking for the Animancy Core. That's one of the main reasons why I entered the gate. The second is the fact that I need to get to the surface, and this is the fastest way. The third is slavery and bastards offend me, so I intend to take this place or die trying." Shiv chuckled. "In fact, I look forward to *dying* a lot more in the attempt."

He still couldn't read the demon's features very well, but something about how wide her eye was getting made her seem flabbergasted. "Who... Are you a Necrotech? One of the Undying Masters who have split their souls? You're here to deal with Vicar Sullain, are you?"

NovelFire is the home of this novel. Visit there to read the original and support the author.

"Right on the last one," Shiv said, grinning under his helmet. "Who I am... is a chef. And I'm technically from the Republic. But I like to think of myself as my own man."

"Do not mock me," Leu hissed, the swirling whirlwind around her blade building to the level of a small typhoon. Heather's spell broke as she got flung into a bookshelf. Tran cursed as his wounded knee gave out, and he held himself in place using his saber. Siggy was already sailing through the air, dragged along the walls.

Shiv just stared at Leu with his arms folded. He could feel the winds pulling on him hard, but he defied them with Might of Mass. "I'm not. Stop throwing a tantrum, I actually want to talk. But if you want to fight... Well, I guess your Reflexes are probably Master or close. Aeromancy is at least Adept—maybe a Fusion Skill with your invisible weapon. But how's your Toughness? Or your Physicality? I think your armor's Magical Resistance will keep you protected from my Biomancy for a few hits, but what you have on is pretty fragile compared to Confriga's actual skill. We can fight. But I like my odds. How about you?"

With each word he spoke, his Dread Aura Skill ground tighter and tighter around her will. Leu's muscles tightened for a moment. He thought she was going to attack purely out of instinct. And then, without preamble, she released the winds and released her weapon. Shiv frowned. It was probably floating in the air someplace he couldn't see. *Would be really useful if Adam was here.*

Tran grunted as he rose to his feet. Siggy fell on Heather with a yelp as the latter was trying to rise using the bookshelf. Loose debris, books, and other scattered items littered all over the ground.

"Are you moving your invisible weapon behind me?" Shiv asked, mostly on a hunch. Leu went stiff.

Her eye narrowed. "How potent is your Foreshadowing?"

Shiv laughed. "Just Adept. Actually. Try running me through. It'll break some tension." She stared at him like he was insane. "I'm serious. Mostly because I don't think you can do it. I don't think your weapon has the capability to even chip me."

"Are you mad?"

"No. Just curious. Come on. Do it."

"No. I refuse. You—what are you trying to do?"

"Is that the weapon you planned to use on Confriga? If you can't pierce me, what's it going to do to him? He's at least Master-Tier in terms of Toughness with his armor. It'll be pretty sad if you got the chance to avenge your hatch-brother or whatever and your little invisible blade just bounces off of him. How's it going to feel then?"

Leu stared at him for a beat. And then she made a dragging gesture, and Shiv felt something slam into them—striking perfectly at his lower back. A blast of wind tore the

remains of Oldsmith's painting behind him apart. What felt like a constantly accelerating javelin ground against his Adamantine Adaption. To his surprise, the tip of the weapon actually sank a good inch in before his armor adapted and stopped it dead. That would've opened his flesh at least.

Across from him, wind and lightning flashed as flickering *invisible* spells pulsed between Leu's hands.

Shiv couldn't help it. He laughed. "Invisible spells too? You must be pretty tricky."

She hissed, straining with effort. "Why are you—what kind of Evolution do you even have? Is your Toughness Heroic?"

"No. Just Adamantine Adaption." Shiv didn't know if it was wise telling her, but he was enjoying her reaction too much not to get another rise from her.

"Why do you have a Master-Tier Skill Evolution meant for monsters?" Leu stopped driving her unseen javelin against him at the same time as she took a step back, and the winds in the room immediately died. She was still holding quite well, but she felt less than half as confident as when this conversation started.

And Shiv was a bit embarrassed to admit it, but he kind of enjoyed intimidating people. The stunned and fearful reactions sent a rush of amusement through him each time. "Maybe because I am a monster?" Shiv replied. "Who knows. But it was a good stab. Not sure if you can get through Confriga's body, though. He barely budged when I struck him, but I didn't exactly get to use my Momentum Core on him, so I can't really tell you how tough he really is."

"Master," she spat. "He is a Master without his armor. He has the *Void Serpent's Aegis* as his Skill Evolution."

"Cool. I don't know what that is because an asshole named Roland Arrow stopped me from attending proper school. More details about me: I like cooking, fighting stuff, learning about Biomancy, an Umbral named Uva, bullying a certain Young Lord, killing evil bastards, and the whole being a Pathbearer thing in general. What I want is to get back to Blackedge after dealing with the Animancy Core so I can help stop the vicar, save the town, and then beat the shit out of Roland in front of everyone. I added killing Confriga to that list because of the child-torturing Necromancy bit. Now. You got to stab me and I told you plenty about me. So. Your turn. Start with your hobbies or something. I don't care."

Heartbeats passed. The demon looked on at Shiv with stunned disbelief—and she wasn't the only one. The Slayers and Siggie were rooted to the ground by shock at what Shiv just casually shrugged off. The walls behind him were barely standing after Leu's brief strike. Shiv didn't even shift an inch.

Leu shuddered and let out a disbelieving breath. “I... Everything you said is honest? Truly?”

Shiv nodded. “Yep.”

The demon considered him again, and her body language softened to a wary but non-aggressive posture. “How... strange. But the System desires strife, indeed. It should not surprise me to encounter a *Hissak* at some point.”

“What’s that?”

“The closest meaning you might understand is ‘System-Favored’ or ‘Chaos-Blessed.’ Both functionally mean the same thing when considered from certain perspectives.”

Shiv smirked. “Yeah. I remember Valor calling me that. Guess it’s a bigger deal than I thought it was.”

“Valor?”

“Valor Thann,” Shiv said. “People also call him He Who Kills Eternity or something.”

And at the mention of Valor’s name, Shiv felt Leu’s courage nearly shatter. “Godsbane! Lordslayer! Realmbutcher! You know the Deathclad One?”

Godsdamn, Valor, just how many titles do you have? And how much shit did you get up to? “Yeah. I’m technically his disciple now, but he’s kind of outsourced most of that training to another guy. Partially to train him through me. I suspect he just can’t be arsed to teach me the very basics. I don’t blame Valor, though. Training a novice chef is pretty hard, so I can’t imagine teaching a novice Pathbearer is any easier.”

“Disciple,” Leu practically choked out. “I...” She mastered herself, but her courage remained under siege. “Yes. Yes, it is true. The vision you saw is no lie. I am here for retribution. This revenge, I have been planning for over 313 years.”

Shiv gawked. “Wait, you’ve been after him for over three *centuries*?”

“It is immensely difficult to rise through the ranks of *The Fist*—Lord Scorn’s Legions. Lesser Marshal Confriga and I—along with the many others of our race—am *Vulteg*. Translation of the closest meaning is like... *Fingerling*. We are extensions of his power and will, created by his magic to serve as the means to his ends across the Integrated Dimensions. I spent years honing myself, following Lesser Marshal Confriga through the ranks, from battlefield to battlefield. All to fulfill a forbidden wish. To avenge my clutch-brother—the only of my kin to survive our metamorphosis into adolescence. And now I have finally drawn close, yet...”

Leu let out a weary sigh. “Yet, it is as you realized. Despite my greatest efforts, I cannot best Lesser Marshal Confriga in direct battle, nor have I discovered a means to ensure his death through subterfuge. And thus you find me here; planning, preparing. Until now.”

Share to your friends

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

46 (II) Allies

46 (II)

Allies

“Right.” Shiv nodded. Some of that was new, but most of it seemed to make sense. “But do you have any hobbies?”

“What?” Leu said, her eye dilating in confusion.

“It was a joke. Because you told me all that other stuff and didn’t say anything about hobbies.”

“I... breed *Hulag* Slugs? I have a few living in a garden. It’s very calming.”

“Nice. I don’t know what that is.”

Leu looked at the other Pathbearers. “And these... are your associates?”

Shiv looked at his sorry company, and something inside him broke. He threw his head back and laughed loudly. It didn't sound any more real this time. Both Heather and Tran flinched. “Ha! No. Those two assholes are Tran and Heather. They’re Slayers from Blackedge. I saved them from the Inquisition, and they’re stuck in this mess, trying to get out. Siggy is a hostage. I still haven’t decided if I’m going to kill her after all this is over yet.”

The goblin whimpered.

“So, they are with you purely by circumstance?” Leu asked, incredulous.

“Yeah?”

“And you had them participate in your, eh, attempt at deceiving the Lesser Marshal, when none of you are trained in subterfuge?”

“I took a class on that at the academy,” Heather mumbled.

“Do they also teach classes on being an asshole and abandoning the people that saved your life while they’re struggling against an Orcish Skill? Because I think you might have gotten a higher grade in that class,” Shiv said, pretending to be as upbeat as he could.

Heather cringed away in shame again.

Leu looked at Heather, then at the blood-drenched carpet and the scattered pieces of Shiv's spare body, then considered Shiv again. “Master Pathbearer... What was your plan, exactly? Was the corpse... Was there something more? Anything?”

“I just kinda thought that if I showed up with one of my old bodies—”

“Old bodies?” Leu asked, confused again.

Shiv continued, ignoring the interruption. “—that Confriga would think I’m dead and open the gate again. After that... I guess I would try to steal the core and then kill Confriga and all the big threats here and then take the gate.”

Leu made a stressed noise. “But... did you have *any* ideain mind if your deception failed?”

“Yeah? I’d just attempt to kill Confriga immediately. Move that up my list. Not the most ideal conditions for a fight, but I’d probably get past him and try to kill all you other Masters first before duking it out with the Gate Lord.”

“That... that was your plan.”

“Yeah? I mean, I guess it’s not the most well-thought-out, but I’m working with what I got here. Can’t just do nothing.”

“I... see...” Leu seemed at a complete loss with how to treat Shiv. He got the impression she was starting to think he was mentally challenged in some way, but he shrugged it off. “If... you do not trust them,” she said, looking at the others. “I might have a reliable means to ensure their removal. My Hulag Slugs can digest up to Adept-Tier materials.”

Shiv felt Heather, Tran, and Siggy’s terror spike.

“Yeah, maybe not right now,” Shiv said. That only made their reaction worse. It was kind of mean of him to say, but he was still sour over the whole “escaping without him” thing. And it amused him. “But I would still be interested in seeing these slugs. And also

talking about how we might be able to kill Confriga and get the other stuff done. I think our goals are aligned enough that we can help each other get some stuff done. Stuff we can't do alone."

"This is acceptable," Leu muttered. "But I will need you all to pose as prisoners to suit appearances. Lesser Marshal Confriga has eyes everywhere. I hope this doesn't offend you."

"I'm fine with it," Shiv said. He looked at the others and scoffed. "They're fine with it too."

Tran stared at Shiv. "We are?"

"You got another brilliant escape plan hiding up your ass, Tran?"

"I... No."

"Yeah. So you're fine with it." Shiv grinned at Leu. He wasn't sure how much he trusted her, but for now, when it came to Confriga, it seemed like he just made a new friend.

"Congratulations, Leu. For not being a slave-running drug dealer and not leaving me to my fate while I suffered from an orc's love, you're now my favorite person in this gate."

Leu stared awkwardly. "I... It is an honor?"

"Yep. Sure is. Now. Let's go see some slugs."

Silver Tongue > 9

"Holy shit," Shiv breathed as he watched ten-meter long slugs eat their way through several small mountains of bodies, waste, and other *materials* dropped from above through three different chutes.

When Leu said slugs and garden earlier, he expected something small. Like a bunch of small and slimy creatures gliding over glistening grass and supping water from dewdrops. What he got was a few hundred grunting, massive, aggressive, corpse and literal shit eating monsters that took up the space of a Blackedge residential cluster—*500 felling meters of space*.

And the garden part was kind of weird too. Most of the plants were a mix between plantmass and meat. Their branches spread through the space in branching arterial limbs, and they seemed to be competing with the slugs for sustenance, breaking down the waste.

"The slugs are an important part of Gate Theborn's ability to sustain itself," Leu said, her voice alight with pride and joy. "I took special care to bring them over from *Vulketh*: my

home dimension. It took the effort of many Biomancers across dimensions to modify the slugs to adapt them to your atmosphere and make them resistant to disease strains. Now, they consume most of the corpses and waste from the upper districts. Most efficient, is it not?”

“They got a chain of stomachs inside them,” Shiv murmured, studying the slugs using his Biomancy. About half of them were in the range of his mana field, and their bodily architecture was *weird*. He could tell they were modified—even identify a few transplanted organs because of how human they were compared to the rest of the slugs’ biologies. But overall, it was like studying an entirely alien creature. Shiv tried to remember every detail. Their nervous system was especially interesting considering how *layered* it was.

Practical Metabiology > 15

Another surprise was where Leu resided. Instead of being atop a building in a penthouse like Oldsmith, she and the other *Vulteg* lived below the higher levels where the bridges and plazas were. Shiv got a good look at Gate Theborn as she led him and the others down. The place was pretty compact overall, with most of the residents living within ten kilometers of space. This recontextualized just how disruptive Shiv’s brawl with 811 was to him. Thankfully, most of the slaves lived on the lower-mid levels and in a few select buildings meant only for them.

The Vulteg lived at the very bottom, and they stayed in these hanging habitats with transparent floors that let them watch the molten rivers rush on ceaselessly below them. This wasn’t because they enjoyed the heat or had to live a certain way, but the fact that there was a *third gateway* out of this place Shiv didn’t know about. Right at the very bottom. That was the place where all the molten metal originated from: It was connected to another dimension entirely. Another dimension, and another System-claimed world: *Vulketh*.

Apparently, most of the Vulteg began life as fireproof tadpole-like creatures swimming around in molten rivers. There were thousands of them swimming through the burning streams Shiv could see. Only a small percent would make it to adolescence, however, because the main source of food for the tadpoles was *each other*.

There’s dog-eat-dog and then there’s kid-eat-kid. What a life...

An obsidian tower extended all the way down from the far-above ceiling and passed through the third gateway at the realm’s center. At the bottom of the tower, just above the gateway, was where Confriga spent most of his time. On the other side were his *literal* god, Lord Scorn, and System knew how many Vulteg. From what Leu described, they all lived in some kind of heavily hierarchical mercenary world-kingdom.

Shiv saw all that and more on the way to Leu's personal stronghold. And now he got to watch some of the largest slugs in the world eat some of the people he killed during his earlier rampage. Shiv thought he recognized some faces and winced.

If you come across this story on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen from NovelFire. Please report it.

As Leu and Shiv admired her slug herd, a sudden question punched past all the others. "Hey—your building—it's, uh, not that big, but the space inside is about five hundred meters. How does that work?"

The answer didn't come from Leu, but surprisingly from Heather. "Dimensionality," the Jump Mage said. She gestured toward the walls lining the enclosed garden at the center of the room, and Shiv noticed the glowing spells circulating constantly.

"But that leads to another question," Heather asked. "How do you even have the mana to power all this? I mean, you would need a substantial amount—like Master-Tier spatial magic. And, well, no offense, but I don't think you're a Portomancer."

Leu simply shook her head. "Indeed. However, this is made simple by the fact that all structures within this dimension are connected to this dimension's mana core."

Shiv's eyes widened, and he licked his lips. "Now you have my attention. Okay, that sounds pretty useful. Where is it? Can we get to it?"

"You saw it when you came in," Leu replied. "It serves as the sun of this place."

Shiv paused, several pieces clicking into place in his mind. "Is that why—no, is that what the chains are for?" He recalled the long, black-gray chains binding each of the taller buildings to the Sun.

"Yes," Leu said. "It's a mana-transference system. The gate is constantly growing. As a world between worlds, it absorbs mana from both dimensions it's connected to, and the clashing between dimensions creates something new during the process: the core. From there, the gate grows, becoming more than just a pathway between worlds or dimensions."

"Wait, gates can grow larger?" Shiv asked.

Leu regarded him for a moment. "I—this is something I thought you knew, Master Pathbearer."

"Well, as I told you before, my education has holes in it. A lot of holes. Just treat me like I don't know anything."

“Of course, Master Pathbearer. I mean to imply no judgment. A dimension’s core is effectively a crystallization of its soul. It is often referred to as a mana core because that is its main function: Outputting mana. But that is putting things simply. Much like a Pathbearer, a core can grow—even gain things akin to skills. As such, gates are vaunted things to possess, capture, or close. It is not uncommon for the System to create multiple clashing Quests surrounding the same gate.”

“Well, that’s something.” Shiv frowned. “So, if I can get to the sun, can I do something to it? Shut it down?”

“That is... unlikely.” Leu paused, and Shiv felt her body tighten with discomfort. “A core is not something you can physically destroy, because of its metaphysical nature. But there is a way. And it is even close at hand—a desperate measure that could see this entire place destroyed. The Animancy Core. Animancy damages the very fabric of concepts, of souls, of reality itself. Should we use that on the core... it would collapse the realm utterly.”

And that was an option, albeit a pretty shitty one. Shiv wasn’t even sure if he would survive that. “What happens if a realm collapses, and we’re still inside?”

“Absolute annihilation, I suspect,” Leu said.

“Well, that’s not guaranteed,” Heather interjected. “I don’t know much about Animancy, but if the core to a place is destroyed, all the space composing the gate will shift over to the next closest stable place, so we might get pushed out through the gateways and end up back on the surface.”

Leu considered that. “Perhaps. But with the immense mana powering the Animancy Core, I suspect we will not have this opportunity. I have already considered this plan. I was even overjoyed when the core first arrived. It seemed like a perfect tool—something that even a Heroic Pathbearer like Confriga cannot survive. It will also cost me my existence. And that of every living soul contained within this space. To do that is a last measure among last measures.”

“Fine. Alright. So, no bombing the core unless we’re absolutely desperate. What about Confriga? Maybe if you can get him alone, or we can catch him out of his armor and unarmed, I can put him down.”

“Lesser Marshal Confriga is never out of his armor. Absence—that foul blade—is bound to his soul. I have studied him for centuries—I despise him, but there are few others who live as he does. Wearing his own armor. Never far beyond his weapon. His psychology is deviant. Even for one of my race.”

Shiv blinked. “Then why doesn’t he smell?”

“He bathes with the armor,” Leu deadpanned. “It is something he often boasts about and encourages us to do as well.”

“That... sounds uncomfortable.” Shiv thought about washing with his exoskeleton on. *Yeah, no, we’re sticking to the old way.*

“It is. I tested it.” Leu sighed. “Regardless, an ambush is possible, but it is also unlikely to succeed, for by his recognized authority as Gate Lord, Confriga can call upon the very mana of the gate and all its resources to aid him.”

Shiv frowned. “He can? Then why did he just show up to brawl with me the first time?”

“That is because Confriga is a vile, arrogant creature who enjoys demonstrating his personal superiority over others. The fact that he couldn’t easily finish you with his fists alone hurt his pride. That you wounded him at all and destroyed his effigies... If I may ask... what did you do to him?”

Shiv shrugged. “Donno. He hit me with a Necromancy whip. It blew up my arm. It blew up everyone around us. It ignited most of the Pathbearers and burned Confriga.” Shiv’s left arm still itched and pulsed with pain at times. “My arm still doesn’t feel great even after I... *recovered*. I don’t think Necromancy gets along with me.”

“It is supposed to wither one’s vitality when unleashed against a foe directly,” Leu explained. “It decays matter and kills life. I have seen him make thousands of enemy Pathbearers crumble away into dust. And then, the art lets him keep something of an imprint of their souls that he might wield for his twisted means. I do not fully understand the lore, but every time he draws on Necromancy, it burdens me with dread.”

“Well, it seems to set me off like a mana bomb,” Shiv replied. “Is there a way I can avoid having him use Necromancy?”

“Yes. But that is also difficult, as you will need to destroy his effigies again—his instruments of death-channeling. You cannot wield the powers of Necromancy without a source of death.”

Shiv blinked. “Huh, that explains the kids. Sort of. He could have used a dead dog or something. So no bones and deaths means no Necromancy.”

“That is my understanding.”

“Guess I know what to target. What’s the deal with his sword?”

“I know it is a Heroic-Tier weapon. Something that can cut perfectly no matter how far the target. A blade that never misses. But that is only the beginning of its Enchantments, and of the others, I know little. I can say that it is deadly enough as is.”

“Well, I’m looking forward to sampling its edge sometime soon. So, aside from the Necromancy, his weird shower habits, and his control over this gate—actually, what does that allow him to do, exactly?”

“It allows him to summon every single Pathbearer bound to this dimension to him. As the gate is also attuned to Pyromancy and Cryomancy, he can also use the sun to channel immense acts of mystical destruction.”

“Wait, a gate can have its mana attuned?”

“Yes. Both a Pathbearer and a gate are composed of three parts. A soul or a core. Vitality or *zeitgeist*. Mind or *expanse*. The soul is the anchor for everything, but where a person is connected to a vessel and exists in a state of life, a dimension lives through culture and history, and its capacity to develop is determined by how expansive it is.”

Leu gestured at the space around them. “This is how the History and Legend-Building Theory of Mana Accumulation came to be. Where a Pathbearer grows as they build on their own accomplishments and accumulates more acts of triumph or exertion, a core draws on the deeds of everyone that lives in its expanse. As such, most cores output far more mana than a Pathbearer, but lack a mind to attune them to the proper magic or environments, leaving their development random and chaotic when left alone.”

And here was another thing that would have been great to know. *Roland, I’m going to beat your ass in front of your son so badly, he’ll need all of Blackedge to pull me off you.*

“And this dimension is... large?” Shiv asked.

“A Category Eight, by the measurements your peoples use,” Leu said. “It is Lesser-Medium, considering its mana output. But that’s still substantially more than almost any individual Pathbearer can unleash.”

“Shit,” Shiv said. “And I was just expecting to fight the guy.”

“In your defense, it is not an incorrect expectation. But should you press him to the brink, he will use the powers of the gate and call upon every Pathbearer and dimensional here to aid him.”

“So, what if we manage to get him out of the gate and attack him there?”

“I have considered that as well,” Leu said. “But he rarely leaves. Even to return to our home dimension. With someone he imagines being an Aviary spy lurking—someone that slighted him—I think he will not go anywhere until the enemy is found and slain.”

“But he left the gateway to his home dimension open?”

“Yes. Because any non-Vulteg who enters Vulkethwill learn the folly of setting foot into Lord Scorn’s domain uninvited.” Leu chuckled darkly. “My god cares little for his own people, but he despises intruders above all, and the Curses he bestows can shatter even a Legendary Pathbearer in seconds.”

“Right. So we’re not fighting Confriga there either.” Shiv was increasingly stumped by this conversation. His plan had been some variety of ambush, fight, possibly die, and then eventually kill. Now, with all Leu just told him, fighting Confriga was going to be even more miserable than expected. “Well, shit. This is a pain. I wish I had Valor with me now. He would have some better ideas. Adam, annoying prick that he is, would probably come up with some tactics and strategy too. And Uva.” Not that he missed Uva for that reason alone. He had many reasons why he missed her. Lots of them.

“Wait, Valor Thann and your allies... Are they nearby?” Leu asked. NEW NOVEL CHAPTERS ARE PUBLISHED ON n0velfire

“Yeah,” Shiv said. “Kind of. They’re probably not in the immediate vicinity, but I think I can find my way back to Weave if I get back into the Abyss.”

“Broken Moon, you really weren’t lying about the stuff you said before, were you?” Tran breathed.

Shiv eyed him. “Look, Tran, the Republic’s... kind of full of shit. Everything they told us about the Abyss is a lie. Even most of the Eclipse War.”

The Slayer’s expression turned pained. “I...”

“If I find a way across, you’ll see. You really should see Weave.”

But Leu was silent. And thinking. “I can help you get through the sealed gateways. To the surface. And to the Abyss.” She regarded Heather. “You are a Dimensionalist, yes? In fact, I suspect you to be the one who was detected at the surface gateway earlier.”

Heather wilted slightly before the Vulteg’s glare. “I... yeah...”

“I know the spatial resonance for both gateways. Will that help you shape a proper spell and get through?”

The Jump Mage suddenly looked stunned. “Are you serious? Yes! If you have that then I can absolutely get across!” Excitement consumed her. “We’re getting out of here, Tran! We’re—”

“We’re going to the Abyss first,” Shiv said. “This isn’t done. You can be cowards and run once you help me retrieve the people I can actually rely on. But to get to them...” He hesitated, remembering the Jealousy. “There’s a Greater Demon hovering over the gateway. That’s going to be a problem too.”

“Greater Demon?” Tran said, his face pale.

“It’s worse than you think,” Shiv muttered. “Nearly cracked my protection when I was approaching Gate Theborn.”

“Ah, yes,” Leu mused. “The Jealousy.” She thought for a moment, then chuckled. “You may be pleased to know that I have a plan to eliminate the creature. Part of my overall strategy to kill Confriga in the end.”

Now Shiv was *very* happy he ran into Leu. “Well, don’t keep me waiting. What do we need to do?”

“Confriga has a contract with the Greater Demon. He feeds it minds every month, and in another day, it will be due for another feeding. It is... part of the reason we import so many cheap slaves.”

“That’s... You’re just letting this thing eat the minds of people?” Shiv asked. Leu’s casual admission about this reminded him that she wasn’t exactly a decent person either, mostly an ally of convenience.

“It is part of the conditions for its contract,” she explained. “All the dimensionals and demons have running transactions with us, Compact, and many others. Regardless, when the Jealousy finishes feeding, it briefly goes into a digestive state to absorb all the minds consumed. It is vulnerable, then. And it is usually left alone in a hidden sanctum within this dimension to recover.”

With each word she said, Shiv’s grin grew. “Oh, and you know where it is?”

“Indeed I do. But even so... the risks are substantial. For even a Master, I would consider this practically suicide.”

Shiv laughed. “Leu. Stop. I’m already on board. Tell me the rest, and let’s kill this Greater Demon.”

Share to your friends

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

47 (I) Jealousy [I]

The System spans countless worlds, and magic allows magi to travel distances unreachable even by the miraculous technologies of pre-Integration humanity. This being said, just because you can get to a place does not mean it might be wise to go

there. Hence, it is essential for Dimensionalists and aspiring Portomancers to understand the most popular locations in the Integrated Dimensions and the dangers that lurk within glorious vistas.

Additionally, this book will also go into detail about summoning and contract rituals. The ability to reach across space and varying realities to call upon trans-planar allies is an immensely beneficial power, but not one to be wielded frivolously. After all, having a Greater Demon of the Shadowclaimed serving as your surveillance operative or protecting you from the shadows is immensely wonderful. It is less wonderful if you, because you did not research and understand their nature, offend them by summoning them to a place with any light at all and then refusing to let them eat your—or someone else's—ability to ever sleep again.

The Integrated Dimensions are strange, incredible, and above all, different, and thus, so are all the creatures contained within them. Reaching across the boundaries is your first gift as a Dimensionalist. Knowing where to go, whom to call upon, and how to reach them will become your second gift by the end of this book.

-Dimensionals, Demons, and Dominions: A Dimensionalist's Guide to the Integrated Worlds

47 (I)

Jealousy [I]

It had been some time since Shiv conducted a proper monster hunt. But this time wasn't the same as all the ones he'd been on before, either. Before, he was just a desperate Pathless sneaking down into the ruins to slaughter nests of lesser vampires, hoping to earn a Path through triumphant bloodshed. His allies were daylight, fire, surprise, and a deep knowledge of his enemy's habits.

Now, he was going after a Greater Demon—a powerful dimensional being offering its services and skills under the conditions of a contract. A pretty massive leap from the lesser vampires. The bloodsuckers were something a prepared and fearless Pathless could hunt. The Jealousy was something that cracked Shiv's Heroic-Tier Mind Shield with its Psychomancy in mere moments. All things considered, this was, like Leu said, practically suicide.

And that just upped the thrill.

"Shiv... are you serious about this? It's a Greater Demon. A Greater *felling* Demon." Tran, meanwhile, was on the other end of the excitement spectrum. "Creatures like this... it takes a dedicated force of Slayers to defeat. A group of Masters working in concert. Or—or even a Hero! I don't think Roland Arrow would enter this beast's lair alone and take this fight."

“Well. I guess I’m not Roland Arrow.” Shiv chuckled. It was kind of strange being more enthusiastic about killing a monster than a Slayer, but Shiv kind of got why Tran was worried. The man was traumatized, wanted out of this hellscape, and if Shiv died, his fate would be up in the air alongside Heather. Leu didn’t regard the Slayers or the goblin mercenary much. Most of her obsequiousness had been spent buttering Shiv’s ego, and that mostly because of his association to Valor and the fact that he just might help her fulfill her lifelong desire of killing her brother’s murderer.

But if this went wrong and Shiv got his mind broken, well, things might not go so well for Tran and Heather. Even if they got out of the gateway over to the surface or the Abyss, they likely couldn’t fight off a small army of enemies. And then there was the small matter of them knowing too much.

Shiv wasn’t a complicated thinker, but basic secrecy and suspicion wasn’t that hard to grasp. If he was Leu and purely self-interested, he might just see Siggy, Heather, and Tran dead if this thing went wrong. That way, she could go back to hiding in plain sight and not risk anything. It was an ugly thought, but something Shiv thought Leu was absolutely capable of doing. After all, she served as Confriga’s Guardshead for a good while, and being a Guardshead for a slave-runner usually demanded a lack of morals.

I’m probably going to end up fighting it out with her over that once Confriga is dealt with. Or... I don’t know. The whole slavery thing still doesn’t sit right with me. Don’t want to just let her get away with it, but... Ugh, might be something else to ask Valor and the others once I meet up with them again. But for now... for now we got a bit more preparing to do.

Over the course of a half-day, Shiv crafted three more sets of heavy bone armor, six bone drills, ten bone daggers, and harvested thirty skin decoys. This was all of the adamantine variety. He had much more in terms of the older Diamond Shelled category, and he fully intended to use materials taken from his Adept-Tier corpses when faced with lesser enemies.

However, the Jealousy was a monster, and a Heroic-Tier monster at that. From what Leu elaborated, though only its Psychomancy and Physicality were in the Heroic-Tier Threshold, its Toughness was Master-Tier as well, with only its Reflexes lacking at Adept. And there was more she didn’t know about the beast, such as if it had weapon proficiency skills and just how intelligent it was.

Much like a cave biter, most Jealousies started out as non-thinking parasites that devoured the minds of conscious beings. From there, the ones that ate and leveled enough would ascend and attain a metamorphosis into a higher form—that being the colossal, angular, mind-crushing octopus-thing Shiv saw guarding the gateway in the Abyss. This Jealousy had been alive for well over five hundred years, so its power and experience had to be staggering.

But that provoked a question from Shiv. “Why’s it only Heroic?”

Leu was bewildered by his question. “Only? Master Shiv... You must understand that most simply do not accumulate the experiences and stresses required to progress at your prodigious rate. In fact, if what you have claimed about your rate of advancement is true, then you are truly a monster among prodigies.”

Maybe. Or maybe my Unique Feat is just pretty damn good. But that still didn’t sit right with Shiv. “But still. Five hundred years is a *long* time.”

“Consider how it spent the five hundred years,” Leu said. “Its initial growth, like most Pathbearers, is likely rapid—reaching Adept in months to years.”

“Years, usually,” Heather commented from the side. “Not weeks.”

“Technically, I got my Adept-Tier Toughness in days,” Shiv corrected.

The Jump Mage looked close to being dangerously ill.

This story originates from a different website. Ensure the author gets the support they deserve by reading it there.

“But after it ascends to Adept-Tier and undergoes the initial stages of its metamorphosis, it will start to think and learn,” Leu continued. “And among the first things a thinking creature learns are more sophisticated acts of self-preservation. Its natural lifespan is long, and its advancements in Physicality only lengthen the time it has. It need not hurry to progress, as most Pathbearers do not. It is also not uncommon for most Master-Tier Pathbearers to slow their progress and enjoy the fruits of their labor. Or face a bottleneck that leaves them trapped. After all, it is hard to achieve greater and more significant acts of legend as you evolve your skills and rise through the thresholds.”

Shiv didn’t get that at all. “I thought the whole point of being a Pathbearer was to claim more freedom through skills and power. To face stronger enemies and do greater things.”

“Yeah, but most of us want to live too,” Heather remarked. “Can’t exactly do any of the great and history-shaping stuff if you’re dead.”

The Deathless stared at her. And slowly smiled under his helmet. He made sure it came through with his voice. “Well. I suppose that’s true for most people.” Read complete version only at

“Still, Shiv,” Tran interjected, interrupting their one-sided bickering. “If this plan goes wrong—this is a Heroic-Tier Psychomancer. Death isn’t the first thing it might do to you.” Tran looked uneasy, and he sounded genuinely worried about Shiv. “You said your mask got cracked by its mind magic. How many more hits do you think it can take?”

Shiv regarded his Mask of False Paths.

Equipment: [Mask of False Paths]

Condition: Moderately Damaged

“Probably at least another good hit or two from a Heroic-Tier adversary,” Shiv said. “But Leu says the thing will be sluggish, confused, and weakened while in its digestive state after eating the minds of the slaves. And it’ll be distracted and unfocused *while* trying to eat the slaves. That, and its sanctum will be sealed during its feeding time to protect the rest of the gate from... what did you call it, Lue?”

“Psychoactive Overflow,” the Vulteg reminded him.

“Psychoactive Overflow. Meaning, if I manage to sneak in with the slaves, it’ll just be me, them, and the big ugly bastard for a good few hours. Plenty of time to either kill it, or get my mind broken for good. Preferably the former. That being said...” Shiv tossed the last of his bone drills into his cape. It felt like it was nearing capacity in terms of weight and storage by now, but Shiv had a feeling it would get a lot lighter *real* soon. “I’m probably going to ask you to return that armor to me, Heather. Way this fight’s going to go, I’m going to need every bit of Magical Resistance I can afford. Especially since I got none.”

“What?” Leu said, her voice low with disbelief. “N-none?”

“Yeah, the mask got a Heroic Mind-Shield, but aside from that, I got my Master-Tier Biomancy, and... well, the other magical skills are still growing. Just... not as fast.”

The Guardshead just stared at him, her glowing eye shrinking at its core. “Master Shiv, your skills and evolutions are... The nature of your capabilities is beyond my comprehension.”

Shiv blinked. He wasn’t sure if she was insulting him or praising his power. “Thank you?”

Leu gawked at him for a few moments longer before turning to stare at Heather, Tran, and Siggy.

“Don’t look at me, I’m just a hostage,” the goblin muttered.

“I’m as grossed out as you look,” Heather said. Beside her, Tran just shrugged.

“Against a Greater Demon like the Jealousy, a damaged piece of equipment will not do.” Leu hesitated for a moment, before turning, staring in the direction of her personal armory and wardrobe. “Please wait here, Master Shiv. I may have something that might be of service to you in the battle ahead.”

As the Guardshead departed, Shiv flinched as two of her slugs began smashing into each other in the spatially expanded enclosure below. It seemed like they were fighting over some large—*Wait, is that 811's body? Hells yeah! Get that body, slugs. Eat the bastard and shit him out again!*

“Shiv, hey, listen... I know you don't trust me, but can I take a look at the mask again?” Tran asked, interrupting Shiv's thoughts.

Shiv paused, and after a beat of consideration, removed his helmet and mask before handing the item off to Tran. Its surface was veined with deep fissures, but the mask was still holding together. It was surprisingly resilient for something that was supposedly just made from bronze, but magical items were weird that way.

“How many Enchantments is this thing running?” Tran asked, running a finger across the cracks in the mask.

“About four. Perfect Semblance. Adept and Initiate-Skill Thief, and... uh, Heroic Mind-Shield.”

The Slayer whistled. “Those are some pretty hefty Enchantments, Shiv. I'm guessing this mask is pretty close to its current mana capacity, so I don't know if I'll be able to apply a Self-Mending Enchantment to it, but I can try.”

“You can enchant?” Shiv said, taking in Tran with new eyes. “I didn't know that.”

Tran smiled miserably at Shiv, and he laughed. “We barely know each other, Shiv. Lots of things you didn't know about me, and I certainly didn't expect about you. I'm no dedicated enchanter—mostly got the skill because I wanted to avoid spending money I didn't have at the academy... But I should still have a few skill levels in repair that I can invest into the mask. If it takes, the damage should go away.”

Shiv didn't know what to say. “You're willing to do that? Just... give up some of your skill levels.”

“I'd be willing to give up an entire Skill Evolution if it means keeping you alive and getting all of us out of this miserable place,” Tran said, sighing. “Even if that's impossible to do.”

Shiv frowned. “Tran, I know it's going to be a rough and ugly fight even with the demon weakened, but I wouldn't call the odds impossible.”

“No, not that: Investing a full Skill Evolution into an item is impossible.”

“Huh?” Shiv blinked. “It is?”

“Yeah,” Tran said. He looked around and muttered something under his breath about needing to ask Leu if she had an enchanting table somewhere. Heather, meanwhile, was looking down at the slugs, appearing lost in thought.

“So,” Tran continued, “skipping through all the academic theories, items usually have Tiers of their own—a bit like a Pathbearer or a core. But an item’s Tier determines how many skill levels it can contain with its mana. The thing about investing skills into an item is that our skills are shaped in relation to us as people, and with how mana is actively attuned by the mind... Well, most skills transform a bit once they get put into an item, because there’s usually no longer a mind that can mold them and due to a lot of other details that’d take all day to explain.”

“So, the reason why you can’t just give an Evolved Skill to an item is because it won’t be the same skill?” Shiv asked.

“That, and you can’t invest anything below your evolution thresholds. Skills don’t exactly *devo/ve* back to what they used to be, no matter how much some people might want to get another try at a better Skill Evolution. It’s like a crystallization of who you are to some extent. A hardened aspect of your soul formed by your mind, vitality, unattuned mana, and other experiences.”

“Is that why my body and mana fields change too?” Shiv asked.

“Yeah,” Tran said. “Something like that.” The older Pathbearer closed his eyes and shook his head, letting out a stressed, humorless laugh. He ran a hand over his short beard. “Broken Moon, Shiv. You really just fought your way across the Abyss and just made it through by dying over and over again, huh?” He met Shiv’s eyes, and his expression flattened into something bordering on apologetic and regretful. He breathed in deeply. “I wanted to tell you.”

As he looked upon Tran’s face, Shiv understood. “About keeping tabs on me for Roland?”

Share to your friends

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

47 (II) Jealousy [I]

47 (II)

Jealousy [I]

“Yeah. I wanted to. I thought you didn’t deserve it. Any of it. But I needed the mithril badly, and Lord Arrow was paying extra for us to keep quiet. So I shadowed some poor, vicious kid who the System seemed to really have it out for. Years and years. For nothing. And now here we are, Roland’s worst nightmare has come true... Except he can’t really do anything about it, and you’re not actually a monster. Well. Not after you dealt with the Orcish Skill, anyway.”

Shiv sighed, turning away and crossing his arms over the railing at the edge of the upper level, there to keep people from falling down into the slug enclosure. The two from earlier were still trying to rip 811 apart. They seemed to be having trouble with the orc’s Master-Tier physique. “I wouldn’t have cared much if someone else did it. But you were always decent to me back then. Maybe we weren’t friends or anything, but I thought you were just the one guy who wasn’t some backward fortress town asshole and that the rest of the Republic or world wouldn’t hate me for something I didn’t do.”

“I don’t hate you,” Tran said. “I never did.”

“Yeah.” Shiv snorted. He believed him. But... “Neither does Heather now. Instead, you two are scared shitless of me. Kind of an improvement, but is this really what being a Pathbearer is like for you? You can’t decide what you want to do, still have to grovel before the Town Lord for mithril, you treat those lesser than you like shit and those stronger than you like they’re gods? What kind of life *is* that?”

“It’s reality,” Heather said from the side. She was still watching the slugs, but there was a hint of heat in her voice. Anger. “We can’t all be like you, Shiv.”

At that, Shiv could only laugh. “You had a nice family that loved you, that paid for your education, that made sure you were preparing to be a Pathbearer from the moment you could walk. Tran might’ve not had that much, but... he *did* go to an academy. You look at me like I’m some sort of weird, nightmarish monster of a person. Fine. I accept that. I’m flattered, even! But I also remember you sneering down at my face like I was some vermin every time I asked you about magic when I was just a felling kid living on the streets, and you sure as hells didn’t get anything out of doing that. You were being a shit just to be a shit. For *years*.”

She stayed quiet, and the Deathless gave an annoyed sigh. “For all my life before the past few weeks, I fought. I fought. It hurt, but I fought. The System spited me. I fought. Shit hand? Bad luck? Fight. And I was so godsdamned *jealous* of you people, of what you could do and become. I would have given *anything* to become like you—and I did! I died fighting some bastard I knew I had no hope of more than distracting, but I fought him anyway, because the only other choice was to fold and let him hurt someone else. And I wasn’t about that. Even as a Pathless. Even when I had no idea death wouldn’t stick. But it seems you two were for the folding, even as Pathbearers. Which makes me wonder, what the hells is the point of being one? What kind of ascension or evolution are you going to get if you keep folding?”

Heather still refused to meet his eyes, but he could tell her jaw was clenched tight. Tran focused really hard on Shiv's mask and tried to hide how his own jaw was clenching.

"The System wants us to fight and struggle," Shiv said. "I don't know why. I don't know for what grand purpose. But it does. You two have *years* on me. Years of being a Pathbearer. Years of academy education, a team to support you, everyone being willing to help you. I might have a Unique Path. I might not be as bothered by death and pain compared to most people, but I always *fought*." Shiv almost snarled as he looked at them. "Well. Now you're in a place where the System doesn't care that you're scared, that you're alone, that you're *hurt* and hunted. Congratulations, guys. I'm now you, and you're now me. The only difference is, I don't intend to leave you to die. Because I don't stay scared. I just get pissed."

A painful silence followed. Neither of the Slayers could meet his eyes. Shiv could hear Siggy gulping nearby. Leu's return mercifully broke the awkwardness. She came bearing something with her head-tentacles. It resembled a heavy, pitch-black gauntlet that seemed to be made of some kind of *quivering* material.

Huh, this looks promising.

"Master Shiv," Leu said, bringing the item to bear. "Over the years, Gate Theborn has amassed trinkets and weapons from Pathbearers that... no longer require them. A few, I took as my own, ostensibly treating them as trophies, but I truthfully wished to build up an armory that would give me options when it came to executing my plans one day. Today, I have scoured the few Master-Tier pieces I have, and wish to offer something to you for your coming struggle—and as payment offered toward introducing me to the Great Valor Thann."

The Guardshead was definitely laying it a bit thick as she buttered him up, but Shiv couldn't lie: After a lifetime of being practically destitute and bereft, he was *pretty* bribable.

But then he noticed something very *peculiar* about the gauntlet. More than just being made from a weird, constantly vibrating material, it also kept his mana field at bay, becoming like a small fortress his magic couldn't pass through. And he wasn't the only one feeling it. The source of this content is .net

"Wait, is that gauntlet made of Inertium?" Heather gasped. "How the hells did you get an *Inertium gauntlet*?"

"From a Pathbearer who proclaimed herself to be a Magebreaker. She actually offered one of her gauntlets to us in exchange for some very *pertinent* information about her target." She let out a sibilant chuckle. "I made sure the gauntlet *went missing* before someone else could claim it from the inventory."

Shiv took it from her tentacles and felt how the material hummed between his hands. More than that, he felt how his mana got stuck and disrupted by the constantly shaking substance. “What even is this?”

“A very rare material created by the magic-fearing Farwalkers to combat the Fae. The nature of its composition is known to no other race, and as you might have already observed, mana is disrupted by the unstable nature of the item.”

Equipment Obtained: [Gauntlet of the Magebreaker]

Tier: Master

Condition: Perfect

Composition: Inertium

Enchantments > Attuned Mana-Nullification; Master Self-Mending; Binding

Equip Item to Left Arm?

Curiously, Shiv used his Biomancy to remove the bone gauntlet on his left arm and tentatively slid his hand into the Magebreaker. The effect he felt was immediate. His left became a *nullified* spot for his mana. He could still shape spells and wield his Biomancy with his right hand, but the Woundeater wyrm circling his left arm recoiled off the gauntlet as if a blade parried by a shield. His left arm was practically in a mana-cage—not unlike how his Mask of the False Path was a cage that guarded his mind.

“It’s like a layer of vacuum in my mana field.” Shiv moved his fingers and felt the gauntlet tighten to fit him. That was pretty neat too. He used his right hand to collapse his bone gauntlet around the Magebreaker, reconfiguring the design of his hand to layer the black, magic-blunting armor with additional supports of adamantine bone.

“Perhaps a demonstration would be more apt,” Lue said. “Hold up your arm, Master Shiv.”

A case of theft: this story is not rightfully on Amazon; if you spot it, report the violation.

He did, and she unleashed a blade of wind using one of her head-tentacles. The spell crashed against his hand, but the gauntlet lashed back at the offending magic, and Shiv felt himself able to push back against the spell with his strength. He managed to *parry* it, much to his surprise. “Shit. That’s something. Thanks, Guardshead. This would have been useful for me when I was fighting Harkness. Wait, can this nullify mind mana too?”

“If the attack comes from a source of attuned mana, it can be seized and struck aside. But be warned: Every magical impact it endures will cause the Inertium to vibrate faster and faster, until it hits a breaking point. My tests indicate that it takes around five

focused Master-Tier spells to fracture the gauntlet, and it requires around four hours to rebuild itself if the pieces are in the vicinity of each other. Additionally, trying to direct mana into or using that hand is not advised, as it will also be regarded as damage.”

Shiv tested his gauntlet again as he opened a cut on his right hand, fed it to a wyrm, and then launched the wyrm at his gauntlet. A splash of crimson mana folded around his left hand, and the sudden force made his arm jolt. He could feel the gauntlet’s vibrations quicken. *But more than that, I think I just discovered another means for it. Apparently letting the wyrms break themselves against someone’s Magical Resistance or a mana-shield might let me avoid needing to take back a wound if there is no one I can inflict the injury on. It is channeled mana, after all, and this thing nullifies it.*

Then, Shiv blinked as something occurred to him. “Wait, how does this thing even have Enchantments if it nullifies magic?”

“Attuned mana,” Leu said. “Skills governed and shaped by a lore of magic. Most skills are empowered by mana, but they lack a field...” Leu trailed off as she tried to find a better explanation. “They are *self-referential* rather than *encompassing and metaconceptual*.”

“Uh-huh,” Shiv said, acting like he got what she was getting at. “So. No mana field, no problem.”

“In simplicity,” Leu begrudgingly said.

“Okay,” Shiv nodded. “I’m more than happy with that.”

“This item does pose another drawback,” Leu continued. “It cannot be used in tandem with another item that provides Magical Resistance or against someone with Magical Resistance, for Magical Resistance is also registered as an attack against it.”

“What? Why?”

“Because Magical Resistance is a field too,” Tran explained. “It just develops inward. That’s why it still works with other magical skills in the rare cases that a dedicated mage does develop Magical Resistance. It’s a fundamentally compact field of adaptive mana that turns into a counterforce against whatever outside magic is trying to affect the Pathbearer without their permission. Honestly, I would prefer the Inquisitor’s armor over this. It’s like a full set of armor: More encompassing and doesn’t need you to actively block.”

Shiv opened and closed his hands. “But I told you earlier, Tran. I *want* to fight. And sometimes, I might want to let a spell hit and hurt me. Gotta feed my wyrms with something.”

“Great,” Heather breathed. “The Orcish Skill is gone, but he’s still insane.”

“And you get to keep the armor a bit longer, Heather,” Shiv quipped, snapping a finger in her direction. “But I’m still taking it off of you when this is over and you and Tran are safe, so don’t break it.” He then regarded his mask in Tran’s hands. “Hey, Guardshead. You got an enchanting table around? And a kitchen? I don’t see anything in this place.”

“I can arrange for a table to be delivered with haste but... why a kitchen?”

“Because I want to have tested my Master-Tier Cooking out at least once in my life, in case this whole endeavor against the Jealousy goes poorly. And because it doesn’t feel right taking something from you without some appreciation back. You have any food preferences, Leu? Or allergies?”

“I...” the Guardshead took a moment to right herself, the offer catching her off guard. “I like, uh, what is that Earth ground-fruit called...”

“Ground fruit?” Tran muttered.

“Radishes!” Leu said. “That is it. I would be most pleased to taste some of your cooked radishes, Master Shiv.”

“Alright,” Shiv said, pulling his chef’s knife out of his cloak. “Let’s go find a kitchen. I’m going to need some scallops and brown butter to go with this...”

The amount of salt baked into the radishes was perfect. The moisture was perfect. The Pyromancy-seared scallops were perfect. The brown butter was perfect—down to the very texture of the sauce. And Shiv’s final hit of inspiration was *preternaturally perfect*, prompting him to pick out a fistful of bitter seeds he’d never seen before and scatter them over the smoking dish.

From the moment he entered the kitchen, a trance fell over him—more than meditative, it was a sense of hyper-awareness, of hyper-efficiency. Where Culinary Berserker made the world seem like it was burning and exaggerated everything he did in the kitchen, *The Chef Unwavering* made everything about him seem brighter, clearer, allowed him to deliver every cut down to the perfect depth, helped him keep track of how long certain things had been boiling, burning, and building to that final culmination.

Culinary Berserker was like being consumed by chaos and calamity, and inflicting every bit of that disaster on the food. The Chef Unwavering was all the power of chaos and disaster wrestled into submission by focus and dedication, refining it into an implacable peace.

At some point, Shiv couldn’t tell where he began and the kitchen ended. The food he made was infused with something from him—a mood, a touch of mana, an imprint of his skill.

The Chef Unwavering > 52

As he filled plates and prepared utensils, he stood off by the side and watched. Watched as the Slayers, the mercenary, and his new unlikely ally looked down at their slightly glowing dishes with varied expressions.

“Should... it be bright like that?” Tran asked.

Siggy didn’t ask that much, she just dug in, spearing a radish and popping it into her mouth. Shiv leaned in closer in anticipation, curious to see just how his Master-Tier Cooking would taste to the others.

A second later, Shiv found himself holding the convulsing Siggy as she practically had a seizure in her chair. “Shit. Shit. Shit.” Shiv held Siggy’s head up and forced her mouth open so she wouldn’t bite her tongue off. A horrible feeling twisted inside him as he wondered what went wrong. He swept through her person with his Biomancy and—

“Stop!” Siggy said, pawing at his hands. Her eyes stopped rolling, she stopped shaking, and she began reaching for her plate again. “Don’t—I need more! I’m not having a seizure! I need more!”

As the goblin literally threw herself at the food, Shiv turned to stare at the others. His Dread Aura told him that their *courage* was shaken, but with how vigorously the goblin was gobbling up her food, Tran swallowed and brought his fork down. “Alright. Shiv. If this kills me, I’m sorry for spying on you.” The moment he put the food in his mouth, he nearly slumped over. “Oh, *holy shi*—what did... what did you put in this?”

“Nothing,” Shiv muttered. “Just the ingredients.”

“It’s... the best radish I’ve ever eaten. I like it.” Tran paused as he tried to right himself. “And I *hate* vegetables.”

Heather followed soon after, and Leu was the last. As both of them took their bites, the former found herself bracing against the table for support, and Leu let out a *sob*.

What did I just do? Shiv blinked.

“Is this what you cooked at Swan-Eating Toad?” Heather whispered.

“Sometimes,” Shiv said. “Depends on the night and the menu.”

Then, Heather burst into tears. “I didn’t go... All those years, I thought you were an Omenborn... that everything you touched was cursed... and I didn’t go.”

Leu shivered in her seat, her head tentacles twitching and spasming. “Food... It should not taste this good. It is too much... too much...”

As the group collapsed into various states of near-incapacitation, Shiv walked over to his own plate and chanced a quick bite. An *explosion* of flavor, energy, and contentment hit him.

Perfected Salt-Baked Radish with Seared Scollops on Brown Butter Vinaigrette has boosted your Physicality.

Shiv didn't just feel stronger, he *was* stronger.

"*Holy shit*," Shiv said. "Is this what Master-Tier Cooking does? Is this why people keep coming back to eat what Georges makes even after he literally punches them?"

Shiv took another bite. Still great. Still wonderful. Still *perfect*. His throat swelled. He choked. "Well. If this is my last meal, I think... I think Georges would call this one *not shit at all*."

The Challenger is amused by your triumph.

Shiv ignored whatever the System felt like telling him about what the damn orc god was doing and turned to regard the others. "Did you all get... get a boost to your Physicality?"

None of them replied, for they were so occupied with his food that the chef himself had become an afterthought. And because of that, Shiv smiled. If nothing else, he would have made a pretty good chef after all.

Share to your friends

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

48 (I) Jealousy [II]

An Envy and a Jealousy are technically the same creature at different points of their life cycle. Born of Dimensional-Lord Scorn's attempts to create a perfect lifeform to, and he demands that everyone quote him under pain of death, "incentivize those dumbfuck Psychomancers to channel their dumbfuck mind magic powers somewhere else where that dumbfuck shit doesn't end with a dumb motherfucker getting killed."

Though he assumed his attempts ended in failure, and he abandoned the unfinished Envies to one of the many barren worlds he left destroyed during one of his many conquests, the Envies instead survived, adapted, and evolved to gain sustenance from another's mind and memories. In fact, this is the reason they are called Envies—

because they are not naturally capable of consciousness or thought on their own, and are instead filled with an echo of Lord Scorn's rage, despising what was denied to them.

As a parasitic infant, an Envy is drawn to and seeks out any creature capable of higher thought, with the goal of draining their minds hollow. After approximately ten years spent in this state, the Envy harnesses all the minds it consumes and begins to undergo a state of metamorphosis—going from a mindless, amphibian carnivore to a colossal Jealousy that can inhabit practically any environment so long as they consume a requisite amount of minds to retain their consciousness.

Ultimately, every surviving Jealousy grows to become a titan of intellect and body, eventually choosing to bind themselves to certain places as guardians or overlords that demand tributes of minds. Their very nature makes them quite reliable dimensionals to call upon should you have memories and minds to offer, and if you need something to ward off enemy Psychomancers or root out spies.

However, Jealousies are not invincible, for while they feed, their mana briefly enters an unattuned state as they work to process the many minds flowing into them, leaving them in a fugue state and vulnerable to attack.

Hence, they usually create “nests” for themselves as well—places hidden, guarded, or difficult to reach while they are at their most vulnerable...

-Dimensionals, Demons, and Dominions: A Dimensionalist's Guide to the Integrated Worlds

48 (I)

Jealousy [II]

Equipment Obtained: [Mask of False Paths]

Tier: Heroic

Condition: Fine

Composition: Bronze

Enchantments > Perfect Semblance; Adept-Skill Thief (0/1); Initiate-Skill Thief (0/2); Heroic Mind-Shield; Self-Mending

Steal Initiate-Tier Skill [2/2] Dodge

Shiv regarded his new Perfect Semblance in the mirror with a measure of discomfort. The Umbral looking back at him was bedraggled, weary, and broken. His white hair was falling out in clumps, leaving bare patches on his scalp. A heavy steel collar hung

around the stranger's neck, sporting a single slot for a chain to be inserted. The Umbral's face was a mess of scar tissue—the kind left over from whippings and violent abuse. Read full story at [novelfire](#)

An entire history of violence was outlined across the slave's body, and now the poor bastard was dead. All Shiv knew about the dead Umbral was his name, the names of his skills, and his Dodge Skill. This Perfect Semblance, more than any other, filled him with a deeper loathing for Compact and the vermin that ran this gate.

Leu obtained this body with ease—simply finding one that found its way down the chute into the habitat for the district's waste disposal, serving as feed for her slugs. The way she plucked the corpse out of the muck and filth with her Aeromancy made Shiv feel a particular way he hadn't before. While he had risen as Pathbearer, striding beyond death and fear, there were so many others who were outright damned by their Path. People like the dead Umbral boy he was pretending to be.

Name: UI Festik

Age: 14

Path:

Slave

"Slave," Shiv whispered, speaking to himself in the mirror. A foreign voice carried his words; a hard, rasping voice that was worn from yelling and screaming. "What kind of Path is that? What the hell kind of life did you lead, stranger? Did I kill you during my fight with the orc? Could you have escaped it? Could you have fought hard enough to overcome your life and change your Path? Could I have, in your place?"

"Master Shiv? Are you finished with the process?" Leu's voice came from outside, and Shiv shook himself free from introspection. There was nothing he could do for poor UI Festik anymore. If there was an afterlife, the Umbral was there, with whichever god he believed in, or whatever happened after true death.

"Yeah," Shiv said, eyeing the body once more. He clenched his jaw, but the expression looked wrong on a face so young and wounded. "Well. If you're listening somewhere, Festik, I'm going to kill them. The slavers. Confriga. Every bastard I can find. Might not give you peace, but it'll give me satisfaction. And it will bring this bullshit to an end. That's all I can do for now."

As he left Leu's changing room, the Vulteg Guardshead observed him for a moment and used her Analyze Skill on him once more. "Remarkable," she breathed. "I cannot pierce your disguise at all."

“Now if only my Acting was better,” Shiv grunted. He regarded his new ally for a moment, a complex set of emotions swelling inside him. She had been remarkably helpful thus far, providing information, a powerful item as an offering, and even a plan that allowed him to move in and out of the gateways, even while they were technically sealed. Yet, despite having done all that, she was doing this out of a personal desire to slay Confriga, and not much more.

“Guardshhead. I got a question for you. Do you care about any of the slaves?”

The Guardshhead paused. “The slaves? Why do you ask such a thing, Master Shiv?”

“Well, to put it bluntly, I despise slavers. I despise people that butcher and abuse people weaker than them. And everything that’s happened in this gate makes me want to kill all the guards, and every new thing I see just pisses me off more and more. Does it bother you? I mean, with everything you have to do here? You see the slaves come pouring down to feed your slugs, and... It’s just wrong to me.”

Leu replied immediately. “Ah. I understand your question now. Unsurprising for a disciple of the Legend Valor Thann to seek the Virtues of Ascension.” Shiv didn’t know what the Virtues of Ascension were, but he let her talk without interrupting, because he was more interested in what she had to say.

“The System is a cold presence in our lives. An imposing and cruel presence that demands from us conquest, blood, and struggle. The Vulteg learn this from the moment they hatch, with only our clutch-kin as those we might trust during infancy—and even then, starvation has a way of breaking even natural instinct. When we finally mature and greet the shore, we are hunted immediately by our elders, with most seeking to capture and condition us to their cause. The fortunate ones escape and flee to one of the Freeholds—places of higher virtue in our dimension, inspired in part by the philosophies of Great Pathbearers. More find themselves bound and guided into specific Paths—and burdened by Curses.”

“So, what, you’re saying this is all just normal to you?” Shiv asked. “That it’s part of life?”

You might be reading a pirated copy. Look for the official release to support the author.

Leu hummed, considering that for a moment. “Are you aware that Lesser Marshal Confriga, despite being a practitioner of it, despises the very concept of slavery?”

This took Shiv by surprise. “*What?*”

“It is true. But not in the sense you might expect. Confriga believes in the Ideals of Exaltation; that one must stand for their strength and values alone, and that the taking and use of slaves debases one’s legend and corrupts their Skill Evolutions. It is part of the reason his rage burns so hot in this realm. He was not given the title of Gate Lord as

a reward, but as punishment. This place is his prison as much as it is the slaves', as much as it is ours."

"So even Confriga doesn't want to be doing this... But he *has* to?"

"But the Compact of Babel is pushed forward by slavery, is held up by slavery, and we are bound to Compact per the arrangements between our Lord Scorn and their Lords of Law. Confriga likes to imagine himself to be a Pathbearer striding forward by way of his own will, but ultimately, he bends quickly before a higher, stronger tide."

Leu paused, and her head-tentacles went slack. "The simple answer is that I do not care about the slaves. I do not think of them. To me, they are usually numbers on a sheet I see, represented in notifications or documents I receive. They do not look upon me on the streets, and I do not see them even when they are before me, as I am governed by a single desire."

"Killing Confriga," Shiv said.

"Correct. If you ask if I would release the slaves, if I am noble or kind... I do not know. My people are fractured. Broken. We have no singular governing philosophy. Most of our thoughts are inherited from the *world without* and granted unto us by Lord Scorn. Our creator... is not a god of ideology, but of mercurial emotion and spite. He cares little for most things and is selfish above all. But violent and vile though he can be, he is no absolute tyrant. He merely created us to serve as a buffer across his conquests, and he wishes to be left to himself atop his great and lonesome tower besides."

Shiv tried to imagine such a god, but he failed. With the Auroral Council so distant from his life, the only god Shiv truly knew was the Composer, and it was telling that a spider-wasp goddess seemed so very human beside the one Leu just described.

"I am not a full person," Leu said. "I refuse to be until I kill Confriga. This... The only reason I survived to adolescence is my clutch-brother. And the only reason I will live again is when Confriga joins him in the Great After of Death. After this... After this, perhaps I will have my own reckoning. For what I am. For what I have done to achieve my triumph." She turned a curious eye on Shiv. "I have a question for you in return, Master Shiv. Might I ask?"

"Sure."

"Do you feel regret for those you killed during your struggle against the orc? I understand that a battle between Masters is a desperate affair and that the small are so easily crushed underfoot, so it is—"

"Yes," Shiv answered without hesitation. He grimaced. The statement felt strange, coming from the mouth of one likely slaughtered in the battle in question. "It's more shame than pure regret. Some of those deaths I don't think I could have prevented at

all. But the longer I think about it, most of those who died did so because I was rough and raw, doing everything I could to hurt and kill the enemy instead of thinking about those around me.”

“And you would have acted differently?”

“I would have launched us downward, for one,” Shiv said. “Instead of smashing through building after building and brawling with 811 where all the people are, I could have taken him down into the molten lakes, and we could have brutalized each other there.”

Leu hummed in acknowledgement. “It is hard to make the wisest choice when the heat of conflict is upon you.”

“Hard is not an excuse,” Shiv said. “People died. Places that didn’t need to be broken were broken. A real Pathbearer should be more... careful? Or focused. Controlled.” He gave a humorless laugh. “And that is where I need the most work. Experience. And control.”

“But you also do not seem to be burdened by this?” Leu asked, tilting her head. “Your words sound more like an acknowledgement than true sorrow.”

“It’s just a feeling. And there’s nothing I can do but try to make it better.” Shiv shrugged. “That’s the way I see things, anyway. I did badly the first time. Because the world bends to power, others paid for it. So. I’m going to get better, and next time, no one will pay for it.”

The Guardshead went quiet. “I am jealous of your nature, Master Shiv. You see the world simply.” Leu sounded like she had some disagreements regarding his philosophy, but she didn’t push on it, and Shiv let it go.

“Hey, Shiv,” Tran said, coming over with his glowing enchanting hammer in his right hand. The armor the Slayer took from the Inquisitors had a trail of half-finished spell patterns dancing over it. “How’s the mask? Did the Enchantment take?”

“Yeah,” Shiv said. “It’s coming back together pretty good. Thanks. I’ll make this up to you.”

“Yeah? Well, you can make me dinner again if we get out of this alive.” Tran paused. There was a bit of tension in his body. “Listen. About that—about the plan in general, I really don’t think you need to do this. The Guardshead already said that the Greater Demon will need a few hours to recover from the feeding, and we can all just slip out during that time—”

“I’m still coming back in, Tran. Even if you aren’t. The Jealousy has to die at some point, and there isn’t a better chance than now. Look, are you worried about me dying for

good and Leu finishing you two off because she might think you two are loose ends who know too much about her whole revenge thing? Is that what's bothering you?"

Tran's expression turned ugly at that. Leu looked between them, but she said nothing. "I—no, look, I do care if you live or die, Shiv. But there's also the fact that we're probably not going to make it very far without you if someone catches on. You're the only one who knows where they're going in the Abyss, and you said there are fire elemental watchtowers and aerial threats just outside of the gate. We're not outrunning that, and there's a good chance that Heather's spatial magic will get intercepted by another Portomancer or a Dimensionalist if we're spotted."

"Do you doubt my character, Adept Tran?" Leu asked. There was an edge to her words.

"I don't know your character, Guardshead Leu," Tran replied as diplomatically as he could. "And after getting my mind ripped apart by what were supposed to be my own people, I'm not doing that great on the trust thing with anyone. I mean, would you have bothered helping me or Heather if Shiv wasn't going to help with your revenge?"

Leu considered that for a moment. "No. I would not. You offer me nothing, and there is too much risk. But I would not betray you now. I have both of you listed as Dimensionalists tasked with maintaining gateway stability in the guard roster. So long as you behave accordingly, you will not be noticed, and your presence at either side of the gateway will not draw overmuch suspicion. If things do go wrong, slip back into the gate, and I will simply arrive to take you all into custody. I am the Guardshead here, after all."

Tran still looked worried.

"She's risking more than most of us," Shiv said. "If either of you gets taken alive, they might just pull these memories out of your head. Same goes with me. But without more support, it'll just be us against the rest of the gate and the core." The thought sent a rush through Shiv. He wondered how much damage he could do between each of his deaths—or until they broke his mind for good. "I'm up for that fight if it comes to me. Are you?"

The Slayer shook his head. "Hell no. I—I need out of here. Heather and I need to... The things they did to us..."

"Yeah, okay," Shiv said, reaching out to steady the man. "I told you: I am not going to leave you, so just be ready. Leu said that the Jealousy will be teleported inside the gate after it presses a tendril against the Abyssal gateway. And then, after a few hours, when it finishes feeding, it will be teleported back out—and I'll be coming with it. We'll use the dead Jealousy crashing down in front of the gateway as a distraction to make a jump out of here. Then Heather will share whatever spatial magic thing Leu showed her for the gateways to another Dimensionalist, and then I'll slip back in to kill Confriga and capture the Animancy Core."

“A series of mana bombs will also be going off within various critical buildings,” Leu added. She gestured at Shiv with a tentacle. “I thank you for your corpses. This will make the appearance of a larger Aviary sabotage operation look more severe and compel the Gate Lord to tighten the lockdown even more.”

The Slayer seemed like he had more to say, but he just sighed. “Shiv... Good luck. Try not to die.”

Shiv snorted. “Yeah. I’ll try not to *stay* dead.”

“Um. So. What about me?” A voice came from behind Shiv, and he found himself eyeing Siggy. The goblin Pathbearer had both arms behind her back, and her courage was on the verge of crumbling again. “What happens to me...”

“Well, you’re either coming with us, or I kill you,” Shiv said. “Can’t have you running around in this gate full of Psychomancers with everything you know.”

“Yeah, I got that part, but... you know, what happens after the escape?”

“I haven’t thought that far,” Shiv said honestly. “I’ll decide if we successfully escape and are still alive by the end of this.”

Siggy’s courage broke again, and she staggered away. Shiv didn’t even need to use Dread Aura to do it this time.

“Anyway. The hard part will be killing the Jealousy, and that’s up to me. So the rest of you just keep loose and stay ready. Odds are, you’ll be far and away from this place for good by the end of the day.”

Share to your friends

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

48 (II) Jealousy [II]

48 (II)

Jealousy [II]

Shiv was wrong. The hard part wasn’t going to be killing the Jealousy, but not butchering the guard that was breathing his foul breath in Shiv’s face as he locked the chains in place.

“Damn shame about some of these slaves,” the guard said. He sniffled and rubbed his nose as he leered at Shiv one final time. “This one especially. He looks like he still has some life in him. Why do—”

“Adept Cormand,” the Vulteg Overseer present said, glaring at the burly guard with her one eye. “If you touch the Jealousy’s food, and it gets a *fresh memory* it doesn’t like the flavor of because of you, I will personally keep you alive until the next year, in which you will be offered as a sacrifice in place of a lucky slave.”

The miserable sack of flesh named Cormand stuttered and looked away from Shiv. “I was just sayin’...”

“And I have spoken,” the Vulteg Overseer hissed. “Secure the cattle and then move them. Nothing else. Now. Do your duty.” She looked over the slaves gathered in the fetid, cramped room and shook her head. “Why you humans desire to touch any of the wretches is beyond me. I must praise Lord Scorn for birthing us void of miserable, mammalian impulses.”

When the Overseer left the room, Cormand just spat a globule of phlegm on the ground. “Yeah, well, I’m glad I’m not a felling squid-headed bitch.” He gave Shiv and a few others a final, miserable sneer. “Sorry, sweet things. Another life.”

Sooner than you might think, Shiv thought, making a mental note to come find this one later. The same way he made a mental note to resolve the matter of Oldsmith when he first entered the gate.

Getting smuggled into the slaves selected to be the Jealousy’s next meal wasn’t particularly hard. All of them were selected as those deemed too sick, too defiant, or too incompetent to be worth anything. With the slaves being transferred from individual buildings and districts across the gate, Shiv slipped in among them with Leu’s help and let the guards move him along. Playing the role of a miserable, broken slave was mostly easy. Shiv didn’t need to talk much. But if Cormand actually tried touching him, Shiv would have ruptured all his brain vessels.

Pathbearers didn’t often drop dead for no reason, but it wasn’t unheard of. The System was a *capricious* entity at times.

As Shiv found his collar joined to the other slaves in his group by the same chain, he took a moment to study them. He was at the front of his line, with another row on each of his sides, each about a dozen people long. A good portion of them seemed old or ill, but more than a few simply looked young, badly beaten, angry, and scared. A few of them eyed the single-handed hammer Cormand had hanging from his hip, but none went for it.

If their skill levels were anything like what Shiv’s Perfect Semblance had, he understood why. Those on the Path of the Slave had most of their martial skills emptied out, with

Festik having Striking Proficiency at some point, but now the level was blank. It seemed, once one embarked on this Path, conventional resistance became impossible. Only the magic skills still seemed viable for combat, but there was one other issue with being a slave.

Curse: Sigil of Supplication - The sigil imprinted on the back of your neck will inflict unbearable pain if you do not obey the commands of the ones registered as your owners.

However bad Shiv's childhood was, it was nothing compared to this. Being unable to resist anyone's commands, being little more than cattle to be abused and forced in one direction or another, was as close to hell as Shiv could imagine. He would rather live on the streets forever, hated by everyone who saw him, than deal with this. At least he got to make some of his own choices growing up.

Cormand commanded the slaves to rise. Some did. The others tried to resist at first, but each of them cried out in agony seconds after as their sigils flared. To Shiv's surprise, the spells inscribed on the backs of their necks were *crimson*. This was Biomancy in origin, and he could feel the effects of the sigil. It wasn't even doing anything overly complicated, just hyper-stimulating the nervous systems of the slaves.

Wretched as it was, Shiv studied the effects with his field as best he could.

It would be *deliciously amusing* to inflict the very same spell on Cormand when Shiv found him again in the future. The other slavers too for that matter.

Practical Metabiology > 16

"Where—where do you think they're taking us?" a slave behind Shiv asked. She was a human and looked younger than most, but there was a furious spark in her eyes as she glared at Cormand. When no one answered her, she swallowed and lapsed into silence, but she never stopped glaring at the slaver. She probably fell in the "too defiant" category. Her courage was also holding admirably strong when Shiv examined the other slaves with his Dread Aura, just brushing against their courage without pushing.

I think I'm going to keep an eye on her.

That's when Shiv noticed another thing about the group. There were no automata. They were all predominantly human, with a few Umbrals thrown in for good measure. Maybe that was a coincidence, but Shiv thought not. With how many automata were being brought into the gate as slaves, he guessed that this might be a thing of *taste* for the Jealousy. Mainly because he could feel The Chef Unwavering shaking inside him as well, lighting the people around him as *ingredients*—himself as well.

Wait, does this mean I can prepare people as a dish for a Greater Demon? Though the thought disturbed Shiv, it made sense. It was within the duties of a chef, after all, even if it was a bit horrific.

Their walk to the Jealousy's hidden den took well over an hour. After getting off an elevator and marching across a plaza, Shiv found the streets even more controlled. There were dimensionals everywhere—especially those flying eyeball things that constantly scanned minds. There was a sizable presence of Vulteg as well, now, each of the tentacle-headed humanoids leading their own group of Pathbearers. Above, the gray sun shone colder than ever, and the entire gate realm was practically freezing over. Some slaves cried and shivered under the oppressive temperature. Shiv wasn't bothered, but he could feel what was happening to the others beside him and clenched his jaw. *I can feel the frostbite sinking into them...*

As the group slowed, Cormand pulled harder, commanding them to keep up. Those that didn't suffered the sigil. As people cried out around Shiv, the rage inside him built, going from a flame to repressed inferno. He hated this place. He hated the bastards that ran it. He hated Compact. And he hated Confriga for being too weak to follow his own beliefs.

After a few minutes, their procession entered a particularly dilapidated-looking building, moving through a dimly-lit corridor lined with dusty boxes. Some of the human slaves clearly had a hard time with the lack of light, and an older slave soon tripped over a piece of wood and fell to Shiv's left. He caught the man before he could bring the rest of the group down. The brief interruption to their march was still enough to provoke Cormand to turn and clench his fist. "What part of *march* don't you understand? You worthless—" He came forth, swinging a wild haymaker at the old man. Shiv blocked the blow reflexively—and felt the slaver's knuckles and wrist shatter against his elbow.

Cormand let out a wild howl of pain as he clutched his right hand. Shiv regarded the man with a wince. *Shit. Well. This is going to look weird. Uh, think... Godsdammit, I'm the worst spy in existence...*

The guard's eyes were wild with rage as he regarded Shiv. He immediately went for his hammer with his working hand and swung the weapon as hard as he could across Shiv's face. Not just one, but dozens of blows snapped into Shiv at whipcrack inducing speeds. Several other slaves were launched from their feet as Cormand vented his outrage. The girl a few places behind him shouted and tried to get in front of Shiv to blunt some of the beating, but found herself restricted by the chain. The Deathless just frowned harder.

Great. This is going to be even worse, now. Alright. Let's see how I'm going to bullshit my way out of this...

After a good half minute of swinging, Cormand staggered back, gasping for breath. His eyes widened as he stared at Shiv. The Deathless was annoyed but entirely unharmed. "I... You... How..."

“They will never believe you,” Shiv began, just saying shit to give himself more time to think. “They will never believe you couldn’t hurt a child slave with that hammer.” He increased the pressure of his Dread Aura and drove it against Cormand as he stepped closer. The guard’s bravery dented inward.

“What... what...” Cormand said, gasping like a fish on land. “How did you...”

Shiv took his chain and shook it. “Keep the group going,” he whispered. “The Overseer isn’t going to believe that you stopped this long to punish a slave with nothing to show for it. If she comes back, we’ll just tell her you couldn’t help *sampling* the goods along the way and dropped the hammer on your hand in the process. Your hand, which is definitely broken. Now. We’re going to keep going. You’re going to get us to where we need to be, and you won’t mention this to anyone. Because it didn’t happen.” Shiv shaped a Woundeater wyrm and sent it out to consume the damage inflicted on the guard’s arm. In a slither of red, the wyrm returned to Shiv—and he nullified its mana with his Magebreaker Gauntlet, causing the crystallized wounds to splash against the Inertium and amplify its vibrations.

Woundeater > 53

Several slaves stumbled back from Shiv. The defiant girl behind him gawked. Shiv chanced a quick look up and around to make sure no one else saw this little scene, then continued his intimidation. He was glad this hadn’t happened while they were still outside. “Cormand. Look at me.”

The guard blinked, staring briefly at his own repaired hand, trembling as he gazed upon Shiv with terrified eyes. “W-who are you?”

“A slave,” Shiv said, pressing his Dread Aura harder. Cormand’s courage started collapsing. The guard backed away from him. “That’s what you’re going to believe I am. That’s what you’re going to say. I took those wounds from you. I can return them to you any time I want. And I will if you ever mention this to anyone. I’m in your mind too. I know who you care about and what you treasure. I got people in this gate watching you. Not even the Gate Lord will be able to keep you safe if you tell anyone what just happened. You understand? Nod if you understand.”

This story has been taken without authorization. Report any sightings.

Cormand did so vigorously. “Y-ye—”

“Then pick the godsdamned chain back up and keep moving,” Shiv snarled. “Wipe that fear off your face. You do that, and your arm stays fixed. Don’t, and I’ll break everything *but* the arm.”

Dread Aura > 63

Silver Tongue > 10

The terrified slaver did as he was commanded, picking up the chain and pulling the group on. When he tried to chance a glance at Shiv, the Deathless squeezed the guard's once-broken arm with his Woundeater mana, and Cormand nearly pissed himself. The pace of the group quickened, but now the other slaves were staring at Shiv. *Shit. "Cascading series of stupid" problems...*

"None of you say anything either," Shiv growled at the slaves. He hated using his Dread Aura on them, but he couldn't have them breaking his cover either. Most of slaves bent to terror almost immediately. The girl behind him flinched, but now she had her eyes locked to him.

Dammit, Shiv cursed. *Not what I need right now.*

As they moved deeper into the unmaintained building, Shiv found the rooms to be empty and the floor to be carpeted with dust. This place hadn't seen people in a while, but as they got to the end, another heavily armored guard waved them in toward a working elevator. "Cormand. You're the last group—and late. What's the hold up?"

"O-one of the fu-fucking slaves tripped," Cormand stuttered, his body still shaking with terror.

Shiv cringed. *Too much Dread Aura. Shit.*

The other guard frowned at Cormand. "You alright? Shit, man, you didn't take any Drift before the shift, did you?"

"N-no. I just... feel sick. Like I got the fever."

His colleague winced. "Alright. Get those slaves in and punch out. I'll cover for you. Say one of the cattle tried to run."

Cormand couldn't help looking at Shiv one last time. Shiv squeezed the man's arm again. This time, the guard did piss himself slightly. "Y-yeah," he said, clenching his legs together. "T-thanks. I need to... to..."

He stumbled away from the group, making fast for a doorway.

The Deathless struggled to keep a straight face. *He better not tell anyone. I hope that Psychomancy bullshit got to him. No idea how I would have gotten through that without Dread Aura.*

Another major benefit that came with high Intimidation: Even if someone knew you were lying, you could scare them into willing ignorance.

As Shiv and the other slaves got on the elevator, the new guard eyed them and shook his head. He waved his hand over a series of mana symbols, seemed to solve some kind of puzzle as he assembled the shape of a final spell, and finally tapped that one, after which the large elevator started moving downwards with a low rumble.

Shiv could still feel the girl in the back looking at him. She hadn't said anything yet, but he was just waiting for something to go wrong.

"It'll all be over quick," the guard said with a sigh. Shiv regarded the armored figure and felt how tight the man's posture was. "It won't feel good, but your minds will go quick. That's something, right?"

Shiv realized the guard was trying to comfort himself about what was going to happen. The guard knew. The other slaves looked confused and fearful, but Shiv simply glowered at the man. He wanted to pull the coward in half, but he held back. *Made enough of a mess as is. I'm gonna need to take Acting lessons or something. Every attempt I made at spying has been a real disaster. Can't believe I'm saying this, but I look forward to fighting the damn Jealousy. At least that will be straightforward.*

As the door opened, Shiv found himself led out into a cavernous expanse. This place didn't look like it was part of the building, and the temperature had gone from frigid to scorching. Several slaves that lacked shoes cried out as they stepped on the rough, stone floor. Not far in front of them, a massive set of curved gates stood open, leading into a wide, open chamber that looked like...

A teleportation anchor?

There were hundreds of other slaves being led in ahead of them, with guards slowly filtering out. Shiv could see the Vulteg Overseer from earlier hovering in the air. She briefly regarded his group before a spatial distortion swallowed her, causing her to vanish from sight. Shiv's group was the last to enter through the massive doors—and judging from the sheen, Shiv guessed that they were made from reinforced titanium or something.

Inside, Shiv found himself being packed in tight with a mass of other slaves. True to his guess, this place was mostly filled with humans, with a few Umbrals. They were all glowing like ingredients to his Cooking Skill as well. A real ominous sign of what was to come. The fact this place practically counted as a kitchen made him instantly realize there were exactly 1344 slaves, himself excluded. The information slammed into him as The Chef Unwavering's focus rushed through his body. It was a pretty dark way for the skill to activate, but frankly, Shiv wanted every edge he could get now.

His assessment that this place looked like a teleportation anchor was more right than he could have thought as well. There were complicated spell patterns circulating along the walls—though far fewer in variety compared to the average anchor.

Still. What the hell is it with the System making me brawl big godsdamned monsters in teleportation anchors?

“That’s the last of them!” a guard called. “Everyone else, out! Get your asses out before the doors close.”

“Yeah,” another guard barked, laughing. “Don’t want to end up like MacDowell. Poor shit.”

As the guards began rushing out, the large curved doors groaned, squealed, and started to shut. Most of the slaves were frozen in terror. Shiv sensed collective courage was in ruins, and that more than a few were still suffering from the sigils. The stench in the air was also almost unbearable. Too many bodies packed too tight together. Shiv almost gagged. *Adam might just drop dead from this.*

As he slowly pushed past several slaves, he studied a colossal door, punching it once with his fist. He left a small dent, but he wasn’t going to be hammering his way out. Probably not even with Momentum Core. This place was meant to serve as a cage for something much bigger than him. A cage, or a *nest*.

“Hey,” the girl at the back of his group called out as she pushed free from a mess of sobbing, shaking bodies. Shiv ignored her for a moment as he studied his surroundings some more. Looking up, the ceiling was high. A few hundred meters at least. Shiv blinked. *Just how far down did we go? We must be beneath even the molten rivers to have this much space. That explains the heat too...*

It was then that he noticed something else. There were ten enormous “handhold”-looking protrusions lining the inside of this teleportation anchor. Each of them gleamed slightly, and Shiv realized they were *focus crystals*. *Oh, shit, that’s not good. That’s a lot of focus crystals... for a whole lot of monster. This is going to be a miserable godsdamned fight if I can’t break those crystals.* He looked at all the slaves around him and winced. *And how am I supposed to keep most of you poor bastards alive?*

“Hey!” The girl gripped his arm. “Who are you? And why did you just let that man take all of us! You have magic! I saw you use magic on him—to fix his arm after you broke it? Who are you?”

Shiv stared at her and frowned. He didn’t blame her for being upset, but he also wasn’t going to let her know who he was—especially with him planning how he was going to attack the Jealousy the moment it got distracted with draining everyone’s minds.

But an amusing thought occurred to him. Something that might piss off the Gate Lord even more if this girl somehow survived. “I’m with New Albion, here to sample some exotic *calamari*.” Google search

“What?” she said, “What’s that? And what’s *calamari*?”

Shiv's frown returned. Right. She was a slave, and a young one at that. She might know less about the world than he did after falling into the Abyss.

"Nothing. Don't worry about it." Shiv regarded her for a moment with discomfort. "Listen, when the fighting starts, I need you to get as many people as you can and curl up against the walls. I'll try to keep the fight away from you. If I can. Somehow."

"Fight? What fight?" the girl asked, frowning.

He wasn't sure he wanted to tell her what was about to come, but it wasn't in his nature to lie. "In a while, a Greater Demon is going to come in and feed on everyone's minds. The moment it does, I'll use that as a distraction to try to kill it. Things will get bad, so the best thing you can do is keep your head down, curl up, and press your back against the walls."

Her eyes widened in confusion and horror as she looked at him, but to his surprise, she just swallowed and nodded. "Okay. Okay. I can do that. But... how are you going to kill a Greater Demon alone?"

Shiv grinned at her. "One death at a time is my general plan, but we'll see how this goes soon."

And then, waves of immense pressure washed over Shiv. A chorus of wailing confusion and discomfort sounded from all the slaves trapped within the great anchor. In the air above, an expanding sphere of spatial mana began to swell, and from within its confines slipped the first of the Jealousy's great tentacles. The Jealousy wrenched itself free from the spatial bubble even before it finished expanding, popping out like an octopus might from an egg. Shiv could finally see its appearance in detail—its deep-purple outer flesh dense and jagged chitin that looked more right on a crab or a horned insect than an octopus.

Then came the monster's single eye, glowing bright with mana, like a hateful star.

Beneath its baleful glare, the slaves screamed in terror, their collective courage turning to dust. The Jealousy, meanwhile, felt like an unbreakable mountain in terms of morale. Shiv intended to change that by the end of this fight.

As the final pulse of teleportation magic died down and the Jealousy hooked its massive, claw-tipped limbs through the focus crystal grips bolted against the anchor, Shiv saw the spell patterns lining the walls circulating faster and faster. He drew upon his Biomancy and reached into his cloak, seizing two adamantite bone drills. *Alright, you big ugly shit, let's see what you're made of.*

To his surprise, instead of beginning to feed immediately, the abomination spoke. "Hmmm. Tasty little minds!" the Jealousy proclaimed with a cackle of glee. The creature's telepathic voice was sharp and high, not at all what Shiv had

expected, not that he'd expected it to address them at all. The way it projected a literal *flood* of Psychomancy mana down on all the slaves also nearly caught him off guard. All around Shiv, slaves twitched. The girl's eyes rolled to the back of her head as translucent tendrils of mana spread out from her orifices as near-invisible tendrils.

Shiv didn't use his Magebreaker to parry the invisible blow coming for him. Instead, he felt his mask shudder as he pretended to be incapacitated too. He needed it to start feeding before he attacked. Only then—

Then, the Jealousy stopped. Its mind mana suddenly shifted across the room in rushing currents. *"Something—something is suspicious!"*

The Deathless froze. The creature's mana crashed down specifically on Shiv—on the group he came with. *"Not right. This memory is not right. Slaves cannot fight back. Slaves cannot Intimidate. Wrong memory? No. Cannot be misremembered. Too many consistent memories between minds. Has to be true. Has to be..."*

And as the Jealousy rambled through his stream of thought, Shiv cursed himself one final time. The other slaves remembered Shiv's conversation with Cormand—a very recent, very memorable event that was fresh in their minds. Why it slipped his mind this might happen, Shiv didn't know. Now, the Jealousy was scanning through these memories too, focusing on his group specifically.

The Jealousy's eye snapped to him, widening.

I am the godsdamned worst spy in existence, Shiv muttered mentally. And then he promptly launched his two bone drills right at the monster's eye.

Share to your friends

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

49 (I) Jealousy [III]

Gravitic Dominion

A powerful Master-Tier Physicality Skill Evolution that allows the Pathbearer to project and control fields of intensified gravity through physical contact. This Skill Evolution usually results from individuals and monsters that have achieved Might of Mass, Kinetic Overlord, and Vector Nexus.

With Gravitic Dominion, the user becomes their own leverage. They are able to alter their own mass or the mass of anything they are in contact with, allowing them to crush everything around them and sail through the air, as a few examples.

The most well-known monster that possesses Gravitic Dominion is the Voidwelling Titan, which can usually be found in the depths of space surrounded by a dense field of asteroids and other debris. Special Note: It is recommended that Pathbearers who lack Physicality and Toughness take special precautions when facing an adversary capable of manipulating the nature of gravity. Their ability to manipulate their own weight means they aren't just extremely strong in close quarters, but when paired with high enough Reflexes, they can be incredibly fast as well.

-Encyclopedia Apocalyptia

49 (I)

Jealousy [III]

Shiv's bone drills blasted through the air. The backblast of their acceleration sent a good few hundred slaves sprawling onto their backs and chests. Even more were launched off their feet as Shiv himself leaped off the ground, applying both his near-Master-Tier Physicality and Biomancy in tandem to launch himself up at the Jealousy like a ballista bolt.

True to Leu's assumptions, the titanic demon's speed was inferior to Shiv's—but that didn't make it slow at all. Its eye ignited with a blinding surge of power as its mana rippled, sending multiple psionic tsunamis to crash against Shiv. It also curved a massive, armored limb to shield its eye—but was too slow. Both bone drills speared past the Jealousy's tentacle before it was in position to do anything. The adamantite bone drills struck the Greater Demon's eye at immense speed, grinding deep into the flesh of its eye like burrowing needles.

Yet, even as the Greater Demon wailed with pain, its focus endured, and its Toughness proved to be enough. Though the drills bit deep, they ran out of energy long before they could push through the outer flesh of the eye, remaining in place like jutting arrows. That put the big bastard at Master-Tier Toughness at the least.

This is going to be a rough godsdamned fight, Shiv snarled internally as he saw the psionic waves close in. Controlling his exoskeleton using a rippling spell in his right hand, Shiv clenched his left fist and prepared to meet the first of the encroaching waves. Considering the Jealousy's Heroic-Tier power, Shiv expected this to leave his gauntlet ringing like a bell, but it was either that or take it with his mask.

A wall of screaming, magical thought reared back to crash down on him. Shiv flung himself gauntlet-first against its tides. An enormous impact swept through him, rattling his bones and shaking his organs. Shiv cursed and grit his teeth as he struggled to

parry the magical wave aside. It felt like he was trying to grapple with a falling mountain. Even with all his strength, it was a hell of a fight, and other waves were closing in. With a roar of effort and a tug of his Biomancy, he managed to *parry* the angle of the psionic tide into the wall behind him. His gauntlet was shaking hard, trembling jarringly against the rest of his armor as it released a shrieking note at the frequency of the vibrations.

Might of Mass > 95

Parry > 42

Shiv didn't know how many more hits like that his gauntlet could take, so he pushed harder with his Biomancy to get in closer. His mana field was on the verge of reaching the monster's body. Soon, it would be his turn to use a little magic of his own.

"*How?*" the Jealousy screamed. Shiv felt its eyes flash with mana—it just Analyzed him. Another scream of confusion and outrage sounded from the creature, and Shiv couldn't help but laugh. Perfect Semblance was confusing this big bastard too. His amusement was short-lived, as he saw the Jealousy shaping new spells with its ten limbs. The pursuing waves of Psychomancy pooled together and turned into a nightmare of jagged teeth that sang telepathic notes so dreadful that his mask started quivering on his face.

But before it could fully bring its power to bear against him, Shiv felt his Biomancy field pass over one of the beast's enormous tentacles. To his dread, he discovered that it also had a *thick* layer of Magical Resistance. This thing was a juggernaut of meat and spirit, but Shiv had a Master-Tier magical skill of his own that he wanted to test against a powerful foe.

Bringing the power of his Woundeater to bear, Shiv inflicted *absolute ruin* on his own body; bursting his organs, shattering bones, gouging out his eyes, and bursting his ears. But before an explosion of pain could even rush through him, his wyrm swept through his body. He fed the mana-formed serpent with all the damage he inflicted on himself, and by the time it burst free from his body, the wyrm was pulsating with concentrated mana and crystallized wounds. With a channeling of intent, the spell patterns dancing across Shiv's right arm transformed. Just as the Jealousy swung its titanic arm down at Shiv, the wyrm blasted forward, its maw wide-open.

The crimson mana construct struck the Jealousy's tentacle, coiling around the limb and biting deep. Shiv felt the crystallized wounds crash against the monster's Magical Resistance—and then an explosion of crimson engulfed the space in front of him.

In a mirror of what happened with Shiv mere moments ago, the beast's arm reeled back as well, and its entire body jolted as if it had been physically struck by a heavy blow. "*Mage! Master! Biomancer! Keep at bay and break with Psychomancy!*"

The monster's thoughts were choppy but intelligent. What surprised Shiv even more was how there was actually a thought process to what it wanted to do that went beyond

the instinctive—and that it would rather avoid him rather than attacking up close, despite its huge size advantage.

Even with Might of Mass, Shiv didn't think he was anywhere near as strong or heavy as the monster. The damn thing had a limb-span of practically two hundred meters, and its body was literally a small mountain with a gleaming eye at its core. A gleaming eye that was beginning to glow again. Shiv frowned as he prepared to cast another salvo of wounds. Why was it analyzing him a—

The author's tale has been misappropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

A shockwave exploded from the Jealousy's body as it projected a jet of hypersonic water into Shiv. He was fast enough to see what was coming, but not nearly quick enough to dodge without a filled Momentum Core. Shiv cursed and brought his arms in front of himself as he crashed against the jet. He was blasted backward. His stomach lurched. What felt like a wall broke against his back as he passed through the sound barrier. Micro-fractures spread across the arms of his exoskeleton. Then, the bones adapted. Shiv got *harder*. He drained a massive rush of momentum into his body, and he got faster as well. His Momentum Core surged. Time practically stopped.

Shiv prepared to discharge his core and launch himself into the Jealousy like a bullet.

The monster's psionic attack bit down on him first.

Equipment: [Mask of False Paths]

Condition: Damaged

A loud crack sounded around his head. Shiv felt a piece of something fall against his cheek. *Not good.*

"Mind-Shield?" the Jealousy cried out. *"No wonder! Hold in place! Concentrate magic!"*

Not good at all, Shiv thought. He discharged his Momentum Core—but did it at an angle to avoid contending with the monster's immense Hydromancy. For the second time, Shiv exploded through the sound barrier. A pocket formed in the crushing jet of water the Jealousy was channeling. The horizon jolted toward Shiv in an instant as he crashed into one of the Jealousy's tentacles. Its armored carapace shattered against Shiv's body. He took no damage at all, his Adamantine Adaption already hardened.

"Pain!" the Jealousy cried. The shrill declaration reinvigorated Shiv like a gulp of cold water on a hot day.

Shiv tore his body apart and unleashed another spell shaped from crystallized wounds into the monster. A wave of crimson mana exploded around its body and cracked a

focus crystal grip the Jealousy was holding onto. Before it could react, he pulled a new bone drill out of his cloak and reshaped it, extending a ring of blades around its core and along its length. He then drove his weapon through the monster's compromised shell and commanded the newly modified blade-drill to *turn* as he pushed it as well. Blood geysered all over Shiv as he cut and cut *deep*. With the monster's outer armor cracked open, its supple flesh parted before adamantite blades as Shiv stroked a bloody furrow across its entire body.

"Pain! Hurt! Get away! Get off!" It shook the limb, trying to fling him off, but he just used its immense strength as fuel for his Momentum Core. A huge benefit of fighting a monster of this size and strength was how fast it helped fill his core. Though it felt like he was running across an earthquake and had to hook his drill in several times to avoid getting thrown off, his core was flooded again—faster than the next Psychomancy spell could reach him. Everything came to a halt, and this time, he took his time aiming for the Jealousy's eye.

Let's see you glare at me now, asshole.

The sheer force of his departure split the entire limb open. It was only because of the Jealousy's Toughness that it received a laceration instead of a dismemberment, but more of its carapace came asunder, and Shiv speared across the entire length of space between the limb and its eye like a bolt of lightning. The Jealousy anticipated his arrival—attempted to angle its face away from him.

It might as well have been a slug crawling through mud when his Momentum Core was discharging.

Shiv struck the vast eye of the Jealousy akin to how a meteorite would plunge deep into the soft and fertile earth. Blood and viscera erupted, spraying like specks of soil cast in all directions.

Immediately, Shiv felt himself enveloped by the soft tissue of the Jealousy's inner eye. His exoskeleton—boosted by Might of Mass, Biomancy, and Adamantine Adaption—worked in tandem, making him an arrowhead like no other. NEW NOVEL CHAPTERS ARE PUBLISHED ON NOVELfire

"Hurt! Injured!" the Greater Demon screamed. Comparatively, Shiv only felt a jolt of discomfort rush through his body. Whatever Master-Tier Skill Evolution it had for Toughness, it was nothing compared to him. Frankly, the entire fight had been going better than he thought. Perhaps, after he broke its Magical Resistance, things would come to a quick end.

Shiv tore himself open, disemboweling his very body, flaying his skin, carving cores of agony through his flesh, before he fed it all into a new wyrm and slammed it against the Jealousy's already compromised insides with a punch. A blast of crimson mana mingled

with the rushing ocean of blood and gore pouring out from its wounded eye. A surge of adrenaline flooded Shiv's being.

Woundeater > 55

Momentum Core > 75

He was going to rip and tear his way through the insides of this creature, mangling it with his bare hands, with his *Woundeaters*, with his bone drill, with his knives, with everything he had, and then he was going to feast on its flesh like it had planned to—

Something reached inside Shiv. Something pulled at the very essence of his body, wrenching something essential out of his flesh. For a moment, he thought he was being attacked via Biomancy and was confused as to why he didn't feel it—and couldn't stop his abrupt and instantaneous death.

But it was his Biomancy that ultimately revealed the truth to him, and he realized his folly a second later—just as he died.

More than half of the human body was made of water for a baseline mortal. At Master-Tier, Shiv had gone through more than a few evolutions, changing both biologically and spiritually to an extreme extent. But his body still needed water. It still functioned off of water. And when every droplet of water inside him was ripped out all at once, he immediately convulsed—his organs ceasing to function, his mind stopping, his limbs twitching as his skin dried and shriveled.

Through it all, his durability remained immense—bones near unbreakable, skeletal armor barely cracked. But Shiv died all the same, because he couldn't sense the Hydromancy mana seeping into him, coalescing in his very person before the Jealousy tore him asunder using a magical skill he had no counter for.

Might of Mass > 100 (Skill Evolution Imminent)

Woundeater > 57

Momentum Core > 76

Adamantine Adaption > 107

Parry > 44

As Shiv returned as a Revenant. His first thoughts were, *shit, I'm going to need a Hydromancy Skill too. Without that I'm not going to be able to see where the mana is coming from.*

He started draining the Jealousy immediately, drawing its vitality into him. But there was something else as well: a surge of strength rushing through his being. His Skill Evolution for Might of Mass was close at hand.

Rather than being disheartened by this death, Shiv felt almost excited. With perhaps another death or two more, he might gain Hydromancy as well, which would allow him to defend against the oncoming matter he currently couldn't see. And, after his Might of Mass evolved, he might just be this thing's physical equal—or at least strong enough to hurt it better.

The Jealousy's telepathic thoughts came in bursts of exclamation and intense rage: *"Killed! Dead! Pain! Still pain! Weakening! Something inside! Enemy still alive? No! Felt enemy die! Pulled water out of them!"* This was a psionic rage that boiled and simmered. It even crashed against Shiv's mind like an actual attack, though not as hard as a focused one. He used this moment of confusion to keep draining its vitality. His shadowy cocoon came back together, and he prepared for the next bout.

But the Jealousy surprised him once more. The creature might be a Greater Demon and a monster that fed on human minds like a base predator, but it was no simple fool. It knew something was wrong, and it adapted. It directed its Psychomancy inside a moment thereafter, and Shiv immediately felt a spike of mind mana lash out at him. He struck the oncoming field using his Magebreaker.

Share to your friends

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

49 (II) Jealousy [III]

49 (II)

Jealousy [III]

As the Magebreaker crashed against the mana, a detonation of translucent, white force burst out from the creature's mangled wound, and it let out a cry. *Thank the System that you're bound to me*, Shiv thought.

The Jealousy snarled. *"There, still alive! Hidden! Inside me! Tricked me! Won't trick me again!"*

Suddenly, he felt the carapace around the creature bubble and come back together. He blinked in disbelief as its flesh rapidly knit itself closed—what was ruined and carved was enclosed, healing perfectly.

This isn't Biomancy, Shiv realized. He failed to detect any attuned mana guiding the process. Is this part of its Master-Tier Toughness? Some kind of advanced healing skill? Or just its natural biology?

Whatever it was, it presented a new problem for Shiv. He was now enshrouded in a mass of recently healed flesh, lodged next to his old body. His cocoon accelerated toward that moment where he would attain resurrection—but once he did, he would be pinned in place. Between the creature's Psychomancy and Hydromancy, he didn't like his odds of surviving for very long while trapped here, and of keeping his mind unbroken thereafter.

Earlier, Shiv had wanted Tran to add a final Binding Enchantment to his mask. But the Slayer didn't have the right skill to invest, and the mask didn't have capacity for any more Enchantments after Self-Mending. Right now, if Shiv resurrected, he would likely be immediately killed again. His Magebreaker was in a pretty precarious state as well—it was shaking violently on his hand; trembling as if on the verge of a volcanic eruption. He guessed it had one to two blocks more left in it before it actually started taking damage.

To counter the Jealousy's Heroic-Tier Psychomancy, he needed to go on the offensive. He needed to keep it off balance. So he slammed his Woundeater field against the monster as hard as he could. A lashing wyrm exploded out from his field, coiling and snapping like a serpent. It rammed headfirst against the Jealousy's Magical Resistance. The Greater Demon flinched while its physical body mended itself.

Shiv felt a slight fracture form in its magical defenses. But only a slight one.

This entire fight, they were mirrors to each other—one, a monster of the mind and a beast of titanic proportions; the other, a man beyond death and monster-like in his own skill composition. As the beginnings of mana strain affected Shiv's Biomancy, he struck once more, ignoring the discomfort. He needed it off-balance as he resurrected, and he needed as much time as he could to get to his mask and escape from the creature's insides.

His new plan was simple: hit-and-run, focusing mainly on wearing down the monster's Magical Resistance. After that broke, he would flood it with his wounds and bring it down, using his own damage as the catalyst of its destruction.

And when resurrected, he needed to keep a distance from the monster's immediate vicinity. He couldn't risk facing the Hydromancy until he had the skill himself.

Shiv's resurrective cocoon hatched. He felt the hard but slick inner flesh of the Jealousy's eye clamp down around his person. He sensed another rushing wave of Psychomancy coming at him. And then, with a rush of violence, of effort, of tearing hands aided by a slicing bone dagger, he pushed his way through to his original body and commanded the skull helmet on his old corpse to part. He didn't bother with the rest

of the exoskeleton—he wouldn't have time to perform the meticulous action of assembling it back around his current self. He just pulled the mask off and braced for the next onrush of Psychomancy.

With how violently his Magebreaker Gauntlet was still vibrating, though, he decided to do something risky. He decided to take this blow using his mask. *It's the only instrument I have protecting my mind from complete annihilation*, he thought. But if the gauntlet broke, he wouldn't have anything to actively protect himself with while dead.

He needed to use them in tandem to prolong his combat longevity.

A spearing lance of mind magic crashed against his Mask of False Paths. Shiv felt another crack run through the item, and a splash of vicious, hateful thought leaked into his mind. He caught glimpses of the world through the Jealousy's perspective: everything in vibrant color, hyper-detail, vivid wavelengths of thought. This was a creature designed to hunt those who could think, designed to feed off mind and memory.

But that wasn't how it thought about Shiv, who was lodged inside it. Shiv, it considered another monster—something it needed to destroy, to mutilate and obliterate beyond form or function. It didn't even want to eat Shiv's mind. It just wanted him *gone*.

Equipment: [Mask of False Paths]

Condition: Moderately Damaged

And that made Shiv realize something else: the creature's courage was fraying. His Dread Aura was pushing up against the breaches in its bravery, briefly affecting its concentration. But the focus crystals proved greater, and so he was forced to endure the mind magic attack in its entirety, as he punched, sliced, and burst out of the Jealousy's eye.

It let out a shriek just as he felt a strange presence seize his body once more—but he was free. He had cut his way back out of the inner eye. Even as it ripped out all the water in him and rendered him a shriveled corpse, he was free.

He plunged lifelessly from the Jealousy, and his Revenant form separated from his second body in midair.

Skill Gained: Hydromancy 1 (Initiate)

That was another quick death. Shiv winced at this performance, but at least he got Hydromancy from the ordeal. Hydromancy and nothing else. It was the only reason he was dead, after all. Now, he could see the Jealousy's Hydromancy field, and it was practically only a bit larger than its body. Though considering its entire width was more

than two hundred meters, it was still pretty wide. He was dealing with High Adept-Tier Hydromancy. At least.

As he fell, he looked up at the Jealousy, which eyed his corpse briefly before its baleful glare turned on his barely visible Revenant. *“How...”* the Jealousy hissed, its mind tinged with outrage and genuine confusion. *“How is this possible? Dead, but spirit still here?”*

It gathered all the mana it had, drawing in a building singularity of Psychomancy.

Shiv frowned. He didn't like the look of that. At least his gauntlet wasn't vibrating so fast anymore. Tremors and quivers still ran through its structure, but it was returning to baseline. The gauntlet recovered fast—but with how powerful this coming attack would be, Shiv found himself worried. The Magebreaker might break, which would leave him with only his mask.

Worse than that were all the slaves below. The building torrent of mind mana didn't look like it would discriminate much when it came to shredding thought. If he didn't block that, he was sure a good portion of them would be mentally torn asunder.

And I'm probably going to need to drain some of their vitality as well. It was an ugly thought, but he had no choice. The Jealousy was far away, and he needed to get back into the fight, no matter what.

As soon as Shiv landed among the slaves, he winced as he saw more than a few people scattered where his corpse had impacted the ground. He launched a wyrm at the wounded, eating their injuries before he cast the spell into his old corpse. At once, the body's leg, back, and arms folded in different directions. All the ribs inside the corpse broke as well.

Woundeater was a *golden* skill to have, offensively and defensively.

If you come across this story on Amazon, it's taken without permission from the author. Report it.

Most of the other slaves were injured too, most of them lying on the ground, a great number clutching their ears, nursing wounds. Shrapnel falling from above and the deafening noise of the clash between a Master Pathbearer and a Greater Demon had inflicted significant harm. Once again, people were suffering. Collateral damage came with every clash—but this time, there was nothing he could have done. This enemy was trapped with him and trapped with them as well. The only way he could save most of them was by killing it—killing it before it could truly do all the harm it wanted.

He reached out, briefly tapping his hand against random slaves as he rushed through the masses. It was still enough to make them cry out in immense pain. His stomach

twisted in regret, but he forced the discomfort down. If he didn't come back, they were as good as dead anyway. He could only reduce the harm being caused.

His shadow congealed around him.

Above, the Jealousy screamed,

“Break. Break. Nightmare, find you. Nightmare, rip into your soul. Pull your mind apart. Break, undying creature. Break!”

It spat every word with human intensity, human vitriol, human *fear*.

Shiv stopped halfway through draining another slave, planted his feet, and looked up. A needle-thin spell was taking shape right at the center of the Jealousy's great eye. Unlike what he'd initially assumed, what once was a colossal gathering of chaotic mind mana had now been disciplined and shaped into a small, gleaming shard—a concentration not of a savage, incoherent beast, but something beyond even a Master of Psychomancy.

Shit! Shiv cursed.

He immediately reached out again, seizing the last bits of vitality he needed to return. And just as he hatched from his third cocoon, the Jealousy unleashed its great attack. A thin needle connected to a psionic thread shot out, twisting through the air to strike Shiv. He anticipated it, his Momentum Core allowing him to easily keep up with its movements. But before it came for him, it suddenly arced at an extreme angle, something impossible for anything that possessed mass to do.

Instead of striking him directly, it curved around him, threading through dozens of slaves in his vicinity. Their minds popped and expanded in blasts of mind mana. Psionic echoes wailed from each of the struck slaves, their cognitions sacrificed to channel the coming spell.

Shiv twisted his Magebreaker, striking the needle that threaded through so many minds as it finally came for him.

His gauntlet rattled and practically broke off his arm. For a second, he thought it shattered entirely—but it held together, if only just barely. Even so, so much force rushed through that his left arm was dislocated and almost torn off his shoulder.

Shiv cried out, but the surrounding blasts born of the slaves were not unmoving either. They slammed inward, crashing where Shiv was, collapsing to that point where the needle had been. And though he parried one magical attack at the cost of a limb, the others slammed all around him, drowning him under a magical assault.

His mask nearly fractured in half. This time, shrapnel composed of mind mana speared into his consciousness.

Shiv staggered backward, letting out a scream of absolute agony as he instinctively clutched at his head. His thoughts felt *shredded*. For a brief moment, he couldn't remember who he was—but his instincts to fight, to move, to survive, kept him going. His thoughts jumped from item to item as he pulled things out of his cloak, as he launched himself into the air. A new pre-made exoskeleton collapsed into place around him as he let out a pained breath and examined both his essential items.

Equipment: [Gauntlet of the Magebreaker]

Condition: Severely Damaged

Equipment: [Mask of False Paths]

Condition: Extremely Damaged

Well, this... this is going south fast. Another... hit like any of that... and I'll be a gibbering wreck, Deathless or not...

Then, from the corner of his eye, he saw the flash of a massive shadow rising up to strike him. To Shiv's disbelief, the Jealousy had twisted a limb along the side of the chamber and intended to crush him with it from behind. He sensed it entering his Woundeater field before it ever grew close. But this was a mistake on the part of the Greater Demon. He was going to rip this limb apart and drink all its momentum in the process.

Then, instead of plunging back into the beast's eye, he was going to strafe it, just dart along its vicinity beyond the reach of its Hydromancy, and cast his wounds against its Magical Resistance until he could harm it directly.

But then, the Jealousy reminded him that it was no simple creature of brutality, that it was a *complicated* creature of brutality, and it did so by unleashing another attack at the same time.

It channeled a massive stream of hyper-accelerated Hydromancy at him again. The water slashed out through the air, and Shiv found himself cursing. The cursing intensified by a magnitude when it also flung two smaller needles shaped from Psychomancy down at the slaves. It came at him from three different angles of attack—the Psychomancy he could barely defend against at the cost of losing his gauntlet or mask, the jet he needed to drink the momentum from for speed, and the tentacle he had to counter in case it pinned him against the wall and let the other attacks finish him.

The Deathless's mind was an overwhelmed whirlwind, trapped by indecision—confused as to what the right course of action was. He was still thinking, still lost as the Hydrokinetic jet crashed into him, blasting him backward. He absorbed its momentum; it filled his core rapidly. But then came its arm, and he stuck out his other limb, preparing to intercept the blow. It was the size of a coiling tower, and it enshadowed him

immediately, like a tree falling on an ant. Shiv didn't even have time to shape a Biomancy spell before it hit.

His Adamantine Adaption kept him from physical harm, but the Psychomancy needles were already plunging through the slaves and building up homing mind mana explosions. He was being blasted off course, swatted aside like the flea he was, because he didn't have the strength to push back against his enemy—until finally his Momentum Core filled. Updates are released by novel—fire

In that moment, he conceived a desperate, instinctive plan. The Jealousy was being empowered by the focus crystals it clutched. *That's what kept its spells going, even through all the pain...* He needed those broken, and he needed the monster off-balance so it couldn't use its Psychomancy against him. He couldn't take another hit from that—and more slaves would die every second he hesitated.

Shiv aimed his Momentum Core discharge at the massive limb crashing against him. He aimed it so that he would pull the entire tentacle at a sharp angle, wrenching it out of place. There was a point where this limb couldn't curve anymore and would end up smashing into another—and that was his mad plan: to use one of the monster's limbs to knock another one loose. It would require an absurd degree of concentration.

And so, he triggered his *Song of the Vigilant*. At the same time, he activated his discharge. He attacked the monster both magically and physically. His Momentum Core made up for where his strength failed, and his wounds fed his Biomancy, making his wyrm seem like a mana bomb as the Woundeater detonated against the Jealousy's Magical Resistance.

His magical attack momentarily stunned the Jealousy, offering him a few seconds of uncontested resistance. He slammed hard into the limb, shooting past the hydrokinetic surge. The jet of water crashed against the wall behind him, curving and splitting down at all angles from how fast it was going. The metal began to deform, but the interior of the teleportation anchor held—unlike many of the slaves below, shredded into pieces by the speeding streams of water.

Frustration exploded through Shiv, but he couldn't think about them right now. He had to keep attacking and force the monster on the defensive to win.

The carapace of the tentacle he was pushing against first cracked, then broke, and finally, he sank into its flesh. But as he sank, he could already feel it healing around him again, fusing over his body, clenching him in place—and soon the Jealousy was pushing back. His Momentum Core was still driving him forward, but with a creature this big, and his mass and force concentrated in such a small area, he couldn't wrestle it. He was like an arrow or a dagger passing through its body. He needed to be the opposite. He needed to be something like a massive telekinetic hand that could seize the beast by its enormous tentacles.

Shiv dug his fingers deeper into the creature's flesh as he strained, armored skeletal digits slicing and ripping, but never granting him the purchase he needed, never giving him the overwhelming force he desired. Then, his Momentum Core began to die, and Shiv pushed with his Biomancy. But it wouldn't be enough. He knew that. He pushed anyway, because he would die and break entirely before he surrendered.

Even if he wasn't enough. Especially because he wasn't enough.

But then, at that moment, he sensed something with his Biomancy field—another limb intersecting the one he was pushing. They were on a collision trajectory, and the other limb was currently gripping a focus crystal. His momentum died, but it was enough. The arm he was stuck in crashed into the other and caused it to rip free from the handle, tearing the focus crystal out from where it was bolted to the wall. After that, the limbs tangled. The Jealousy *slipped*—Shiv felt his guts plunge, and just as it did, just as the focus crystal grip broke free, something detonated inside Shiv as well.

It was like twin suns going into supernova inside him. Two skills shattered and reforged in the same instant, merging together as Shiv achieved something few humans ever would: successfully inventing a weird magical wrestling technique to sweep the limbs of a Heroic-Tier monster octopus well over ten thousand times his natural weight.

The Challenger is watching excitedly!

Skill Evolution: Might of Mass (Adept) > Gravitic Dominion (Master)

Skill Evolution: Grappling Proficiency (Initiate) > Takedown Artist (Adept)

Skill Fusion: Gravitic Dominion (Master) – Takedown Artist (Adept) > Gravitic Wrestler (Master)

Gravitic Wrestler > 102

Share to your friends

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

49 (III) Jealousy [III]

49 (III)

Jealousy [III]

Inside the Jealousy's twisted, mutilated limb, Shiv underwent twin metamorphoses while engulfed by black, bitter blood. His Might of Mass, once a thing that made him harder to move, made him stronger and heavier against even the likes of an elemental golem, broke and *transformed*.

The new Gravitic Dominion Skill swept through him, infused his flesh and layered itself over his skin, becoming a tactile field that was close to magic, but not quite.

His very strength went beyond his muscles now, beyond his Physicality.

At the same time, a rush of intuitive knowledge flashed through his mind. Instinctual understanding of leverage, of where joints were, and where an enemy's center of balance could be discovered, settled into Shiv, like sand gathering at the bottom of a lake.

But then, these twin skills collided in a marriage of power, the lesser merging into the former, as Gravitic Dominion became even greater than what it was. Rather than a static field that shrouded him, that let him channel his strength beyond the limits of natural physics, his Gravitic Dominion became an animated, reactive thing that was made to bend, grip, and throw anything he could touch.

And right then, he could touch a lot.

His fingers were digging into the rapidly healing flesh of the Jealousy. All around him was meat and broken bone and carapace.

Shiv could feel all of it. And what he could feel, he could *seize*. His field expanded, flowing out from him, gripping the entire, colossal limb in the span of a second. Shiv felt his now immense strength bring the tentacle to a halt with considerable effort.

Damn... heavy...but I got it... His wish from earlier came true. He could grasp the entirety of the Jealousy's tentacle now. And more than that, he could squeeze, and he could twist. So he did.

He squeezed so tight that even its internal layer of loose, protective fat parted. And he squeezed even tighter, until he felt the jealousy's bones start to creak. And then he directed a portion of his gravitic field inward, right along the length of a solid bone. Along the length of a bone, not flexible cartilage. Along the length of a bone that was snapping and breaking.

"Stop! Out! Release!" These words exploded out from the Jealousy's mind, but he paid it no heed. The bone snapped. He felt it. He felt it snap like he was just gripping and breaking the arm of someone his own size via a joint lock. It was natural. It felt intuitive. Instinctive. *Perfect*.

And Shiv kept going, twisting the bone outward, using the compound fracture to slice through the inner flesh of his enemy. The Jealousy wailed. It tried to pull its limb back, but Shiv held on tight. A brief tug of war raged between them, and Shiv reared back hard, willing himself backward. His field dragged on him—a spike of gravity pointing in the direction he desired.

And to his delight, his field was a reactive and adaptable force, just like using his own hands. It was like a sort of tactile telekinesis, but more than that. It was tactile gravity manipulation, further bolstered by a deeper understanding of how to pick someone up and slam them down, how to bend a limb out of place and keep it broken for good.

The Jealousy pulled, and Shiv pulled right back. The limb they fought over tore and bled, and as Shiv used his gravitic field, he went from being a bullet passing through the monster again to being a rival titan in this struggle. But he was still weaker. Despite everything, despite his new Skill Evolutions and his Skill Fusion, he was still weaker than his adversary.

But that's how it'd been almost his entire life. He had been weaker than the lesser vampires, but they didn't know how to fight that well. And neither did the Jealousy when it came to a proper brawl.

He didn't need to overpower the Greater Demon entirely. He just needed to break them where they were at their weakest. And so he twisted the limb with his gravity field. The sinews inside snapped and came apart. The bone began to coil nerve clusters around itself until they, too, parted with a sickening crackle—and tore from the Jealousy itself.

The tentacle came apart in two pieces down the middle, not even the carapace allowing it to hold on.

The Jealousy *screamed*. It was a wail of pure pain. It was a wail of absolute misery. And it was a wail that signified the breaking of its focus, despite how tightly it clutched the other crystals. The two needles of Psychomancy it had been channeling through the slaves dissipated just before they could strike Shiv. Every mind that was destroyed below left a trail of blossoming explosions, mental tides of devastation that were meant to follow the needles. They too faded.

Shiv glared. Shiv raged. And Shiv felt the final piece of his newest advancements slide into place. A new Feat was available to him. And just then, after all the people this monster killed, he had plenty of anger to spend.

Feats [2/2]:

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

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

Shiv burst out from the Jealousy's severed arm and clutched the titanic limb in a single hand as he fed his rage into his Gravitic Wrestler Skill. His arm was practically a blade of grass clutching and bearing an entire tree when it came to the limb. His muscles tensed and screamed with strain, swelling as his gravity field used them as anchors of strength and to guide its movements. Whatever he touched, he coated with his gravitic field, so this severed limb was his, and unless his enemy was strong enough to take it back from him right now, or to break his grip somehow, the limb would remain his.

But Shiv decided to be *nice*. He gave the limb back to the Jealousy. By throwing it as hard as he could at the nearest crystal he saw. The massive limb twisted through the air, causing tides of displaced air to throw what few slaves were still standing straight off their feet as it snapped and turned. Shiv drank some of the momentum rushing through him from how much force he was getting.

Gravitic Wrestler > 104

Momentum Core > 77

As he finished flinging the limb, he also realized something else as his field launched him through the air—he could use it to *fling* himself as well. Or just lighten his weight until he was hovering. His face twisted into a vicious smirk. *Whatever I can touch. Including me.*

Shiv released his exoskeleton from the clutches of his Biomancy. For a beat, he just drifted through the air as he wrestled gravity to be a bit past his head. The field bulged, and he swayed as if hanging from a string. He was weightless. Despite everything, Shiv *laughed*.

Flying. I'm finally actually felling flying! Sort of. Feels more like I'm just constantly throwing myself. If I live through this, I might actually be able to carry Uva across Weave...

The Jealousy screamed again as it flinched away from him. *"No! Hurt me! Stronger! Much stronger! Skill Evolution! Has to be! Multiple Master Skills! Need to stay away! Too much risk up close! No more limb!"*

He decided to exploit this new skill for all it was worth. He directed his gravitic field against a nearby wall and crashed into it hard. The metal dented inward as if it had been struck by the fist of a giant rather than a man. Shiv's Momentum Core filled at the same time. The world slowed. He targeted another one of the Jealousy's limbs—one still clutching a focus crystal—and discharged.

Stolen from its rightful place, this narrative is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

Shiv exploded across the chamber. As he accelerated, he also amplified his gravity field as much as he could. He impacted the limb and the crystalline handhold at the same time. The focus crystal shattered in all directions, bursting into debris as the limb the Jealousy used to hold onto it was smeared to bloody paste before Shiv's crushing strength.

The Greater Demon screamed again, but Shiv didn't care. He reached into the mangled limb, and then he broke it. He broke every bone he could feel, twisting, wrenching, and jerking them until everything was out of place, every tendon shuddered and snapped, every nerve was coiled tight on the verge of ripping, every bone was a drifting shard.

Gravitic Wrestler > 105

"*Stop!*" the Jealousy howled. Its courage was quivering. Where once it stood a mountain of implacability, now cracks lined every section of its bravery—cracks made worse by Shiv's building Dread Aura. With an animalistic roar, he tore this limb in half before launching its tip at the Jealousy's eye, burning away the remainder of his rage. The limb became an artillery piece, an artillery piece to end artillery pieces.

It slammed into the creature's eye, knocking it back hard. The Jealousy flinched back dozens of meters, howling as its remaining arms bunched closer and tighter behind it. It was afraid to spread out. It was afraid that he was going to touch it, that he was going to dismember it again and again.

It was afraid of Shiv.

"Come down and fight me!" Shiv roared. His anger was building again, slowly, but there was another benefit to his Feat. It burned his rage clean, it helped him think, even after turning off the Song of the Vigilant. And as he found himself capable of thought, he realized that its Magical Resistance was also damaged from earlier. In fact, he should have been attacking it from multiple vectors, just like how it tried to overwhelm him.

"Alright, you big, ugly bastard," Shiv snarled, a feral grin painting his features beneath his mask as he flung himself in charging bursts after the Greater Demon. "I'll tell you what's gonna happen. I'm gonna pull your arms off, I'm going to mutilate you and break you over and over again until there is nothing left but your ugly head, and then I'm going to line it with so many injuries and wounds that you will beg me to kill you."

The Chef Unwavering told him there were 948 slaves still alive. 948. In the brief clash between him and the Jealousy, hundreds of people had died. Shiv's anger climbed again. He was going to follow through on that threat. It was going to be more than a threat. It was going to be made *truth*.

"No," the Jealousy hissed, clambering upward, its body pulsing with a shroud of darkness. This was a new skill. It started floating upward as well, releasing its handholds as it retreated toward the top of the chamber. Darkness expanded out from its body, rushing down to greet Shiv. *"No. Stay away. Stay back. Stay back. Monster predator. Not food."* This update is available on novelFire

Dread Aura > 65

The Greater Demon's collapsing courage was like blood in the water, and Shiv, in that moment, was closer to shark than man. He blasted towards the retreating demon. Again, it wasn't quite flight; it was more like flinging himself or falling along an accelerated vector of gravity he designated for himself. Every few moments, he would run out of momentum, and then he would need to effectively touch himself with his field and fling himself forward again, like a wrestler would launch an opponent off their feet with a takedown.

Along the way, he tore himself open. He mangled his body, broke his own bones, and fed a growing Woundeater wyrm at his side. He was going to smash into this thing, and he was going to break it down to its bedrock, flesh and soul.

"I'm coming for you," Shiv growled. "You better stop running. There's not much room left! Stand! Fight! Die!" He chuckled. "Wonder how your meat tastes too!"

"Stay away, miserable creature! Stay away! Monster! Vile monster!"

The Jealousy was borderline screeching now, terrified and furious beyond measure. *"Interrupting my feeding! Bad! Terrible!"* Its eyes flashed, growing bright, and Shiv sneered as he prepared himself for what was to come. A massive beam of hyper-accelerated water cut out towards him. And this time, he didn't even try to dodge. He let it crash into him, and he touched it with his field. He touched it, and he anchored himself in place with his gravity field. He let the water flood his Momentum Core momentarily before he started pushing against it. It split in half, one jet stream turning into two, crashing against the walls. And then he struck it from the side, parrying it as if it was a straight punch from a foe.

Parry > 46

There was a brief break in the surging stream. It split off at an angle, and then Shiv discharged his Momentum Core. The world around him exploded. He lurched forward, shooting toward the Jealousy. Its eye widened, and it shrank back into the darkness it emanated in fright.

At once, he vanished into the black after it. His cloak's Shadowsense allowed him some sight, but not that far. As Biomancy washed over the space, he felt... *nothing*. Nothing of Magical Resistance, nothing of biology, nothing for him to direct his power against.

And then the shadows broke apart like night lifting with the rising of dawn. Shiv heard a noise and looked down. There, to his utter disbelief, he saw the Jealousy far below him, crawling away along the walls.

“How? What?” Shiv gawked. “How the hells did you do that?”

The Jealousy was growing new limbs to replace those it had lost, leaving smears of red along the walls. As it fled, it turned briefly, eyeing Shiv one last time. “*Going to hide now. Stay away, hide now, hide, avoid, be smart.*” And then it turned its entire body downward toward its *food*.

The slaves were screaming. Shiv launched himself down with a spike of his gravitic field. He crashed against the side of the anchor to fill his Momentum Core, then discharged immediately. He blasted down in an instant as the wall beside him folded inward.

He was fast approaching when the Jealousy began to cast a spell. Shiv clenched his Magebreaker. It was still damaged, but he thought he could parry this oncoming attack. Even if it broke, he would be able to get to the Greater Demon and end this.

But instead of casting a spell at him, the Jealousy shaped a long, complicated working, spending meticulous moments to concentrate as Shiv descended the entire length of the vast chamber toward it, even as he nearly was upon it. And then it was done. A spell unlike any he had felt or seen. A constellation of Psychomancy drifted around it, the mana turning into a complex weaving of shapes that coalesced and outlined the Jealousy’s entire being. It was like it was developing a coat of mana. Then it pointed its eye down at the many, many slaves, the glowing orb twitching from place to place.

And then the Jealousy *vanished*.

Shiv’s mind reeled in disbelief and confusion. “What the hells?” he gasped.

He stopped accelerating—used his gravitic field to pull back against his momentum before he slammed down and accidentally killed a bunch of the slaves. He cut off his constant bursts of speed, and his gravity field shifted upward, allowing him to float.

He hovered in the air, scanning the masses. Most were moaning, some were wounded and scared, but all of them—seemed normal, seemed fine. And the Jealousy—it was gone, nowhere in sight.

“How the hells did...” Shiv muttered. “How does a creature the size and weight of a small mountain *vanish*? In fact, how the hells did it snip-flip past me earlier? Does it have Master-Tier Stealth as well?”

That was a horrifying thought. Why the hells would something that big have Master-Tier Stealth?

As Shiv scanned the people below, he heard a woman cry out. He drifted closer, close enough for his field to overlap with her person. She suffered from multiple ruptured organs, severe internal bleeding. She winced. Many of them were in bad shape. The clash had caused debris to rain down—heavy rock, broken pieces of massive crystals. He could see sections of the room where people were crushed and mangled.

He felt sick. But what the hell was he supposed to do this time? It was like the System was taunting him, making him kill people in every single one of his struggles. If 811 was an act of rage and recklessness on his part, then this was outright torment and insult against him.

He shaped wyrms with his mana and directed them outward. He fed them as many wounds as he could, and then he pulled out some of his old bodies, injecting what injuries he could into them, and taking on some lesser wounds himself. Shiv frowned. There were too many wounded, and somewhere, somewhere in this chamber, the Jealousy still remained. But where was it? Where was it?

And then a spell came from nowhere—a lance of pure psychokinetic energy crackling through the air, building with a scream of rage and torment. Shiv barely reacted in time, so taken by surprise. But he did. He struck out, angling his Magebreaker to backhand the attack into the wall. His gauntlet rang, but it endured without damage. The spell shattered, leaving the gauntlet shrieking in the aftermath. However, Shiv still didn't know where it came from. He couldn't trace it.

The attack was sudden, instant. It was a perfect ambush.

Shiv stared down at the many slaves, and a horrifying thought passed through him.

The Jealousy... What if it isn't just in Stealth mode right now? What if it has a Skill Fusion between Stealth and Psychomancy—and now it's hiding inside....

He started this fight expecting a brawl against a titan, matching his strength, his magic, his very determination and willingness to die over and over again until he finally chipped down that Greater Demon, a beast the size of a mountain. Now he realized just how much he underestimated his adversary. This wasn't merely a titan of Psychomancy and Physicality. It was a full-on Pathbearer itself.

It could learn, it could think, and it had experience. Experience in surviving for centuries. And of all the skills it had, Stealth was among its best.

Shiv sighed, eyes darting between the hundreds of people in the chamber, each a potential carrier of the Greater Demon. "Shit. How the hell am I supposed to find this thing now?"

Share to your friends

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

50 (I) Wounded

The best way to handle a Greater Demon is with an army behind you. You want to know what makes something a Greater Demon? Something being a Greater Demon means that they are at least Master-Tier in approximately three to four skills. Three to four. You want to know the difference between an average Master Pathbearer who has one skill at said Tier and someone who has three to four? It's absolutely colossal.

When I first became a Master of Geomancy, everything changed for me. Before, I had to work with a group of other engineers to build a bridge and keep it stable. As a Master, I learned to raise a fortress out from the mud and the soil with a few spells. When you become a Master, it's like going from an empowered mortal to a demigod. The effect went double when I fused my Geomancy with my Physicality. I went from an extremely valued, but also extremely protected and vulnerable mage, to someone who was a basically a walking fortress.

It changed everything for me.

It also made me an arrogant ass.

When you have four different Master Skills, they come together. They come together and make you different. They give you choices that one who has a single Master Skill will never receive.

Now apply this to a Greater Demon. Most demons are already designed for war. Their biology and instincts are more optimized for combat than your usual human or even automaton. They can be the size of a small mountain. They can be capable of moving at extreme speeds even without any skills boosting them.

Beside all these things, however, they can also be extremely intelligent.

I remember the first Greater Demon I engaged. It was a Jealousy. A colossal being of strength, but also of Psychomancy.

And it taught me an important lesson. It taught me that, even with my Physicality and my Geomancy at Master-Tier, even if I was far stronger than most could ever dream to be in their lifetime, there being skills I wasn't even an Initiate in could cause any engagement to go south.

It taught me that there were areas where I couldn't hope to match an enemy. And that there were Masters beyond Masters.

I dropped a mountain on it while the rest of the unit bombed it with artillery. My wife had cut off all its arms, and we had it pinned in place—were just waiting for it to bleed out.

Stupid mistake. It projected itself into the mind of a cockroach somewhere inside the mountain. And that cockroach came out into our camp that night as we were drinking, reveling, waiting for the demon to die. We were not prepared. I was not prepared. I lost an arm. My wife lost her legs. Many of my brothers and sisters lost everything.

And I never thought I was invincible ever again...

-Memoirs of a Master-Tier War Mage

50 (I)

Wounded Official source is Novel~Fire

Shiv stared down at the mess of slaves with extreme suspicion, and the few among them who were uninjured or recently healed by his Woundeater stared back. Within one of them had to be the Greater Demon, but he didn't know in which, and he didn't even know where and how to look.

Most of them were still glowing, painted with that faint, ethereal luminance his Cooking Skill used to mark ingredients. The Jealousy was still alive. And Shiv was overwhelmed by the situation. He briefly considered using his own Psychomancy to examine each of their minds but quickly rejected that idea. Whatever damage he suffered from the prior mental assault must've left him slightly incoherent. To try doing that, to dip his mind into one of the slaves while a Heroic-Tier Psychomancer was nested inside them was tantamount to complete suicide. It would rip his consciousness in half the moment he drew near.

"Did anyone see it?" Shiv cried.

The slaves jolted back in fright. Most of them were still caught in the throes of panic and terror. Shiv reduced his Dread Aura and asked again. No response. He rested in the air as he observed the massive group, letting his Biomancy recover, letting his muscles relax. Using both his gravity field and Woundeaters had left him strained in more ways than one, and the fight wasn't over yet. It also allowed his gauntlet and mask to mend a bit.

If the Jealousy wanted to hide, Shiv was going to take advantage of that, be ready for the next round when it came.

He regarded the slaves once more. They all seemed biologically stable, with some being badly injured. It wasn't healthy for Initiate and non-martials to be trapped in a cage while a Five-Master-Skill Pathbearer fought a Heroic-Tier monster. Plenty weren't

moving at all, and Shiv suspected the Jealousy couldn't jump into them, seeing how they didn't have active minds.

"Did anyone see it? Did anyone see it jump into someone's mind?" Shiv called out once again.

For a moment, there were only incoherent stammers, stutters, whispered exchanges, but no answer. And then, from the crowd came one clear voice, ringing like a bell. It was the girl from earlier, the one who tried to protect him from Cormand's beating.

"I saw something," she said, holding up a hand. She was curled in the corner, pressed against the wall like a ball. It was telling how relatively uninjured she was compared to the others. Slowly, she pawed up along the wall and pointed to the corner of the room. "I saw... I saw a rush of something down that way. The monster flashed in the air and then vanished."

That didn't help too much, but at least she gave him a general direction. The way she pointed was opposite the gates, around the upper middle of the room, where a cluster of a few hundred slaves huddled together. The walls behind them were dented and drenched in the black blood of the Jealousy.

Dots of gore and fallen debris had left people splattered in small islands, but most of them were packed in tight, like cattle in a slaughterhouse. Tension built inside Shiv, spilling down inside him like an overturned hourglass at each passing second. These slaves seemed normal as well. He didn't know how the Jealousy managed to hide its mana fields so well.

The Umbral Shadowwalker Skill Shiv stole couldn't hide his mana very well, and that was another reason why he had been discovered while hiding among the containers so many times—why he ended up just ambushing people over and over.

He dragged himself over the slaves as if he was a marionette hanging on a wire. He hovered and bounced as he constantly *"threw"* himself up in the air over and over again, bouncing up and down unevenly. It wasn't perfectly stable, but good enough for surveillance. He narrowed his eyes at the slaves, and there was a building feeling inside him—Shiv frowned. And focused. The suspicious feeling grew when he looked in the direction of a certain slave. It felt like Foreshadowingaiding his search—

An attack struck Shiv. Not from this group of slaves at all. A spear of hyper-accelerated water crashed into his back, and he didn't even see it coming. Couldn't even hear it until the last second. As the hydrokinetic blast impacted him, he was briefly unbalanced until he pushed back with his gravity field.

He gripped the stream of surging water, seizing with his strength, and wrenched it aside. The blast that was crashing into him broke apart at an angle. He turned around,

expecting to see the Jealousy somewhere, but there was nothing. He just saw masses of huddled slaves, many of them screaming at the sudden burst of violence.

And then, another attack came from directly below. Shiv reacted to this one in time—twisted down by shifting his center of gravity via Gravitic Wrestler. He punched the rising jetstream of water just as it was about to hit him. His field blasted out with his punch, carrying the fullness of his might against the coming impact. The water slashed through the air, piercing the sound barrier, but it broke like glass against his fist, and a shockwave splashed against Shiv's protective veil of gravity. Several groups of slaves were knocked down, but he'd been far away enough that they didn't sustain any significant injuries.

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

Shiv rose higher into the air, keeping all the slaves in his sight. The Jealousy was taking potshots at him, firing the moment he was focused on one group in particular. To make matters worse, his Foreshadowing was quiet.

Godsdammit, the big bastard's planning to chip me down through ambush after ambush. Or they can wait me out and teleport out of here. I thought I was going to fight a monster, not a felling weasel. Well, there's an easy solution: kill all the slaves. But I definitely don't want to do that. I don't think I can do that. I wish Adam was here. Can't believe I'm saying that, but Adam might have noticed something with his stupidly powerful Awareness...

But Adam wasn't here, and Shiv needed to resolve this problem himself. He wasn't going to be able to fight the Jealousy in a brawl if he couldn't find it. Because it had a Skill Fusion between Stealth and Psychomancy, it decided the terms of the battlefield. Shiv might be able to break a small mountain over his knee with his newest Skill Fusion, but it was only useful if the enemy was physical and *within reach*. And now the demon wanted to play an elusive game, fight carefully and smartly.

So he had to counter it by getting smarter too.

Okay, okay, so here's what we're going to do. It's trying to ambush me. Well, I need... I need to present myself as unaware. I need to bait it out to track it down. Keep thinking there's something I could be doing...

Shiv considered how he was going to do that. And then he realized the Greater Demon was using confusion against him, confusion he could use right back. He reached into his cloak, and pulled out two more bodies. He made them twitch and move, as if he was instilling life in them with a dramatic flourish of exaggerated Biomancy. Instead, he was simply moving them around, forcing their limbs to flop wildly to give a semblance of life. He dropped the corpses, and they crashed down among the slaves, not hitting anyone. The bodies twisted and jerked, their empty eyes wide and their drooping mouths bouncing as he used them as puppets—puppets he tried to disguise as investigators.

Some slaves screamed as the dead Shivs bounced around and glared lifelessly at them.

Dread Aura > 67

Shit. I just keep scaring people I try to help...

From above, Shiv stared, his focus unwavering. If only he had something that could... Shiv cursed himself as a fool. He already had a solution to his problem, even used it earlier, but cut it off when he drew upon his second Feat, using his rage to fuel his Gravitic Wrestler skill.

The Song of the Vigilant. The Blessing he got from the Composer could solve all of this. Thankfully he hadn't used it for very long earlier, so he had a while until it would need to recharge. It was something that could keep his focus from ever breaking, but also something that revealed all things around him in a resonant web. Now, as the song played out, it washed over every slave, outlining them in a texture of vibrations. And then, it dimly outlined the once-hidden shape of a massive tentacle slowly gliding from mind to mind.

The damn Jealousy wasn't just hidden, it was constantly moving as well.

There you are, Shiv thought, taking care to keep his expression even and not look directly at the Jealousy, lest he give his new advantage away. The man who was currently infested didn't even know he had a mountain-sized demon inside him. Visually, the slave seemed to be entirely normal. He had scratches and a burst eardrum, nothing specific that would give him away.

But though Shiv knew its position now, this brought him to the second part of his problem: what was he going to do to pull the damn creature out? If he rushed in close, it would likely attack with both Hydromancy and Psychomancy. Failing to deal with either would result in his summary death and mental sundering. Especially the latter was something he'd prefer to avoid entirely.

Once again, Shiv looked down at his Magebreaker and arched an eyebrow. For something that size to be compressed within a mind, it had to be using a lot of mana, concentrating all of its energy to keep itself hidden. If it was that much mana, he might just be able to strike it with his Magebreaker.

And so, he hovered languidly for a while, gliding through the air, pretending like he didn't know where the demon was hiding. He even directed his surveillant corpses to search in areas away from the mind-infested slave. But then, in an instant, everything changed. He shot down with a pull from his gravity field, spiking towards the ground. He descended like a falling bomb, but the moment he reached the mind-infested slave, Shiv pulled back hard, coming to a stop before he briefly tapped the man on the head with his Magebreaker.

Shiv was rewarded with a most satisfying collision. His gauntlet rang, enduring a severe magical impact. It went from relatively calm to shrieking, a frequency so high that the pitch was grating on Shiv's ears. A second later, the Jealousy burst out. A flood of Psychomancy detonated free from the slave's mind. To Shiv's sorrow, it killed the slave. The man's skull burst apart, unable to bear the sheer power rushing out from his mind. But the deed was done: The Jealousy was exposed.

And Shiv was on the monster in a frenzy of violence.

"How?" the Greater Demon screamed, but it didn't have a moment to consider that question—because Shiv promptly punched it. Instead of driving his fist into the Greater Demon's as if it was a dagger, Shiv's gravity field spread wide across the entirety of the Jealousy's body. A massive wave of force ballooned out, crashing over every square centimeter of the creature. The titanic Jealousy reared back, a blast wave rippling along the edges of its form as Shiv shouted, exerting every ounce of his force to hurt the damn creature.

It was launched back, driven into the titanium-reinforced hull of the anchor, which curved and folded inward with a wail of succumbing alloy.

A stunned groan came from the beast. As its massive limbs scrambled, Shiv parried one into another and rushed forward to continue the fight.

Striking Proficiency > 29

But Shiv wasn't just going to beat the hell out of this monster physically. He fueled his Biomancy with his *rage*. Wounds opened all along his body, and he fed them into a wyrm. He slammed the wyrm into the Jealousy, and it detonated in a colossal splash of crimson mana. He could feel its Magical Resistance sundering, just like how its huge eye was bloodshot and bleeding from the punch.

"Out, away, back!" The Jealousy unleashed a wave of psionic force. It was unfocused and messy—a spell composed too quickly and without concentration. The attack didn't damage Shiv's mask or gauntlet, and he just kept up the violence.

One of them was going to break by the end of this, and it wasn't going to be him.

Undeterred, he surged forward, lancing his gravitic field into the Jealousy with a punch and further causing the metal walls to cave. Between his colossal strength and its immense weight, the anchor was deforming.

Gravitic Wrestler > 106

His next blow struck the eye again, outright rupturing the edge of the Jealousy's cornea. Blood gushed out, parts of its carapace cracked, and then Shiv sank his fingers into its

eye and pulled with his gravitic field. He felt optical cords inside the demon draw taut; heard the fear in its mind as it screamed.

“No! LET GO!”

The Jealousy, however, remained devastatingly strong. The creature swatted at him with its limbs, smashing into him twice at different angles. Shiv found himself knocked loose and launched up into the air. His head rang, but his armor endured. He stabilized himself with a pull on his field. But then, a jet of Hydrokinesis was already coming at him—a jet that he used to feed his Momentum Core to fullness before he batted the stream aside with a contemptuous backhand.

Parry > 47

Shiv’s blood was pumping, his muscles surging with gravity-enhanced power. He came at the Jealousy, his Momentum Core thundering with power. But the colossal beast had no interest in a physical contest, even if it had the strength to engage in one.

“Away,” the Jealousy cried again, and once more, a shroud of darkness enveloped its entire being.

Shiv cursed. He launched a bone drill out from his cloak, and then another. They speared into the dark, and he heard the Jealousy cry out as it was struck. But with his Song of the Vigilant active, the resonant web splashed into darkness, and there, Shiv watched on in awe as he saw two things.

First, the Jealousy wasn’t hit at all—it just pretended to be to mess with his mind. The second was how the Jealousy seemed to disintegrate—its entire body shrinking, turning into a mana needle. He recalled the Psychomancy spell from earlier. The spell it used to detonate the slaves and use their exploded minds as bombs.

So that’s how it slipped past him before: a truly flawless conversion between Stealth and Psychomancy, turning its immense physical bulk into nothing more than a thread of Psychomancy mana.

The sheer ridiculousness of the feat made Shiv chuckle in disbelief. *If this is what a Heroic Pathbearer is capable of, I can’t wait to become one.*

Shiv slammed his fists together, draining a final hit of momentum with the blow. His field magnified his clashing knuckles, and colossal shockwaves swept out from him, shaking the world. His Momentum Core filled. Time slowed. Shiv discharged and blasted toward that thin sliver of mind-matter.

This time, it was the Jealousy that wasn’t ready for him. He crashed into it, his gauntlet coming down as if a falling hammer cast from the heavens. The impact hit the Jealousy hard. Its body rematerialized from the thread of mind mana and crashed against Shiv.

He felt its Hydromancy and Psychomancy fields sweep over him, but without the focus crystals, the beast was stunned and distracted.

It grew more stunned still as Shiv laid his hands on it and started working its joints. He seized the nearest limb and twisted the place where the connective tissue met the Jealousy's body. A sickening snap tore through the air as the Greater Demon screamed—no coherent thoughts accompanied the yell, only misery, only pain.

Share to your friends

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

50 (II) Wounded

50 (II)

Wounded

As it tried to recover, Shiv yanked hard, his gravitic field enveloping its eye. Blood vessels tore as the corner of the massive organ gave way and the eyeball came free, dislodging from the socket. With a primal cry of extreme effort, Shiv burned the last of his rage and used every ounce of strength to fling the Jealousy against the wall. His gravitic field crashed over it in a tsunami of overwhelming force.

The beast wailed as it was hurled backwards. Its body struck one place, and its eyeball hit another, barely connected via the optical cord. Shiv then smashed into it again, overstraining his body before his Toughness could adapt.

The effort came with its own cost. He felt every muscle tear from the bone; he felt his bones creak and start to break. But his Adamantine Adaption kept them from shattering outright, and his ligaments held. Still, the damage to his musculature was severe—severe enough to feed another Wound eater wyrm.

Thus came his second attack. As soon as the Jealousy slammed into the wall again, caving in another section of the anchor, Shiv dropped a fist brimming with crimson mana onto the monster, infused with the power of his wounds.

Twin explosions swept over the Jealousy, swallowing it in crushing waves. The first was the gravitic field channeled outward by Shiv, burying the demon even deeper into the folding titanium. The second was his Wound eater. It snaked out and detonated his wounds against the Greater Demon. The inside of the Jealousy cracked, and its eye snapped free entirely. Shiv could feel its Magical Resistance was about to give.

As it tried to swat him off again, Shiv pulled it off the wall and broke its balance. His muscle damage entirely healed thanks to his Woundeater. He slammed it against the wall again and immediately began pummeling it, launching countless blows. Each of his fists, elbows, and knees hit like falling artillery, a cascade of devastation. Massive blast waves of force tore across the Jealousy, as its blood-filled socket spewed an ocean of red down upon the slaves below, sweeping many off their feet.

Striking Proficiency > 30

Shiv concentrated his gravitic field into thin points of pressure. The Jealousy struck at him, but Shiv yanked the Jealousy along the wall, throwing it off balance every time it tried to stabilize and get a good hit on him. He was relentless. What sloppy hits it did land fed his Momentum Core, and he found himself on the verge of another discharge. With an ascending elbow, he sent the Jealousy up the wall, away from the slaves, and then he discharged, plunging into the beast's socket with a surge of momentum.

Shiv opened new wounds in himself and fed another wyrm. Another crimson explosion washed over the Jealousy. Its Magical Resistance was crumbling; his Biomancy felt like it was being played from his soul. Shiv retracted his gravitic field, focusing entirely on himself. He speared into its flesh, punching deep like a harpoon. Once more, he swam through the creature's insides, gouging and ripping inner flesh. He was stronger this time, and could move everything that he touched. He pulled out bone daggers, carving and slashing, launching bone drills out at every angle. Shiv hunted for vulnerable organs, and when he could find none due to the demon's bizarre biology, he kept sawing, gouging, and slashing, each attack enhanced by his field.

Knife Proficiency > 39

Spear Proficiency > 11

Every punch struck the Jealousy as if delivered by a rival colossus; every slash fell like a titanic blade cleaving deep through the monster's flesh. Shiv felt his soul ache, and the strain of the Composer's song wore on him. His focus wouldn't last much longer, but he still had this—he was going to finish this fight. His Woundeaters devoured new injuries he inflicted on himself, and a series of crimson detonations erupted out from the Jealousy's eye socket.

The Greater Demon howled in pain, healing as fast as it could, but it couldn't dislodge him—not when Shiv was this strong, not when he could anchor himself in place, becoming his own leverage. He grabbed the Jealousy from inside itself and twisted every bone he could feel until they snapped or dislocated, until the demon screamed in higher and higher pitches of agony as Shiv ignored his own muscles ripping free from his bones once more.

He slammed it against the wall again, and as his Momentum Core hit capacity, he discharged and dragged the Jealousy's shattered form socket-first along the surface. Its

massive eye, barely regenerated, was once again little more than a blood-filled pond lined with viscera.

And finally, its Magical Resistance shattered. Shiv promptly caved in his own eye sockets and transferred the wounds into it. The pond erupted as if a volcano of gore, flesh spraying outward as his wounds became its wound.

Biomancy was beautiful: once you broke your enemy's Magical Resistance, you simply told their flesh what to do, and their flesh obeyed. The Jealousy tumbled across the insides of the anchor in a whirlwind of torture.

"Need—need to break free! Strong! Fast! Inside me! Break free!" the Greater Demon cried with horror. Its body was still healing, but Shiv slammed it into the wall again and again, breaking its focus each time, keeping the Jealousy from focusing on a spell.

Shiv was tired—beyond exhausted. His soul felt raw as he tried to crystallize another series of wounds for a spell, but he snarled in focus-breaking pain as the Song of the Vigilant became too much for his soul to bear. His mana field gave immediately after—his Biomancy practically as torn as his muscles were.

Shiv didn't stop. He didn't care. He would burn himself down to cinders to kill this thing.

The Deathless gathered what remained of his strength and began punching the Jealousy from the inside. Every blow was a sledgehammer against a caving wall; every hit like a small mana bomb. The Greater Demon was flagging. He was going to break it—tear it in half.

Shiv gripped it along its middle, and he roared, pulling in two directions. His field penetrated the center of the Jealousy, curving along opposite angles. As if a colossus of unimaginable might, he ripped the demon down the middle from above: its inner cartilage popped, massive ligaments and dense tissue strands snapped.

Shiv's muscles teetered on complete exhaustion—he didn't know how much more he had. But the Jealousy was going to be torn apart first. That was the only outcome Shiv could accept. A splash of light came from above as he ripped open the upper half of the demon. Shiv hissed and groaned; he could barely think—he was so *exhausted*. But he refused to stop. The Jealousy screamed and cursed, begging to be released, but he didn't relent. He would rip it apart, even if it killed him—*especially* if it killed him.

But the Jealousy lashed out unexpectedly. Its remaining limbs smashed into the slaves below. Shiv felt them, his wounded Woundeater field picking up crushed bodies in his periphery. He used the rage born of the Greater Demon's final atrocity to feed his Gravitic Wrestler Skill. The demon was torn even more; most of its insides were exposed to the light, with just a bit more effort—

Shiv felt that sudden tug, that rip, the water leaving his body—and once more, he perished within the Jealousy. Without a body, he had no gravity to wrestle with; all he had was his mangled Biomancy, his gauntlet, and his other magical skills.

Shit! he thought as his mind reeled. He had overextended, consumed by bloodlust and rage, and suddenly he noticed a focus crystal plunging into the Jealousy's inner flesh. The demon had impaled itself on the broken fragments it once clutched as handholds.

“Get loose! Get loose!” the Jealousy cried, its mind ragged with pain but now held together by sheer concentration. It mustered its fury, and called in an implosion of Psychomancy—Shiv parried the attack even as he felt his gauntlet crack. Then, the Jealousy launched a salvo of others into itself—hasty spells that bombarded and ripped through its own mind. But it did the work. It cracked Shiv's gauntlet more, and the blows he couldn't block mauled his mind.

His consciousness reeled. Shiv screamed voicelessly. He drained the Jealousy's vitality as fast as he could, adding to its hurt. But it had focus crystals embedded deep in its flesh, binding shards of the material as implants—and that was enough. The Jealousy unleashed another psionic attack, a concentrated slicing blade that mutilated its own mind just to strike him.

It hit him; his gauntlet fractured in half. Four hours—that's how long Leu said it would take for a still-intact gauntlet to repair itself. And Shiv couldn't put his mask back on before he resurrected.

He fell through the final stages of his cocoon, but it wasn't quick enough. The Jealousy, launching another sloppy, hastier attack, and Shiv's sense of self nearly broke apart.

Unauthorized duplication: this narrative has been taken without consent. Report sightings.

As soon as he resurrected, he attempted something truly desperate. He drew on the Song of the Vigilant and his Biomancy again. Unspeakable pain tore through him—he fought not to black out and maintained his focus. He burst open his inner organs out from his chest and cast a final Woundeater into the Jealousy. A colossal detonation of crimson mana followed, but he felt his soul practically tearing in half.

The song ended; his mana field partially ripped itself free from his soul. He exploded back out into the world in a wave of disemboweled tissue and mana. But the pain was too much. Something inside him broke. He blacked out, soul-deep pain overwhelming even his subconsciousness. Darkness and silence reigned.

He didn't even feel it when he crashed into the ground.

When he suddenly woke, he groaned and retched, laying in a deep pool of blood among whimpering slaves. As he looked to his left, the Jealousy lay slumped against the wall,

groaning weakly. It was brutally injured: its eye gone, its body ripped nearly in half, its insides spilling out in a mudslide of viscera.

Both of them had broken the other. Both of them were ruined.

It was still trying to strike out blindly with its Psychomancy; he saw the spells, but the demon lacked focus and strength, the blows trailing off before they could properly connect to anything. The Jealousy tried to move a limb, but it flopped and wept in telepathetic misery. Shiv tried to rise, but a surge of pain coursed through him, and he blacked out again. When he came to, everything still throbbed with agony. Mana strain was one thing—this was another level. Both his soul and mana fields built on each other's torment. Shiv almost started praying for true death to take him.

He tried focusing on Pyromancy, flinging a flicker of flame at the nearest limb. It sparked uselessly against the cracked carapace—but it roused the demon. It shifted—over two hundred meters of slumped carapace and blood.

"You're alive?" it hissed. Why? What are you? Why won't you die? What's wrong with you?"

Shiv gritted his teeth, barely forcing out the words. "Because you're eating people. Because I need to get past the gateway. Because I'm not done..." He started crawling toward the Jealousy. "I'm not done until I tear you in half." This update is available on [novel·fire·net](#)

The Jealousy let out a human sob of sorrow and absolute exhaustion. *"Just go away. You are broken too. Both broken. Need rest. Stop fighting."*

"No," Shiv growled. "You're not dead, so I'm not done."

He staggered halfway over to the demon, splashing through an ocean of blood before pain overwhelmed him. He blacked out once more while reaching for the Jealousy.

When he awoke again, he saw a ragged boot nudging him—belonging to the slave girl who had noticed him earlier. Her eyes were wide with worry and terror. "Are you... are you alive?"

"Pull me... closer to the Jealousy. I need to... finish it," Shiv rasped.

After a beat of hesitation, she tried to drag him, but she couldn't budge his weight. Shiv glared at the demon, helpless as it recovered. If it healed fully before he could kill it for good, he was done.

"Help!" the girl cried. "Someone help! Move him—he needs to get near it!"

The other slaves cowered in fear. Shiv's frustration boiled over into anger—and with the anger came strength for his Feat. He fed it into his gravity field and exploded off the ground. The girl stumbled back in surprise. Shiv, still wracked with agony, flung himself into the Jealousy as hard as he could and plunged into the slick, hot warmth of its inner flesh. The act was too much. He almost blacked out again.

The Jealousy screamed—but it was roused. Roused and desperate. Shiv could barely focus as it gathered another spell—and this one started dragging at his mind like claws across skin. *“Need to escape... Need to hide... Hide from... monster... hide from... terror...”*

Shiv tried pushing against the Jealousy, but he *couldn't*.

Godsdamn... This is an... eleven out of ten...

The spell was cast; a twisting, winding rush of Psychomancy that collapsed his mind and the Jealousy's together. Through his agonized thoughts, Shiv realized they were traveling, that they were in the psionic needle the creature could create. Then, they struck something, and he found himself tumbling in a hellscape of fractured memories and kaleidoscopic thoughts.

Is this... someone's mind? A slave's mind? As he tried to get his bearings, the Jealousy cried out, sensing him, reaching out to seize him.

Both of them were broken, mutilated, and fused within the same psionic needle. In the Greater Demon's haste to escape, it failed to notice him—and brought him along. *“You! Still here! See you! BREAK YOU!”*

Shi— Shiv thought. He tried to grab the monster, but this was a place of memories and thoughts. And he was no Hero here. He wasn't even an Adept. The Jealousy struck his mind with its last flagging force, and Shiv howled in agony as his psyche shattered like jagged shrapnel.

He could barely speak or remember who he was. All he knew was pain—then he felt the Jealousy burrowing deeper, tearing him in half mentally as he had done to it physically.

“Tear me now, pathetic creature,” it taunted. *“Tear you first.”*

Shiv tried to fight back—but his Psychomancy was a raindrop hitting a mountain. A broken mountain, but a mountain all the same.

He wasn't anything at all.

Despair almost consumed him—almost.

But Shiv was a pillar that would not crumble or break without a fight. He reached out, entwining his mind with the demon's, pouring his final fury into his Psychomancy, and then he bridged his agony with the Jealousy's as it ripped his mind open down the middle. Absolute, nightmarish misery consumed them both.

They screamed—their egos superimposing over each other in shared wails of torment. The suffering seemed to go on for an eternity, but in the end, he felt the Jealousy disintegrate around him, its sense of self breaking apart under the nightmarish pain first. A burst of Psychomancy washed over him. Then there was physical sensation again. Light. And *so much pain still*.

He came tumbling out of the mind-realm, skidding across the cold, hard ground until he came to a stop in a puddle of blood. He couldn't think. He couldn't—

Darkness. Blissful peace. Nothingness. Beloved ignorance.

This lasted a long while, a much longer while than all the times before. But finally... finally Shiv roused, roused with a whimper of pain as he felt someone touching him, something brushing his face. And then broken fragments came back to him. His mind was in pieces. He had been fighting—he was—he was fighting something—and he was...

He suddenly shot up to his feet, and he gasped, snarling and thrashing at the shapes around him, his fists clenched in instinctive, animalistic violence.

Most of the people were far away from him, huddled along the edges of the room. The ones that were alive that was. The ones that were... He couldn't count them anymore. The Chef Unwavering's effect was gone, and even if it was still there, he didn't think he had the focus to...

The girl was in front of him. She had been touching him. She was... was covered in blood. Everyone was covered in blood. And there were so many bodies. The ground was practically a pool... up to his calves.

Everything was spinning.

He clutched his head and groaned. He took a step forward. He felt blood leaking out from his eyes, from every one of his orifices. He struggled not to vomit, but there was nothing in him to throw up anyway. "Where... where is..."

He turned. His insides plummeted. The Jealousy was entirely healed.

He staggered forward, but froze after half a step. It wasn't moving. It lay embedded within a deeply dented portion of the wall. Some of the teleportation anchor's spells were ruined as well, the patterns looking wrong, some sparking.

Their fight had been nightmarish. Of all the slaves that had been led into the chamber, he guessed maybe only half were still alive.

But while the Jealousy was whole, while it had healed completely and even regrown its limbs, it wasn't moving. It didn't react. He blinked. "Hey? Come on. Let's... Still need to..."

He realized it was dead. Its Psychomancy was more broken than even his Biomancy. It was mind-dead.

It broke before he did.

"You weren't moving for a while," the girl said. Her face was wan, and her hands shook. "You screamed so loud for so long that we didn't want to go near you, but then you stopped moving. We thought you died. I came to check on you. See if you were actually dead for good."

It took him a second to even process what she was saying. He clutched his head again. Everything hurt, everything... hurt so *bad*. His body was battered, strained, exhausted, to say nothing of his mind. He didn't even want to carry his own weight. He just wanted to pass back out, lay back down, and sleep for a hundred years.

His hand was covered in... He stared at the gauntlet on his left hand. It was cracked, but pieces were shaking, slowly coming back together. He looked at the slaves, and he looked at the creature, and then he stared down at the blood pool, and he looked at himself. The remnants of his inner clothes were in tatters. He looked wretched, absolutely miserable. Even the silhouette spoke of pain and exhaustion.

He stumbled closer to his enemy, the... Greater Demon. He stumbled closer, expecting it to attack him at any time, to finish this. Eventually, he reached it. He reached it. He placed his hand on it, and now he was operating entirely by instinct. Entirely. He was searching for something. He was searching for... He saw a corpse on the ground beside him. A body clad in an armored skeleton. A body that still had its helmet on. He walked over. He peeled off the helmet and took the mask underneath in his hands. It was still intact. Nearly broken. But still intact.

"That's..." His eyes rolled. He nearly dropped right then and there. He collapsed with his back against one of the massive beast's tentacles, and he just sighed. For a while, he lay there with his eyes closed, just drowning in his own suffering. After a few minutes, he asked the girl a question. A question that had been bothering him in the backdrop of his consciousness.

"Hey, you... girl," he croaked, eyes still closed.

"Yes?" she said, her voice high and nervous.

“You... Did I tell you my name?” he asked.

It took a moment for her to respond. “No, I don’t think you did.”

He chuckled. “That’s not good. Because I can’t seem to remember it either...”

And then, once more, darkness took him.

Share to your friends

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