

Path of the Deathless (Book 2 Completed)

51 (I) Regroup

No Pathbearer can stand alone.

This line will be written again.

No Pathbearer can stand alone.

It will be repeated a third time.

No Pathbearer can stand alone.

Between every chapter, this line will appear.

No Pathbearer can stand alone.

It does not matter if you are a mere Initiate, an Adept on his way, a Master of a mighty skill, or a Hero beyond what most could ever become—even Legends, even the Gods stand union.

Thirteen Ascendants.

No Pathbearer can stand alone.

Whatever your strengths, whatever your virtues, there are places you will be weak. There are places where you will be found lacking. For every Pathbearer who possesses Master-Tier Physicality—capable of punching their way through a mountain, ripping colossal beasts in half and wrestling titans to the ground—the same Pathbearer will be found vulnerable in mind and body, vulnerable to magic, vulnerable to social subterfuge, vulnerable because they are alone, because their skills do not encompass the totality of the world and the totality of many battlefields they will face.

And that is why Pathbearers fight in teams. That is why they operate together, Masters making up for each other's deficiencies. A team of Masters is an army unto themselves. A single Master is a tragedy waiting to occur: someone who can inflict tremendous damage but will inevitably be brought down when their vulnerability is found, when they are struck in a way their ability cannot defend against.

No Pathbearer can stand alone.

These words are repeated.

So, find those you want to stand beside. Find those who can keep you standing. Find those that will ensure your Path reaches the summit.

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

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Regroup

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He awoke again with a sudden shout. His mind still felt raw, but he could remember. Remember... fighting the *Jealousy*...

He looked behind himself, and he remembered a few fragments more.

He remembered how he was drifting through that mind-broken haze. He remembered how badly the monster wounded him. He remembered... He frowned as he promptly lost track of his own thoughts. What was his name? It was... Wait, he was pretending to be someone, right? Was he pretending to be... Shiv? Was he actually someone else?

Name: Tanner “Shiv” Lowe

Age: 18

Race: Human

Path:

Deathless

Okay. So. He was probably Shiv. It looked more like a nickname instead of his actual name, but looking at his actual name made him reactively *angry*. So. Shiv it was. He could kind of remember his Path and stuff like that, but it was hard to recall... So many things were hard to recall for him.

Then, as he looked forward, he saw all the people still staring at him.

Most of them were seated. They'd helped each other as best they could. The injured lay on their sides or gathered in a pile, given what comfort they had. The others looked haggard and miserable, but they were trying. Everyone was also sweating from the unceasing heat and partially soaked in a pool of blood. Shiv could feel the pool because of his Biomancy. He blinked. He didn't know why he could remember that. Right now, his Biomancy was really painful to use, though. Its field still felt pretty ruptured.

At the head of the survivors was a girl. She was dressed in rags and wore these thick, ruined boots. Boots that were filled with blood. She was still staring at Shiv—staring at him and his previous body beside him. Shiv noticed his corpse as well, still clad in the exoskeleton. With a grunt, he pushed himself off the Greater Demon and—

Shiv froze. *Greater Demon?* He turned around to see the Jealousy. The monster he came to kill. It was... It looked fine. But it wasn't moving. He knew it was dead. He remembered.... That they were battling each other within the mindscape of one of the slaves. He bound his thoughts to it. He learned how to do that from someone he cared for—someone he had been intimate with. Her name was lost to him, drifting among the debris of his mind, but he could remember her pale skin, her subtle smile, the scars on her lip, her eyes of deepest blue, and her hair. She cut her hair shorter because of something. They survived something together. Something intense. Whatever he learned to do with her, he did it to the Greater Demon. And that broke the Jealousy somehow. He felt it break. He felt it come apart before he did. It couldn't handle the pain.

For a few moments, he just stared at the unmoving titan, dead of mind but still whole of body.

Shiv was pretty annoyed about that. He thought about cancer for some reason. Why could it heal like that when people just got cancer and died?

"This is... bullshit," Shiv muttered, unable to shake the feeling of annoyance. And intense triumph. Then he looked at the slave girl. "Did I... do that?"

She blinked in surprise, not expecting him to ask her anything. "... uh, yeah! You did. You... you killed it. I don't know how, but... I think it's dead."

Shiv looked back at the Jealousy and nodded. He clenched his fists. *I must be pretty strong. I feel pretty strong, though a little sore. Nice job, me. We beat the shit out of a mountain-sized demon. Now if I could have only done that without getting my mind shredded...*

"How long was I out?" Shiv asked. He was still reeling from the fight, parts of his memories were pockets—were emptiness. He didn't know if this damage was going to be lasting, but at least he could remember his own name now and sort of recall who he was. The broader parts of his own history and why he was here was still missing, though.

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“Hours,” the girl whispered. She looked shocked, even scared of him. He could feel fear with his Dread Aura skill, and he realized everyone in the room was beyond terrified of him. That filled Shiv with a particularly bitter feeling. His mind might be partially shattered, but many of the people around him were just drifting dead in pools of blood.

“How many of you died?” he asked. “Did... I remember trying to keep the monster away from you. I think.” Shiv clenched his jaw as he looked at the half-submerged face of a pretty young-looking *pale-elf*. “I didn’t want so many of you to die.”

The girl swallowed and nodded quickly. “Okay. So, you—you won’t hurt us, right?”

Shiv looked at the survivors, took in their wounds, and let out a breath. “No. Actually. I think... I think I can help you.” There were still a few hundred slaves. Maybe four hundred? He might be able to heal them if he tried. Shiv triggered his Biomancy—and let out a howl as agony coursed through his being and caused him to fall over once again. He barely stopped himself from blacking out again.

His sudden shout of pain made the slaves flinch. The girl fell backward into the pool of blood, backing away from Shiv on her rear and palms. When he remained in his doubled-over state, she slowly stood back up and regarded him with a look of caution. “Are you alright?”

With a grunt of effort, Shiv pushed himself to his feet and shook his head, causing droplets of blood to fly everywhere. “I think... I think I hurt something deep inside of me,” Shiv choked out. It wasn’t just his mind. It was his soul as well. Trying to use magic right now felt like thrusting a burning rod into an open wound. That was the closest comparison he could think of. He needed more time to recover, but that also meant he wasn’t going to be healing the surviving slaves anytime soon.

“Okay,” Shiv said, taking in a shaky breath. “I can’t use my magic on you. So. I think... I think...” He frowned. He was thinking about food. Making food. In fact, he really wanted to make food right now. If he didn’t, he would feel all kinds of pent-up. This knowledge came to him through raw intuition. “How many of you are hungry?”

The slaves just stared at him. Some of their faces were tear-streaked, some were wounded, most were haggard, and all were scared.

“Hungry?” the girl asked, incredulous.

“Yeah. I don’t feel hungry, but I need to cook something... something to make me feel better.” He turned to regard the Greater Demon he had killed. “Yeah, this thing. Maybe we can try eating this thing. It’s got a lot of meat, right?” The girl gawked at him and

didn't say anything. Several other slaves mirrored her reaction. "I think I might be able to prepare this. I just need to follow my gut."

As Shiv strode over to one of the Jealousy's unmoving tentacles, he noticed just how many people had been crushed under it. The monster had eight limbs, and all of them were splayed wide across the room in death. The entire chamber was not much wider than the creature's armspan, so the fact that a few hundred slaves were still alive surprised Shiv. This could have been a lot worse.

His instincts told him to use his Biomancy to pull the Greater Demon apart. That wasn't an option for Shiv right now, so he went for his second favorite option: brute force. He clenched his fists, his muscles surging with power. The power to shatter mountains, the power to wrestle tsunamis and defy storms. A hyper-reactive gravity field was woven into Shiv's very body, and he felt like he could direct his full strength against anything he could touch. Not only that, though, he now had an intuitive understanding of how to use his gravitic field to bend, to break, to throw, to choke.

"Gravitic Wrestler," Shiv muttered, looking through his personal status. "Huh. That sounds pretty powerful. I think... I think I remember slamming this monster against..." His voice trailed off as he looked up at the walls. Most of this place's interior was deformed, dented outward as if it had sustained multiple immense impacts. Blood was smeared all over the walls. Ten broken nubs jutted out high above, composed of broken focus crystals. "Holy shit. I was strong enough to do that?"

A flash of a memory washed over him. The memory of him slamming the Jealousy against the walls over and over again. He let out a disbelieving laugh as he imagined himself fighting the creature. He was barely a speck next to it. This was like an insect out-wrestling a full-grown person. More memories came to him. Memories of dying over and over. That made him stronger somehow. Was he invincible too? Maybe immortal? Shiv couldn't recall. Whatever the case, his mind was definitely very vulnerable.

"Alright, you big, dead bastard," Shiv murmured as he regarded the Jealousy. Its colossal eye was blank and unmoving, but he still felt uneasy, expecting it to rise and attack him at any moment. When it didn't, Shiv rolled his shoulder and stared at one of its limbs. It was densely armored, ridged by a thick, rough carapace. Shiv looked at his own fist and realized there was a slightly metallic sheen to his skin. "Let's see if I'm actually as strong and tough as I vaguely remember being."

He focused his field around his elbow and drove it against the monster's carapace. His first blow was already colossal. The shell fractured. A shockwave crashed against him—but Shiv found himself able to push back against the force without issue, shrugging it aside as if he were dealing with a breeze. He hit the limb several times more before the outer shell cracked completely, exposing the flesh hidden inside. "Alright," Shiv said, licking his lips. "Just let me rip a good chunk off for everyone."

He reached in with his hands, wondering how he was supposed to rip a good chunk of meat out with his tiny fingers, when he suddenly realized his earlier instincts were right. Everything he touched, he could twist or manipulate with his gravitic field. He closed his fists then and pulled as he was stripping the meat off a drumstick. His field pinched around the edge of the Greater Demon's limb and let him rip a massive boulder of flesh free after some tugging.

The whole process still took a bit of effort, even without the Greater Demon struggling against him. Another memory came back to him. A memory of him breaking the neck of a large and vicious rat. Shiv paused. If he was strong enough to wrestle with a literal mountain, why was he struggling against something like a rat before? How old was he? The status said eighteen. That didn't seem normal.

Maybe puberty hit me harder than most people, Shiv thought, half-jokingly. With his mind the way it was, it very well might be true.

He turned to the slaves, holding a mass of flesh well over ten times his size with one arm. They stared at him, slack-jawed and stunned. Shiv frowned at them, frowned at the blood on the ground, and then considered the pieces of broken carapace that were now scattered about. "Give me a moment. Let's see what I can do with this."

About five minutes later, everyone had gotten onto higher ground and was sitting on one of the Jealousy's limbs to avoid the searing stones and pools of blood. Shiv walked along the length of the Jealousy's limbs as he handed the survivors makeshift carapace bowls and bone daggers he found inside his cloak. "There aren't that many bowls, so you might have to share," Shiv said as he handed his last dagger to the girl. She took the dagger and yelped as it almost dragged her to the ground. She could barely bear its weight even with both hands. Near the Jealousy's main body, Shiv had a massive makeshift cauldron going as well. The cauldron itself was also made from carapace, and he filled it with water after looking through his skills again and realizing he had a Hydromancy Skill. It wasn't very strong, but after some effort, he managed a steady stream that he first used to cleanse the slaves and himself of blood before turning it on the cauldron. After that, he used his Pyromancy to heat the water to a fast boil before he started peeling the massive chunk of meat he took from the Jealousy earlier into slices.

The flesh was almost the color of night, but spots of redness and bits of rough texture gave the meat some added character. Shiv used his Gravitic Wrestler Skill to rip neat and large strips out of the meat before mincing it down to small, perfect squares. The moment he started preparing food, everything became *clearer* to him. Every action he did was *perfect*. No mistakes, all focus; utterly unstoppable.

The meat came aglow with an ethereal light, but Shiv didn't even question it that much. He just let instinct take hold and worked accordingly. He first cleaned the meat thoroughly—picked out bits of tendon, secured and layered it with a well-distributed sheen of fat. Then, he started cooking the slices in boiling water, casting small spells of

water and fire as he judged the state of the meat without fail. Soon, he was handing strips of flesh to the slaves who had bowls.

They looked at him and his food with wide eyes and reluctant expressions. Fear still gripped them, so Shiv decided to do a demonstration by eating a bit of the meal himself first. “Don’t worry, it’s probably safe. I’m pretty sure it’s safe.” He paused and frowned. “You’re allowed to not eat it if I die, how’s that?”

Several of the slaves looked at each other.

“Am I having another stroke?” a hoarse voice asked.

Shiv ignored them as he bit into the flesh. He expected something hard, tasteless, and mostly serviceable. What he got was a very subtle, salty-bitter flavor thanks to what he did with the Greater Demon’s fat and how long he let the meat simmer each time. The texture wasn’t too bad either. Not easy to bite through, but quite chewy and softened enough for even the teeth of a Pathless.

And the longer Shiv chewed, the more he liked it. The taste lingered on his tongue, and the meat was the most filling thing he remembered ever eating. “Maybe... maybe I’m a chef?” Shiv theorized as he kept chewing. It certainly fit with the name of his skill. “Maybe... maybe I save people from giant monsters and then cook them. Like some kind of... monster cooker?” As he was considering this, something *burst* in his mind, and Shiv gasped as something clicked back in place.

Perfected Boiled Jealousy Meat has granted you temporary Cognitive Regeneration.

The Challenger is roaring with laughter.

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

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Regroup

Shiv felt a building ache pass through his skull as he remembered something. He remembered being a chef for years at... at *Blackedge*.

He was doing all this for Blackedge. And... and this place was a teleportation anchor and a monster den in one. He hadn't come here as a monster cook or anything like that—though it sounded interesting to him now. He came here because the Jealousy was guarding a gateway he needed to get through, or something, and it was also going to help him escape. Somehow.

Lots of details were still missing, but his broken memories were slowly melting back together. He took another bite and was about to tell the slaves to try, when he heard a loud sob.

He saw an old human man weeping as he ripped another chunk out of the meat. "This is... this is the best meal I've ever had?!" Several others who hadn't touched their bowls looked at him like he was insane, but an elf with burn-scars covering most of her face shrugged and bit down as well.

She let out a gasp and then a moan. "Gods! System!" And she turned frenzied, stuffing more of the meat into her mouth.

A dam of tension broke. The rest of the slaves started eating as well, including the only girl brave enough to approach Shiv. Soon, groans, tears, and chatter grew among the slaves, and Shiv found himself smiling. Despite all the horror and death, this was a nice moment, and he wanted to fill his life with more instances like these.

"Well," Shiv whispered, grinning at the survivors passing along his food, "glad you all like it." He looked at the metal walls surrounding him—and spotted a set of doors. He looked at his hands and hummed. "Maybe... Maybe I can force my way out. I'm strong enough. Maybe—"

The partially broken spell patterns lining the inside of the teleportation anchor then flashed. The Jealousy spasmed as a wave of pressure washed over it. The slaves began to cry out. Shiv's heart sped up. He turned, expecting the Greater Demon to be alive again. Instead, it was still dead, just...

He remembered something else. *Teleportation*. This was what teleportation felt like. Spatial bubbles washed over you, pulled you from one place to another. He could dimly remember it happening faster than this, though. *Maybe to do with the size of the chamber? Or because it's damaged?* he thought. What was certain was that they were about to be teleported somewhere—somewhere Shiv thought he needed to be.

As panic overtook the slaves, Shiv turned to them and called out. "Hey! I think we're about to be teleported. I don't know where, but that might be what's happening." Most of them were still panicked, but a few were listening. The girl blinked at Shiv, then she turned to the others, calling for them to calm down. To his surprise, she managed to do a much better job than he did. As they simmered down, the pressure built. Shiv could see a wave of distortions slowly closing on them. "Okay, how many of you have Master-Tier Toughness?"

All of them stared blankly.

“Right,” Shiv muttered. “Probably a stupid question.” He had a bad feeling about them being teleported. If they ended up in midair or some kind of volcano, these slaves were going to die immediately. He wondered if he could protect them all with his field if everyone held hands, but the idea seemed unlikely to work and kind of stupid. So, Shiv improvised. If he was the toughest thing around in the room, then the second toughest was the Jealousy.

The dead Jealousy. A dead Jealousy with a lot of space and protective tissue inside its body.

“Alright!” Shiv called. “Everyone, follow me, quickly! I know how we're getting out of this.” He leapt over to the main body of the Jealousy and drove his fingers through its body-carapace. With a snarl of effort and a good deal of ripping, pulling, and twisting, he snapped a piece of shell free and turned his efforts on the protected flesh. This time, instead of clawing a chunk of meat out, he tore a chasm into the Greater Demon—a chasm that he pried open wider with his gravitic field.

“That should be big enough to hold a few hundred people,” Shiv muttered. He turned to wave at the slaves. “Alright. Get in!” A great many mouths fell open as they tried to understand what he was asking them to do. The spatial waves emitted by the non-broken spell patterns were increasing now. The teleportation was going to happen soon. The girl looked at him, the chasm, and then at him again. “Look, we’re about to be teleported, and this is the safest place I can think of. It’s either this or try to wait in the blood pool. I can’t remember how you guys got here, but judging from those collars, I don’t think you all got lost on your way back home.”

The girl grimaced and sighed. “Are you sure it’s safe?” The source of this content is Nove1Fire

“No. But it’s the best I got.”

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Her sigh intensified. “Alright!” she called out. “Everyone, let’s... go *inside* the monster!”

As the slaves rushed in, Shiv could see the Jealousy heal a little bit. “Ah. That’s good. Might even serve as a fusion. I’ll see if I can keep tearing it open or something. I’ll stay near the outside of its body and let it partially heal over me so I can see what’s going on.”

The girl, being the last to enter with the slaves, just bit her lip. “I... I’m *scared*.”

Shiv looked at the other slaves huddled in the messy wound-cave behind her. He sighed. "Yeah, I don't blame you. But I'll try to keep you alive, alright? I'll do my best if you do yours." He aimed his best smile at her, and she just nodded

"Okay," she said, slowly backing into the cave.

Shiv, as he said, took his place right where he made the wound. The Jealousy healed fast, so in seconds, a layer of scabbed skin was holding him in place, leaving only his upper body and head outside the Jealousy. He periodically tore the demon's insides open further to push against the regeneration and drove holes into the flesh so the slaves could keep breathing, but this wasn't going to be comfortable. Not by a long shot.

The spatial pressure clamped down on Shiv a second later, and he rolled his shoulders. He pressed his hands close to the Jealousy and, to his surprise, realized he could use his field to move its limbs. The damn thing was ridiculously heavy, but he might just be able to sort of drag or fling it a bit like some kind of giant corpse puppet.

"Alright," Shiv breathed out. "Let's see how this works out. And if more of my memories come back fast enough for me to remember what I'm supposed to do next."

The Challenger is watching with great interest.

"Is the gateway activating? How long? Is he coming?" Siggy bit her lip as she looked at the towering, inactive archway from outside. They managed to slip through a few hours ago. The entire process had been eerily simple. She, Tran, and Heather walked to the gateway and casually passed through using the spatial magic thingy that Leu showed Heather. They also had badges pinned on their armor, marking them as *gateway engineers*. Of the three, only Heather really had any clue what she was doing, and so the other two pretended to be her assistants.

After that... Well, they just had to blend in for a few hours. Blend in while riders sailed above and guards wandered around.

That was why Heather had Tran repeatedly striking a portion of the archway under the guise of "maintaining its Enchantment integrity." Meanwhile, she was constantly shaping the same spell over and over again as she muttered random nonsense under her breath. Every now and again, she and Tran would talk about something that had nothing to do with the archway, but they rambled on about random Enchantments when someone got close.

"I mean, seriously," Siggy hissed, looking up again. Above, there were like a hundred wyvern riders patrolling at any given moment, gliding through the air, most just lazily circling the place. Outward, there were a bunch of smaller gates, most manned by fire dimensionals—fire dimensionals that Siggy once saw fry a clean hole through a

massive cave biter. When a cave biter died like a collapsing mountain? You *felt* it more than you saw it.

And then, there were the massive cave biters themselves—literally, like, hundreds of them, clustered and cluttered right outside the gate. Because of the Gate Lord's lockdown order, a whole lot of goods and slaves were just bunched up outside, halfway up into the faraway wilderness, even. They'd set up camps and intended to wait things out. It wasn't Gate Theborn's first lockdown anyway.

If only they knew what was coming.

If only Siggy knew. Here she was with two Yellowstone Republic Slayers from the surface, waiting for a guy who might just kill her at the end of this. The other option was getting killed early. Shit choices all around. That could practically be the title of Siggy's autobiography.

"So. Like. Do you feel anything?" Siggy asked again.

"Just wait," the Jump Mage snarled. "I'm not feeling that great either, goblin. But if we freak out and one of those riders comes down to ask us a question, or one of those guards that keep coming around to flirt with me starts asking actual questions, we might actually be screwed. Do you understand?"

"Yeah, well," she shot back, glaring at the Adept *Junk* Mage, "if our dear, psychotic, murderous, bone-wearing friend doesn't show up, then we're screwed anyway, right?"

Heather was about to say something when there was a flicker—a fracture of spatial magic that danced and spread across the archway. The gateway was triggering, only briefly, only an instant, but it was drawing something across—something immense. Even Siggy could feel it from the pressure.

"Alright, alright, here he comes. Just get ready." Heather nudged Tran.

The other Slayer drew in a long, deep breath and clutched a saber at his hip. "All right, hopefully we don't need this, but..."

And then, Siggy looked up as a massive sphere of spatial magic shot up from the top of the archway—a sphere expanding wider and larger. For a moment, her heart stilled, her breath quickened, and a colossal limb extended outward. A tentacle.

The goblin merc swallowed. "I don't think he won that fight, guys."

"Shit, no!" Heather cried. Another limb, and soon the Jealousy's shape—its intact shape—was sliding back across.

Siggy felt her insides sink. “Well, I guess we won’t be seeing our bone-covered friend anymore.”

The Jealousy glared down at them with its... *Wait, why’s its eye so unfocused? Why’s it...* And then Siggy watched it fall—watched it drop without creating that shadow-magic-shit it usually did. And it just kept falling. Siggy realized it wasn’t stopping at all, just speeding up.

“Uh, guys?” Siggy muttered, pointing at the Jealousy. Then, it spattered a few dozen wyvern riders and other aerial Pathbearers as a shockwave of force exploded off the other end of the Greater Demon, spiking it down toward the earth at an angle.

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“Heather!” Tran shouted. “I think it’s coming right at us!”

“Run!” Heather cried, snapping out of her trance. All three broke into a desperate dash, but they weren’t going to be fast enough.

Then, another voice rang out—a loud, screaming one. As Siggy looked up, the Jealousy was shifting. Another faint pulse exploded out from its side, and the entire demon’s trajectory changed. It twisted through the air, unbalanced, before crashing down on the ground just a few dozen meters in front of her. Debris flew everywhere. A shockwave threw them all off their feet, and several following tremors made Siggy think that some of the cave biters had been knocked over as well.

As the smoke and dust cleared, Siggy coughed, staggering to her feet. She felt an arm grip her. She nearly screamed, but then saw it was Heather, pulling both her and Tran out of the chaos. The goblin had a few cuts on her face, but—

“Hey, guys!” came a familiar voice. All three paused. Siggy knew that voice. So did Heather. So did Tran. They followed the voice back to its point of origin—back to the top of the Jealousy’s main body.

As the dirt stopped falling and the dust cleared, what she saw, sticking out from the top of the Greater Demon's shattered flesh like a skin tag, was Shiv. It looked like his upper body was partially fused with the Greater Demon. He stared at them for a moment, face lit with confusion and faint exhilaration. He was sweating hard; his body tensing and pulsing. His shirt and armor were gone, and the mask was nowhere to be seen.

"Hey, guys!" he cried, waving a hand. "I think, I think I know you, right?" Siggie didn't even know how to reply. Neither did the Slayers, for that matter. "Well, if I do," Shiv continued, "can you tell me where I'm supposed to go? I, uh, might have developed amnesia."

A long, whining sound came from Heather. "Oh god, we're gonna die."

Shiv slammed his palm down, and a wound tore open along the Jealousy. A wound that expanded into a bloody cavern right in front of Siggie and the others. "Get in! I think... I think the rest of these guys are gonna start chasing us soon."

A beam of force splashed down against him—a magical attack. It hit him with enough force to launch Siggie off her feet, but Shiv just pushed it aside like he was dealing with water from a garden hose.

"Quick!" Shiv shouted. "We should go before they learn to use something other than physical attacks against me."

Tran and Heather looked at each other, but Siggie was already running for the gore-hole Shiv made. "I don't know about you two, but I think I wanna hide in the demon!"

Her words proved convincing. They followed just seconds after.

Three kilometers away, crouched on the edge of a small mountain while disguised as slavers and mercenaries, Uva, her team, Valor, and Adam stared at the pandemonium unfolding at the gate.

"Why... Why is the Jealousy attacking its own people?" Ikki asked, blinking. "And why is it moving like that?"

The massive demon was awkwardly dragging itself along the ground, bouncing and jerking from one place to another like it was being shoved or thrown repeatedly. Beside her, Adam's eyes of sky-blue and radiant sunrise burned with mana. He cast his Heroic-Tier Awareness Skill out to get a better look. It had allowed them to find this hidden place as an observation post while avoiding patrols.

That same skill now left Heroic Pathbearer Adam Arrow gawking in utter disbelief.

“What in the Broken Moon?” Adam said, staring at the scene unfolding before his senses.

“What’s wrong?” Uva hissed. “What do you see?”

Adam didn’t have the words.

A few seconds ago, the Greater Demon reappeared after a few hours of absence. The Jealousy had manifested in the air, its arms limp, descending as if a fallen mountain. Adam assumed that was simply a byproduct of the teleportation, that the monster might be momentarily disoriented. But it just kept falling, and when he noticed its typical veil of shadows wasn’t shrouding it, he got a strange feeling.

As it smeared a few wyvern riders beneath its plunging body, he realized something was immensely wrong.

He cast his senses onto the Jealousy, following sounds and sights, launching his senses toward the horizon. Then he heard a voice he knew. He heard Shiv’s voice, shouting incoherently. And then Adam’s senses arrived at the source of the noise to see Shiv lodged waist-deep in the Jealousy. The Greater Demon’s carapace was cracked. The Deathless Pathbearer looked utterly wretched, but it seemed like he was somehow pushing the entire Jealousy forward with how his muscles were straining. Adam also felt an unnatural field of force yank hard on the Jealousy.

The Young Lord clenched his teeth. *Shiv... if you somehow got Heroic-Tier Biomancy in the few days you were gone, I’m going to either kill myself, or kill you for good...*

“Adam!” Uva cried, gripping his shoulder..

Adam couldn’t process what he was seeing. His mind refused, and so he gave Uva the only explanation he could think of. “I think I’m having a stroke.”

“What?” Uva said. She let out an exasperated sigh and immediately connected with his mind. He felt her moving through his thoughts, fusing with his active perception. It was slightly uncomfortable, but Adam didn’t respond. He was transfixed as a watchtower unleashed a coruscating plume of flame over Shiv, which just washed over him without much of an effect.

This... this is bullshit! That must be Master-Tier Toughness! At least!

And by now, Uva was gawking too, attuned to Adam’s sight as she was. Ikki was badgering both of them for details. The Umbral Psychomancer let out a choking sound. “Hero Adam,” she managed.

“Yes, Sister Uva,” Adam replied.

"I think... I think I am experiencing your stroke."

"Everyone! Everyone, stop that man!" a wyvern rider cried from above. "Stop him—he's... he's *kidnapping* the Jealousy!"

Magical and physical attacks began crashing down all around Shiv. Most struck the Jealousy; a few burst against him. Anything that was merely Adept simply bounced off. A few Master-Tier blows left slight bruises and cuts, but he adapted to them. He kind of wished he had enough Biomancy to don his bone armor, but he made do for now.

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He picked a random direction and started flinging the Jealousy forward. He might have overestimated his strength a little bit. Shiv could lift the Jealousy, crack one of its limbs, even overpower it in specific circumstances. But holding it entirely aloft and trying to constantly launch it with his field was still beyond him. He needed a lot more levels in Gravitic Wrestler to do that.

Right now, he was just dragging it across the ground, doing his best to keep the giant monster moving.

Mercenaries, slaves, and even giant cave biters screamed as they fled from his path. The Jealousy's enormous limbs were dragged behind, bouncing off the floor and ripping massive chunks out of the earth with every pull of his gravitic field. Shockwaves shook the world every time Shiv exerted himself, and his muscles were burning. But he still had to keep going.

Stopping was going to end with him very, very dead, considering the number of people coming for him.

"Oh god, I'm gonna really get a good workout from this," he muttered, launching the Jealousy forward again.

A splash of fire impacted his chest, sweeping over his form. The heat was immense, but his Adamantine Adaption kept him from suffering anything more than discomfort. He'd faced this before, at another teleportation anchor—an elemental golem, he thought.

He narrowed his eyes at the many watchtowers, each concentrating blazing beams on him, burning the Jealousy, burning him, but harming neither.

"All right, then," he muttered, "let's see if we can knock some of you down." He channeled his strength once more, and the Jealousy tumbled forward. It was no longer a mind-dead mountain, but a moving avalanche. It exploded along the ground. He considered using some other skill, but he couldn't quite remember which one he always

used. It was supposed to be his first Master-Tier Skill. He kept using his Gravitic Wrestler instead.

As he loomed closer, he saw fire dimensionals abandoning their posts atop the watchtowers—and he smashed through them a moment later. Wyvern riders descended, slamming down atop Shiv. One brought an axe down on his head, and the blade shattered; a shard slammed into the rider's throat, and he gurgled and fell off. A woman came in behind Shiv, jamming her knife into his throat while her massive beast clawed and bit at him. Her wrist broke. The beast's teeth broke. Shiv sloppily backhanded them off the Jealousy. A third rider caught Shiv by the neck for a rear-naked choke; Shiv tapped their elbow and, with his Gravitic Wrestler, ripped their arm off and impaled them with it before throwing them off the side of the Greater Demon.

Then, Shiv cried out as a golden arrow tore an entire chunk out of his shoulder, giving his durability no time to adapt. A lance of intense flame burned the same place. His adaption shifted—and Shiv realized a limitation of his skill: It could only adapt to so many types of damage at once. With a roar of effort, he yanked the Jealousy upward and sent it “leaping” into the air, its huge limbs smashing into a few of his pursuers.

But there were Master-Tiers hunting him, and they wouldn't be denied.

Shiv felt something enter his Psychomancy field. An enemy crashed down just behind him, bearing a colossal blade gleaming with mind mana. That was definitely something he couldn't just ignore. “Oh shit.”

A silver-black automaton with a crystalline tombstone for a helmet pointed its blade at him and spoke. “I don't know who you are, but when I bring Confriga your head—”

An arrow hit them in the face and detonated, throwing them off balance—and in range of Shiv. The Deathless seized them by the leg and slammed them against the Jealousy's carapace over and over. When the automaton was smoking and broken, Shiv pulled it close and, with a burst of parting gravity, ripped it in half. *Whatever you were, a Master-Tier in Toughness wasn't it.*

He chucked the dead automaton and its blade into his cloak before he flung the Jealousy using his field again. He was off the black road now, crashing through the large mushrooms and woods. Overhead, arrows flew in from all directions—mana-tipped bolts of every type and speed—crashing into the pursuing riders, throwing them off, killing the weaker ones outright.

Shiv laughed. There was someone out there helping him. He wasn't alone! He had *friends*! That was a pretty nice feeling. A reinvigorating feeling. Despite his body being drenched in sweat and his muscles spasming with effort, he kept going. Because Shiv always kept going. That was one thing he knew for sure.

A heartbeat later, a spatial arrow crashed next to him, and someone emerged from the teleportation bubble. He blinked as what looked like a glass-armored, pale elf regarded him, lifting her visor to let him see her face. Then, he realized he knew her. The short hair, those eyes, her face—memories of intimacy and comfort rushed through him. He was so transfixed on her that he didn't even notice several other spatial arrows crashing down around him, bringing more unknown allies into the battle.

"Shiv!" the pale elf cried. She bore a look of concern, and he felt her mind mana reach out into him. He reactively flinched as he recalled the Jealousy tearing at him, but he forced himself to relax—and calmed even more as she clung to him and created a shroud of protective ice around both of them. For a few moments, he felt her nudge things around in his head.

She bit her bottom lip in near-anguish. "Your mind... What did this to you?"

Shiv looked down at the Jealousy, and she narrowed her eyes at him. "You... How are you—"

"I got Gravitic Wrestler." Shiv grinned. "I think it's a Master-Tier Skill Fusion of Physicality and something else. It lets me move big things around with a field."

A loud snarl of rage sounded from her brooch at the same time as a tide of Pyromancy arrows slashed overhead. They detonated at random positions, creating a wall of fire behind the Jealousy, disrupting the flight patterns of riders. A masculine voice came from the brooch. *"Uva!"* Shiv knew this voice too. *"Uva! Did he say Master-Tier Skill Fusion? Tell him to kill himself! It's been less than a week!"*

"Who's that?" Shiv asked with a frown. "He sounds like an asshole."

"He is an asshole," the pale elf muttered. "But he's a good asshole. An honorable one."

"Did he just call me an asshole? Wait, did he say 'who's that?' Does he not remember who I am?"

A howl came from behind Uva as a wyvern and its rider exploded toward them in a gust of Aeromancy. "Look out," Shiv said. He casually passed the pale elf from one hand to another as if she were a small ball. She let out a surprised noise that turned into a near yelp as Shiv punched the charging attackers. A shockwave blasted out over the wyvern and its rider. The beast blew apart. The rider outright disintegrated. The Jealousy was slowing, so Shiv pulled on its mass again to keep it going.

"Hey," he said, staring at the wide-eyed pale elf he was holding close with his other arm. "You know where we're going? Because I don't. I don't really remember much of anything at all? Except for you. Kind of." A line popped in his head—something he instinctively had the urge to say. "I don't think I could forget someone like you. Even if I lost all my memories."

Silver Tongue > 12

"I—is he for real?" the voice sputtered from her brooch. The pale elf, though, was fighting to keep her features in check as she gawked. *"You... Just get him out of that thing so I can shoot him with a spatial arrow."*

"Shiv, we need to go," the pale elf said. "Can you free yourself?"

"Yeah, but there are other people inside," Shiv said. "I can't leave them."

The pale elf blinked. "What?"

Shiv slammed his palm down against the Jealousy and tore a narrow hole just beneath her. A narrow hole that let her see all the slaves, the Slayers, and the goblin merc that was loudly throwing up inside the Greater Demon's "meat cavern."

The pale elf's jaw dropped. The man speaking through her brooch sounded like he was about to have an aneurysm. *"Is—is—that Shiv—you—are you hiding slaves inside the corpse of a Greater felling Demon?"*

Shiv wasn't sure how the guy could see that, but he just shrugged. "Seemed like a good idea to me at the time."

A loud groan came from the stranger as Shiv felt an attacker briefly enter his Biomancy field—only to get decapitated by a lightning arrow. Newest update provided by Nov3lFire.net

"Uva! Change of plans. Have Shiv drag the bloody Jealousy over the ravine we saw."

"Into First Blood territory?" Uva hissed.

"Yes. Hopefully this can start another skirmish—one that will cover... whatever kind of escape we can manage. Godsdammit, Shiv, how did you even come up with this idea?"

"Well, right now, the answer is severe brain damage," Uva deadpanned. "I have no idea how he's still sane. Or capable of anything more than drooling out the side of his mouth."

The stranger sighed. *"Shiv might be too stubborn to turn fully stupid. Anyway. Ravine. Hurry. I can see some damn riders coming for me too."*

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52 (I) Escape

It does not require overly sophisticated means to break or harm a mind using Psychomancy. Ultimately, the desired effect can be achieved by wrenching memories out of place, crashing them into others, or simply blending everything you can see together. This is called scrambling. It is among the most basic and earliest attacks a Psychomancer learns, and it easily inflicts schizophrenia. Such is why Psychomancers are regarded with suspicion, fear, and active deterrence.

When facing a Psychomancer, it is important to either have a Psychomancer of your own, Magical Resistance in yourself or your armor, or, ultimately, stealth. If the Psychomancer does not know you are there, you may have the advantage, and you may be able to eliminate them before something happens. However, should you be caught off guard by a Psychomancer, or should they break your defenses, then there are a few steps you can take—not to avoid harm—it is too late for that—but to preserve your mind.

Focus. Focus on a specific subset of memories, actively switching your thoughts. Think about things you are willing to lose. This will take great discipline, but it will require the Psychomancer to use effort to sift through your mind. An Adept can likely break your mind in a few seconds, but every second more you buy is a second for someone to assist you, someone to save you, and a second where you reduce the damage you suffer. This could be the difference between a mind healer managing to put your mind back together in a relatively intact condition, or absolute madness for the rest of your days, be it years or centuries.

That is another reason why Psychomancers are so feared—for they can inflict fates worse than death. To have your mind broken, to be inflicted with fast-acting dementia, or to suffer hallucinations every time you have a specific thought results in debilitating life conditions.

No matter how strong you are, if your mind is broken, then you will be effectively trapped inside your flesh. For the pilot is dead, and though the vehicle may endure, there is nothing to guide it. It remains an empty shell.

The greatest historically documented tragedy of Psychomancy-induced damage to date was cemented in the case of Cassayla. Cassayla, the impossibly powerful Hydromancer. Cassayla, the Siren that Turns the Seas. Cassayla, Defender of the Enchained Peoples. And, ultimately, Cassayla the Broken. Broken in battle against the great Jealousy. Broken forevermore, with her people desperately trying to put her back together, even after five hundred years. And still she languishes. And still she wanders in her madness. Cassayla, the Lost.

Cassayla was—is—a Legendary Pathbearer. Odds are that you, dear reader, aren't. Mind yourself. And mind your mind. It is a terrible thing to lose.

-Fortress of Thought, Essential Reading at Phoenix Academy for the Course PSYDEF-101

52 (I)

Escape

“And thus are the fruits of my interrogation. I expect to gain more information soon, but I think we must beware. Our paranoia is insufficient. Whatever game is being played, the Republic is lying to its own people, even its Inquisitors. I suspect that the Aviary spy is here for more than just the Animacy Core. His targets have been too varied. Too chaotic.”

As Leu finished her false report, she watched as Gate Lord Confriga's expression turned into one of barely suppressed rage in the reflection of the glass. She was in his personal quarters. Well, *one* of his personal quarters. This was a place where one was punished for failure, or rewarded, in the rare case of success. The ground had grates in it for all the blood that had been spilled here. Those who often ventured into this place were like Leu—very good at their duties—or those who understood that they were likely heading for an execution.

Leu studied the Gate Lord for a few moments longer. The Lesser Marshal was glaring out over the many rivers. He was staring down at the only gateway left open, the length of this building crossing over back to their homeworld. Confriga's personal tower was the only one in the entire gate that was built downward rather than upward, pointed towards the bedrock and the rivers of molten metal rather than the mana core in the sky.

It was a sign, a sign of Confriga's yearning to return to his home, but also a sign and a tantalizing taunt against him, purposefully inflicted during his exile. To cross back over without gaining the favors of the Lords of Law and earning a writ of redemption from one of them would see him spurned still by Lord Scorn.

It brought Leu no end of pleasure, to see the Gate Lord so troubled, so tormented by his failures, so lost as to what was actually happening.

I wish and I yearn to see that final expression on your face when you die, when I split you slowly, she thought, the hate coursing through her blood like a physical presence. But she mastered it. She made the hate cold instead of hot, and she bided her time.

She had a powerful ally now. A disciple of the Great Valor Thann. This Master Shiv was a strange Pathbearer, unlike any she'd met before. Considering the nature of his most powerful skills and the way he operated, he was more like a monster wrapped in the

mind and flesh of a human. Despite this, she felt that she could trust him. She felt that she *had* to trust him, that this was a sign of the System's favor, that her revenge was finally going to reach its climax. At this moment, the Jealousy was likely dead, and Shiv was likely in the process of escaping with the others.

Soon, he would return with the Legendary Pathbearer. And they would bring an end to Confriga's life.

What happened after that didn't matter to Leu.

"Do you miss home, Guardshead?" Confriga asked. Leu was momentarily caught off guard by this question. Confriga was not one for open sentimentality, but she could hear the weariness in his voice.

"Sometimes," she replied, "but I think mainly of my duties and of the processes of this gate."

Confriga grunted. "I have always envied you, Leu. You know this, yes?" He turned to regard her, and once more she found herself surprised.

"You do, Lesser Marshal?"

"Indeed, though you might not possess the virtuous urges to inflict pain, to dominate, to break. Lamentable. But your focus, your dedication to your cause, your dedication to your role and your duties, you are..." He laughed. "...almost too good for me, Guardshead. Almost. I wish I had more like you."

Little did he know the irony in this statement. If there were more of her, he would have been long dead.

He was about to say something else when somebody burst through the door. A human mercenary, looking haggard and terrified, rushed in. She realized he was a Dimensionalist, the badge on his armor indicating that he was from *Gateway Engineering*. Leu tensed. Had something gone wrong? Had—

"The Jealousy has been kidnapped! He stole the Jealousy!" The man's eyes were wide with terror, and his mouth was open wide. Spittle was flying all over the Lesser Marshal's table.

Did you know this text is from a different site? Read the official version to support the creator.

The Gate Lord simply regarded the man for a moment, looked to Leu, and then, with an infuriated snort, he strode forth and backhanded the Dimensionalist. The man didn't fly off in a certain direction. He wasn't splattered or crushed. He simply vanished into a puff of bloody mist, his armor disintegrating into shrapnel. A few shards crashed into Leu,

but they bounced off her body, bruising and nothing more. Still, it was a staggering reminder of how much stronger than her the Lesser Marshal was. She couldn't achieve anything like that with raw strength, not even close. She may have been a blade in the dark, but she was trying to find a way to slit the throat of a titan.

"You believe this?" Confriga said, his voice bearing a growl of primal rage. "These—these—these deceptions, these jokes that the mercenaries come up with. Do you remember them planting a bucket above my door and having it splash down on me?" Confriga snarled.

Leu almost laughed. She remembered how many mercenaries were flayed after that little prank. There were no more pranks in Gate Theborn after that.

But just then, another person rushed into the room, this one a Vulteg, one of their species. They bore the same agitation as the mercenary, the same terror in their posture. Suddenly, Leu thought something was very, very wrong, but she couldn't tell what. The Vulteg messenger repeated the same thing the recently-vaporized mercenary had said: "Lesser Marshal! Lesser Marshal! He—they—they've stolen the Jealousy! They've kidnapped the Greater Demon!"

And this time, both Confriga and Leu looked on, truly stunned.

"*What?*" both of them spat at once.

As they tried to decipher what was going on, Leu was so lost in her own mind that she forgot something important. A series of explosions went off above them. Ones originating from the mana bombs she had planted all over the gate's many districts. From above, tremors ran down, and the entire building shook. It took Leu a moment to remember that she was the perpetrator of this act and that she had a role to play right now.

"Uh, oh no," she said, a little too late. "I think we are under attack. The spy has struck again, and, and I think he... he is also the one that kidnapped the Jealousy." Her reactions were messy, but it was excusable, considering how caught off guard they were.

"Find him," the Gate Lord snapped. His eye was wide with rage. His body tremored with power, twisting Necromantic mana bleeding from the three skulls locked to his chest. "Find!" His roar echoed out from the mana core, out over the entire gate, and his rage was palpable. "HIIIIIM!"

Leu just remained confused. *Kidnapping the Jealousy*, she thought. *How does one kidnap a Greater Demon?*

Kidnapping a Greater Demon the size of a small mountain required someone to be incredibly awesome or insanely mad. Shiv, at that moment, felt like he was literally both on account of his brain damage.

Spells and skills of all types were bombarding the topside of the Jealousy, crashing against its Master-Tier carapace, splashing against Shiv's Master-Tier Adamantine Adaption. But while wings and squadrons of enemy aerial Pathbearers hounded him, they were struck from the sky by arrows of lightning, of mind, of frost and fire. Absolute chaos raged all around them, and Shiv *loved it*.

Atop the body of the Greater Demon, a new theater of war was taking place. A theater of war that was going to escalate soon, as they drew closer to an approaching cliffside overlooking a ravine. With a final burst of his Gravitic Wrestler, Shiv shouted and flung the Jealousy over the edge. He cried out for those helping him to hold on, and most of them did, each one clutching a crevice or a jutting portion of the Jealousy's broken shell.

Uva didn't need to hold on to anything, because he was holding on to her. She, meanwhile, launched Psychomancy spells in one hand and massive stabs of frost with the other. Her twin magics blasted in the air, and Shiv heard several Pathbearers cry out, heard their Magical Resistance crackle and burst behind them.

A rush of force pulled against his insides as they fell, and he reduced the feeling by tugging upward with his gravity field. He couldn't quite fly with the Jealousy. Well, he couldn't truly fly normally. He was mostly just pulling and flinging himself with his gravity field. Still, he could slow the Greater Demon's descent, make it so that it wasn't a violent impact, but rather a controlled landing. Follow current novels on novel ♦ fire

A particularly youthful, girlish voice screamed out from beside him. "I think I'm gonna be really sick," a pale elf said with a chuckle, clutching a broken cavity in the Jealousy's shell, her other hand clinging tight to a glass halberd.

Shiv's feelings towards the group that came to save him were pretty positive. Broken memories inside his wounded mind were beginning to itch as they fused back together. He experienced something like this with them before. They fought together. They knew each other. He trusted them, and they more than trusted him. *I think I even died for them... more than once...*

As they fell, as more spells crashed against the Jealousy, Shiv tilted the Greater Demon's body and swung its limbs upward. The massive tentacles of the Jealousy parried and blunted some of the heavier-hitting attacks. Colossal explosions unleashed by Master-Tier enemies shook the Greater Demon and launched Shiv a bit off course, but with a snarl of effort, Shiv wrestled the massive beast back to a point of stability.

Just then, from the side of the ravine, he saw a series of shapes blast out through a forest of trees that appeared to be drenched in blood under the dim illumination of the sky-ceiling's glowing veins. At first, he thought he was looking at a swarm of bats, but then, as they came closer, approaching at terrifying speeds, Shiv realized they weren't bats at all, but humanoids. Constellations of crimson spells danced around their bodies as their forms shifted. Some sprouted bladed digits. Others grew more lashing limbs lined with jagged teeth. These were Biomancers. These were....

Something clicked together in Shiv's mind. These were high vampires. These were warriors of the First Blood coming to defend their territory. This was the border between the Compact of Babel and the Court of the First Blood. He finally realized what the voice speaking from Uva's brooch was planning. He was going to trigger a border skirmish to cover Shiv's escape.

Asshole or not, the guy in the brooch was pretty clever.

The high vampires came, numbering around a few hundred. Shiv couldn't truly tell how strong of a force this was, but most of them had mana fields that were probably in the Adept threshold. There were, however, four that were Masters, and two of those Masters were superior to his Biomancy in both field size and strength.

As they clashed their mana fields against his, Shiv gritted back a roar of pain as he felt his still-wounded mana struggle to stay intact. But they didn't launch their spells at him first. Rather, he felt them fling their magic against the wyvern riders and other Compact guards that were attacking him while also flinging their magic against the Jealousy.

"Vampires incoming!" Uva cried. Her voice was transmitted telepathically to the rest of the group, and Shiv felt them respond immediately. He was connected to their minds as well—could sense their alertness. He caught flashes of what they were doing, who they were fighting off, how strained or how chaotic their minds seemed. It was like he was synchronized with them, each of their minds stacked on top of each other. And it was all thanks to Uva.

"Brace!" Shiv cried mentally.

Just then, they crashed down on the floor of the ravine, the impact of the Jealousy's colossal weight blunted by Shiv's Gravitic Wrestler. It still sundered the river bed it landed upon, causing the rushing stream to spill down into the cracks.

Shiv kept moving. He launched the Jealousy forward again, sending it rushing down along the ravine, down an instinctive direction.

In the air above, the high vampires met the gateway guardians in a brutal clash of might and magic. Explosions and shockwaves swelled through the air, hammering against the Jealousy from above. A few of the Master-Tier Pathbearers between both groups met each other, intercepting their equals to protect the lesser members in their forces.

His enemies were going to be occupied with each other. Shiv laughed. He might just be able to finish this whole Greater Demon theft thing after all.

But just as he was getting optimistic, one of the Master-Tier Pathbearers slammed into the other, knocking their enemy off their mount and tumbling towards the Jealousy. They crashed down beside Shiv, hard enough to launch one of the Umbrals into the air. It was that girlish one—*Ikki!* Shiv could tell by her shriek, could tell by her mind. He responded by swinging Uva high up into the air, and she reached out, caught the girl by her ankle, and pulled her back down. It was like reeling in a kite.

“Easy!” Shiv cried.

However, Shiv felt a click pass through the girl’s ankle. He and Uva pulled a little too hard.

“Ah!” Ikki’s scream passed through Shiv’s mind.

He winced. *“Sorry!”*

And then somebody kicked him in the jaw.

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52 (II) Escape

52 (II)

Escape

It was a hard kick. It was a savage kick, capable of turning an Adept’s face into nothing but blood and dust, of turning a hill into a plain. The kick bruised Shiv’s chin. The shockwave, however, made Uva flinch back—she nearly let go of Ikki.

A high vampire had torn the throat out of his Compact adversary, and was now trying to beat Shiv to death.

Shiv decided he was offended by this, and clawed out blindly. He caught something soft, and he squeezed. He felt two sensitive organs pop in the palm of his closing right hand, and that’s when Shiv realized he had crushed the high vampire’s groin. The high vampire screamed. Shiv didn’t let go. The vampire clawed Shiv’s face and broke his fingers against Shiv’s hardened Adamantine Adaption. This offended Shiv more, and so

he started dashing the high vampire against the carapace of the Jealousy over and over again.

The vampire likely had something near High Adept in terms of Toughness. High Adept was not a very good matchup against Gravitic Wrestler. Shiv slammed the vampire back and forth, the bloodspawn's body practically disintegrating with every blow, blood spraying everywhere, his organs dislodging from shattering bones. But the High Vampire shaped spells, rapidly healing himself. And Shiv found himself even more infuriated by this—even *enraged*. Read full story at Novel~Fire

He remembered healing himself and just getting cancer for his troubles. Before he got his Woundeater Evolution, Shiv suffered, and Shiv died. That was how he recovered. And these high vampires managed to circumvent all that because their hearts were special or something. And that infuriated Shiv. So he started slamming the vampire around even harder.

As another wyvern landed, Shiv swung the vampire out like a club. The wyvern's head simply ceased to be, and its rider tumbled off, only to crash into Uva's extended hand, which promptly flung the spell into his face. The man's Magical Resistance shattered from her Psychomancy spell, and then she drove a long blade of ice through his screaming mouth. As he tumbled off, she flung that same shard of ice and impaled another rider through their armpit.

"Nice work," Shiv thought. She gave him a smirk, a smirk that turned into a wide-eyed gasp, as suddenly, before Shiv could even react, a spray of blood erupted from her neck.

Just then, the air crackled, and a new figure emerged, bearing a strange curved knife with a vibrating edge. She turned to glare at Shiv. Her armor was barely existent. Her arms were exposed, carved with whirling runes that glowed in the dark, and her face showed she was a ritualistically scarred human. She licked her lips. "Good prey," she hissed.

Uva collapsed, almost falling from the Jealousy's back, but Shiv caught her. Ikki screamed her name. The synchronized link between the group broke as Uva's focus collapsed.

Shiv snarled as he flung the high vampires in his other hand at this adversary. She sidestepped—her speed more than equal to his. And then she was upon him, slashing her curved knife across his eyes. The slash didn't go very deep—but it was deep enough. Both of Shiv's eyes vanished, turned into pits of severed flesh. The bridge of his nose was split. His Adamantine Adaption caused her shaking blade to chip and break, earning a grunt from her.

But the work was done. Shiv was blind. Shiv was hurt. And Shiv was *pissed*.

Pissed enough to fuel his Woundeater. He didn't target himself first. He released Uva for a second. And then—in the moment it took for the enemy Pathbearer to cut him three more times, splitting open his neck, taking a chunk out of his left ear and leaving her blade partially embedded into his chest—he sent out a wyrm, consumed Uva's throat wound, and cast the Woundeater into the enemy Pathbearer.

Magic moved faster than most physical attacks did, and the spell connected directly. However, when the wyrm crashed against the knife-wielder, Shiv found her Magical Resistance to only crack under the assault, and she would have continued attacking him, if not for Uva striking her directly afterward, launching a Psychomancy spell into the knife-wielder's mind.

Shiv felt the enemy Pathbearer's Magical Resistance shatter and her mind come asunder. A psychic scream of misery and pain erupted, washing over him. He remembered screaming like that himself when facing the Jealousy, and he shuddered.

A second later, he fed his new wounds into another wyrm, and he flung that into the enemy Pathbearer, who was still clutching her head. His sight returned. His missing ear was whole. The wound in his chest vanished. Her eyes erupted. Her ear flew off. Her chest blew open in a chasm of blood. She gurgled and slumped off of the Jealousy, but not before Uva hit her again, shattering her mind for good.

"Are you all right?" Shiv called out Uva. He felt her terror, felt her shock, but also felt her discipline, her focus. Her magic seeped back into his mind and reconnected him with all the others.

"I'm fine," she said, rubbing her throat. She blinked at him. *"How did you... Was that your Biomancy?"*

He summoned a wyrm and made it dance around his hands. "Yeah, that's Master-Tier now too. Uh, I'll tell you about it later."

She blinked. From her brooch, Shiv could hear that asshole from earlier let out a string of violent curses.

Just then, a massive shadow swept over them; that of a huge, wedge-shaped sword. Frankly, it was way too large to be called a sword. It looked more like a growing chunk of metal that just kept swelling larger and larger until it was the size of a skyscraper from the ruined city on the surface. The Pathbearer holding it leapt from their wyvern and roared as they prepared to cleave through the entire ravine in a single strike.

Shiv cursed. He flung the Jealousy's limbs, and they impacted the edge of the blade. It was sloppy, but it was enough. He pulled off one of the strangest parries he performed in his entire life, using a comatose Greater Demon to knock a hundred story tall blade off course. The blade bit deep into the cliff face on their left, cleaving a massive portion off from its side, which caused a rockslide to rain down on Shiv and the Umbrals.

Parry > 50 (Skill Evolution Imminent)

Shiv cursed, opened his own chest, crushed his heart, and flung the wyrm at the Master-Tier adversary. The man tried to dodge, but the spell impacted against his chest, and Shiv heard his foe cry out. However, they didn't die, so their Magical Resistance must have held.

This time, Uva blinked at Shiv again. *"Did you just tear yourself open and throw your wound at that man?"*

"Yeah, I'll tell you about it later," Shiv repeated.

She shook out from her stupor and launched her own spells at more enemies. Just then, the voice in her brooch cried out:

"Wait, Shiv, turn into the landslide. If you're strong enough, ram through it."

"What?" Shiv said.

"Into the landslide—trust me. And use your bloody Momentum Core!"

"Momentum Core?" Shiv blinked, and another piece of his mind slid back into place.

Right, that was his first Master-Tier Skill. That was the only reason he survived against... *Harkness*. His mind was rapidly starting to come back together—the most essential parts of his mind, anyway. He was a fool. This entire escape could have been made easier if he'd just used Momentum Core at several points. It wasn't even charged. He didn't even drain any momentum. He immediately turned, steering the demon into the falling rock slide, and he mentally called out to all the other Umbrals: *"Everyone, grab onto me! I'm gonna try something! Don't get thrown off!"*

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They responded immediately, without hesitation.

Each of the group slammed themselves against him, clinging with desperate limbs—several even casting their weapons aside. Shiv could touch them. Shiv could feel them. And whatever he touched, his gravitic field could protect, could seize. They were enveloped by his strength, and Shiv clenched his jaw as he let the rock slide hit him. His Adamantine Adaption helped him endure, but several of the Umbrals cried out—their armor deforming, their bones cracking.

Shiv ignored the extreme agony as he taxed his mana field to shape a few more wyrms, swept it through the others, and assumed their wounds himself. Meanwhile, his momentum *filled*.

Beneath the entire rushing landslide, time seemed to slow—his core reached maximum capacity—and he clutched the Umbrals and the Jealousy to him as tightly as he could before he discharged. A massive blast of kinetic energy rippled off of him, displaced by his gravitic field with a surge of effort from Shiv. The blast wave exploded out behind him—swatting vampires and riders alike out of the sky.

Then Shiv was smashing through the mountain, drilling deep into stone and splitting ore, like a colossal hammer made to split the very earth in half. The world turned into a chaotic mass of falling stone and debris and deafening noise. By the end, he was ragged, broken in so many places, but he still had his field, and he still had his Adamantine Adaption. He was a Master Pathbearer. They weren't. This was what he was for. This was what being a Pathbearer meant.

When his Momentum Core finally ran out, he found himself dropping—as if falling down a large hole. Several Umbrals shaped spells so he could see in the dark, and he realized he was descending down the center of the mountain. It looked hollowed out by something, with towering, metal supports holding the structure up, but it seemed destabilized by Shiv's sudden intrusion.

He plunged—the Umbrals and everyone within the Jealousy going with him, deeper down into the dark. Small hollows and caverns lined the sides of the vast, inner cave. He saw serpents he'd fought before in a hole in the ground after he was burned, and then other strange creatures—large snake-shaped humanoids—mining ore veins in the mountain. They turned to regard him with surprise, but he was past them in an instant. The Jealousy's immense bulk crashed against the artificial, vertical tunnel's sides, tumbling from side to side. Its tentacles tore chasms into the wall, compromising the mountain even more.

Finally, Shiv braced and pulled up, trying to slow its descent. But the moment he did, it crashed hard—and he felt the bodies of the Umbrals around him crack in places as they slammed into the carapace. He assumed those wounds too and almost slumped over from the pain.

“Shiv, stop! Stop taking wounds into yourself!” Uva yelled.

Shiv blinked. *“That's fine. I'm just gonna...”* He pulled out one of his old bodies, chucked it before her, fed his current wounds into a wyrm—nearly blacking out from the pain of renewed mana strain—but managed to finish the spell and transfer it to his old corpse.

Uva blinked. The other Umbrals gasped. Ikki laughed. “Composer! That does it. Shiv, you're coming with me anywhere I go. I'm never going to Cradle anymore. You're the only doctor I need!”

Just then, a massive rumbling of stone descended, and Shiv cursed. He released the other Umbrals and held his hand up, bracing against the mass of falling stone with gravity-ruling strength. At first, it felt light—his might was immense. And then massive

parts of the inner mountain began to collapse, pounding down on him. What was a feather for a Pathless became a massive slab of metal, became a falling wall, became an entire building.

This... this was a real mountain. Not a small one. Not a Greater Demon shaped like a mountain. An entire, literal mountain falling on him. And Shiv... Shiv was strong. But he definitely wasn't strong enough to hold up an entire collapsing mountain. He cried out, straining himself. His Adamantine Adaption was his saving grace—it endured, forcing his bones to harden before they could shatter, forcing his ligaments to turn denser, stronger in the face of immense strain. But it wouldn't give him more than a few seconds.

Shiv began to bend, and that made him look at the others.

“Okay,” he growled. “Okay, someone start hitting me.” They blinked. Uva didn't hesitate—she understood what he wanted. She struck him in the face with the flat of her short sword. It wasn't much; his Momentum Core needed a lot more. *“Come on, everyone join in. I don't know how long I can hold this!”*

All the Umbrals started whacking him, and while they did, Uva's brooch sounded once more:

“Shiv! Shiv! Ah, there you are, I found you. How the hells did you—Okay, never mind. Listen to me. When you discharge again this time, aim down at a 45-degree angle exactly.”

Shiv cursed. More stones piled on him. He couldn't think clearly anymore. “I don't think I could get a 45-degree angle exactly right even when I'm not suffering from brain damage and holding up a felling mountain!”

A derisive snort came from the brooch. *“Just aim slightly downward, then, you damned fool!”*

“Gods. Sure thing, asshole,” Shiv muttered.

His Momentum Core filled—but not fast enough. It felt like an eternity of strain, and it took everything his Gravitic Wrestler had to keep from breaking. He started pawing, moving bits of stone to the side—letting it crash against the Jealousy's tentacles.

Shiv's strength was running out. He could feel his spine popping, and the Umbrals could feel it too. Their attacks intensified. He drank momentum. His core filled. Time slowed further, and Uva struck him one final time—her jaw clenched in desperation, terror, and a slight hint of regret. She didn't like hitting him with a weapon.

Oh, that's sweet of her, Shiv thought, exhaustion making him delirious.

Shiv reached out for them, called for them to hold onto him, and once more, as soon as they touched him, his field seized them, and he discharged. His progress was messier, slower this time. He exploded down—the Jealousy’s immense bulk dragged forward, clenched by his gravitic strength—and Shiv nearly blacked out from sheer exertion. They burst through another section of the mountain, tumbling through the blackness, the monster’s limbs mangled from the immense weight. He did black out in the darkness momentarily, but just then, the final threshold of the mountain burst open.

Dim luminosity splashed over him, and they were once more in the air—sailing over a wide open ground. Before them was a long black expanse, glittering as if there were stars hidden in the rich soil.

Shiv blinked, thinking he was hallucinating, but after a while he realized he wasn’t. He was shooting over a land of glistening silt, a land riven by small lanes of irrigation, far from the conflict. On the other side of the collapsing mountain, flashes and blossoming tides of fire and magic that lit up the night continued to swell. Compact and the First Blood were at war, and they had lost him in the carnage and chaos. Somehow, they had gotten away—for now. Shiv felt a rush of triumph.

But then he was descending at an angle, preparing to crash into the silt fields, and he tried to pull back—tried to pull the Jealousy—but he could only manage to arc its head. His strength finally gave. Shiv dry-heaved, spent beyond stamina and energy. They struck. The Umbrals were flung off into every direction. Uva tried to cling on, but she was launched off as well.

Shiv felt something inside himself tweak. A muscle tore, several muscles in fact, and they kept going until, finally—with a massive furrow dug into the ground—the Jealousy came to a stop.

After a few seconds of just heaving, Shiv slowly lifted his head with a groan. Looking around, he could see the Umbrals strewn around the field along the furrow they dug. They were badly wounded, but he couldn’t sense any fatalities.

Shiv tried to shape a spell, but he instead let out a scream as the mana strain nearly knocked him out again. He just had to hope they would all last long enough to find proper help.

Shiv was spent, unable to even keep himself upright. And just then, an arrow crashed beside him—an arrow shaped from spatial magic. Shiv managed a heroic effort—pushing his torso upright and clenching a fist—only to see a new figure clad in sky-blue armor and bearing a bow with far too many silken strings scowling down at him through an open helmet.

For a few moments, the crimson-haired man said nothing, and another piece of Shiv clicked back into place. He remembered who this was now—and why he thought he was an asshole—and how the guy always knew where to go.

“Adam,” Shiv coughed, “well, I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I’m kind of glad to see you. Hey, did you do something to your eyes? Why are they... Why are they so bright at the bottom?”

Adam stared at Shiv. He stared at the Jealousy. He stared at the moaning Umbrals strewn across the silt field. And the Young Lord sighed. “Shiv, why are you even bigger than before?”

Shiv looked down at himself. He stared at his muscles, then flexed slightly, even though he could barely move his limbs. “Oh yeah, I am. I think I got a Master-Tier Physicality thing now. Oh, and I fused that with my Grappling Proficiency. But how did you know exactly where we were? And how the hells did you know where to go while we were in that mountain?”

Adam just stared at him. “Because I’m a Heroic Pathbearer now,” he said, his voice thin, a slight sneer tugging at his lips. “A Heroic Pathbearer in Awareness.”

“Oh. That’s nice. How high’s your Physicality, though?” Shiv taunted.

Adam clenched his jaw. “How many Master-Tier Skills do you even have now?”

Several Umbrals near enough to hear them moaned in despair. Uva just growled. “Adam, Shiv,” she ground out as she stalked in their direction, “you two can... measure your cocks later. Get the regeneration potions out first... before we all die from internal bleeding.”

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53 (I) Recounting

Subterfuge, speed, chaos. These are the essentials for piercing into and controlling the insides of a dimension. These are essential to taking a gate. To breach a gate, to push into a dimension or a world between worlds of any kind, requires an overwhelming concentration of force when you are pitted against not only the might of the defenders, but the sheer amount of mana being outputted by a gate’s core.

Direct confrontation usually results in ten-to-one losses favoring the defenders—ten-to-one losses that spike exponentially when the gate core gains more power.

As such, having a group of infiltrators or spies already inside the gate and holding specific gateways is critical. Failing this, a sudden attack supported by a powerful

Master-Tier to Heroic-Tier vanguard to brush aside the defenders protecting the gateway before assigning an entire unit of Dimensionalists to crack open the portal is also an option, but extremely risky.

If this is not done quickly, the forward unit can be absolutely devastated by a swift counter-attack. And finally: surprise. It is always best to strike a gate from multiple gateways. It is even preferable to flank them dimensionally, to have it attacked across multiple worlds at the same time—forcing them to split their focus and defenses.

Ultimately, seizing a gate is a battle of logistics. No one Pathbearer can take a gate, not unless they are a true Legend—and even then, the odds are stacked against them. We are composed of our own stories, our own deeds, achievements, our own successes, and defeats. And the gate? The gate is a composition of everyone's story, everyone's wounds, everyone's power. One man cannot wrestle a world. One man is only part of a world. But still, a world can be betrayed from within.

-108 Ways to Breach and Take a Gate: Dimensional Invasion Essentials

53 (I)

Recounting

“How?” Uva kept repeating that word. “How?” She stared at Shiv, resting the palm of her hand against his face. He smiled at the warmth, but her expression was one of continual confusion, disbelief, and exasperation.

“How?” She clutched his head with both of her hands and shook him slightly, affectionately. “How is your mind healing? And so fast?”

“I told you,” he said. “I ate the Jealousy, and, well, it gave me cognitive regeneration.”

She shook her head. “You seriously ate the Greater Demon's flesh?”

“Yes.”

“And it gave you cognitive regeneration? But how did your mind come back together after the Greater Demon broke you? After you somehow mind-bonded with it?” Her voice grew very dangerously low. “Mind-bonded with it through means that aren't intended for that kind of mind-bonding?”

Shiv chuckled nervously. “I... don't know?”

Uva continued. “And then, after it went insane, and after you spent a while comatose, having your ego ripped in half, and barely knowing who you were, you decided—the first thing you would do after you came back to coherence—was to cook the Greater

Demon, eat it along with the slaves, and somehow... somehow, you gained cognitive regeneration."

He stared at her. "Well, I think it might have to do with my Cooking being Master-Tier now too."

"What?" Adam said, spraying the water he was drinking all over his lap. "What did you just say?" The Young Lord grimaced with displeasure. "Another one, another one!" He flung the water canteen against the cave wall.

It bounced off a jutting crop of copper, and Ikki watched the canteen roll away. She glared at Adam. "Hey, uh, Hero Adam, go pick that up. That's mine."

Adam paused, shoulders slumped. He turned to Ikki. "I'm very sorry. I just... hate him so much right now."

"Yeah, well, you're a Hero. He's a Master. You have the bigger penis, technically. Humans care about these things, right? The larger penis size?" Ikki wiggled her nose. "It's a strange thing to care about. Penises are ugly anyway."

Adam just stared at her. "Yes, I do—I mean, I care about being the greater Pathbearer, not the penis thing! But being a Heroic-Tier Pathbearer means having some dignity." The Young Lord was struggling to put together his thoughts, and Shiv grinned at him.

"Yeah, but like, how many Master-Tier Skills do you have?" Shiv asked, needling Adam. "You got one Heroic-Tier Skill, you must have at least two Master-Tiers to go with it. right?"

The Young Lord cracked a wall with his fist as he walked after the water canteen, not bothering to even look at Shiv.

After briefly tending to themselves—administering what first aid they required and recovering their strength—Adam had led them off to a nearby cavern. The Young Lord was surprisingly good at finding hiding spots with that Heroic-Tier Awareness Skill of his. Shiv learned that was how Adam kept track of him and the others as well.

In a matter of moments, Shiv went from trying to pilot the Jealousy's entire body across the silt plains to dragging it into a particularly large cavern Adam discovered. Judging by the accommodations—a massive campfire and heaps of human bones—Uva theorized that a group of cave biter marauders used to live here: mature, intelligent, adult cave biters who would ambush and consume people. They were, once again, in cave-biter territory, but Shiv wasn't too worried about that—not after the fight he'd had with the Jealousy.

The Jealousy was packed tight in the cave, and the group froze the entrance with Cryomancy. Thinking it would look unnatural, Shiv piled a small mound of stones there

as well, sealing off the entrance in two layers. Afterward, Adam remained on watch, peering out through the cracks with his Seer of Horizons Skill.

Shiv had to admit that Adam's Heroic Skill was terrific, to be honest. The Young Lord could practically hear a mouse's heartbeat from ten kilometers away in a thunderstorm. And if he could hear something, he could cast his senses there, extending his already ridiculous hearing, seeing, and even smelling further outward. It was basically like precognition, except it worked in a chain for his senses. Without proper wards, the entire world was practically Adam's oyster. He could just jump towards the horizon over and over again, like his skill's name suggested.

Once they were sure they'd lost their pursuers, at least for now, Shiv got to tearing open the Jealousy to finally free the rescued slaves. He'd been worried about their condition due to their chaotic escape, but it seemed the Jealousy's inner fat tissue was remarkably shock absorbent. If anything, the bigger issue was that they'd been getting close to being crushed between mounds of flesh by the Greater Demon's regeneration, which had slowed by now, but not stopped.

Nonetheless, many were severely concussed and suffered from dislocated limbs where they hadn't been thrown around inside their flesh chamber. Shiv did his best to take care of those that had gotten hurt by feeding their wounds into his wyrms and dumping them on some of his spare bodies once his Woundeater field had recovered enough to not knock him unconscious upon using it.

As they waited for surveillance to die down and for an opportunity to continue their escape, Shiv's mind slowly healed, and he took it upon himself to finish the cooking he'd started earlier. There was still plenty of Greater Demon left, so he cracked part of the Jealousy open and began making jealousy-meat for everyone.

The Umbrals looked at him uncertainly—even Uva did—but the slaves reassured them that it tasted good, especially the girl Shiv had spoken the most with out of the group. The Slayers were also still dazed, with Siggy sitting between them on a carapaced bench. The merc had thrown up the entire time during the initial flight, leaving quite a mess inside the Jealousy.

Shiv made sure not to pull any meat from that section.

After indulging in a relaxing bout of cooking, Shiv handed out plates made from the Greater Demon's carapace to everyone and started filling them with soup and perfectly-cooked meat. As they dug in, he enjoyed their expressions as each staggered, shivered, moaned, or nearly collapsed in delight.

"How?" Uva said again. "How did you get even better at cooking? How did you get better so fast?"

Shiv sat down, letting out a long, exhausted sigh as he thought about the past few days. "I've got a lot to tell you guys. A lot of stuff. Some of it you're gonna like, and practically all of it Adam's going to hate."

"What do you mean, 'all of it I'm going to hate'?" Adam asked, narrowing his eyes. "What did you do? Did you find the Animancy Core?"

Shiv grunted vaguely and looked at Tran. "Hey, Tran, take off your helmet. Say hi to Young Lord Arrow."

This story originates from NovelFire. Ensure the author gets the support they deserve by reading it there.

Adam paused and blinked. "*Tran?*"

Tran took off his helmet, causing the Young Lord to step back in surprise. "You? How?" Heather took off her helmet afterward, and Adam wasn't quite familiar with her, but he knew Tran—his father's personal Slayer, the one he employed to keep watch over Shiv, just in case he developed a Path.

"Young Lord Adam," Tran said, bowing. Heather bowed thereafter. Siggy just watched. She briefly looked at Shiv.

He handed her a bowl. "Just eat up," Shiv said. "I'm not gonna kill you. Not right now, anyway. I'm too tired. And frankly, you look like shit."

"Yeah, well," Siggy said, swallowing, "you look like shit too, I guess." She seemed too tired to be scared anymore. There was a point where someone was too exhausted for their courage to break, or their courage was too broken for it to crack any further.

Shiv understood. He simply nodded. "Just take a bite. Just try not to..." He sagged. He was pretty spent too. "Gods, I'm tired."

"Why is this so good?" Ikki cried, ripping out chunks of Jealousy-meat. "It's supposed to be a Greater Demon! It's supposed to be something that kills people! Why does it taste so good? What did you do to this thing?"

He just shook his head. Once more, Uva was staring at him. She mouthed the word, "*How?*"

"Tell you later. I'll let you all know later. Right now... I think I need to..." Shiv groaned and lay down on the spot. He needed this too. For a while, he took an actual nap. UPDATE FROM novelfire

Shiv experienced the best sleep of his life—sleep that lasted approximately twenty minutes at most.

When he woke, he felt almost entirely refreshed, and he was surprised. But then again, having Master-Tier Physicality meant more than just being strong, or being capable of wrestling with mountains. It meant that you were robust, that your lifespan was leagues beyond a natural human's. At this point, he didn't know how long he would live naturally, even if he could die from age. He just knew that it'd be a long, long while.

There was a saying among the Slayers in their Guild: *Masters don't die in bed*. And Shiv could see why. Masters were called to fight other Masters, and the System demanded strife. It didn't matter if you could live forever. It mattered to that System that your life was going to be spent at some point in battle or struggle.

The others were still eating. Several wanted more, so he kept making additional portions. They all experienced his benefit as well, each of them gaining cognitive regeneration.

Uva was surprised, but more than surprised—Shiv noticed her Psychomancy field was growing, swelling, even refining. It was rippling, as if she were casting out strange frequencies or some kind of broadcast from her being. She didn't fully understand what was happening either, but her thoughts felt clearer—clearer than ever before, more controlled. On top of getting cognitive regeneration, it seemed she, in particular, also gained a boost to her Psychomancy Skill.

Apparently, the Jealousy meat gave someone at Adept additional benefits, and he found himself wondering just what other boons, benefits, and advantages he could bestow upon himself and his allies, considering his ingredients. This was from a Jealousy. Now, with other exotic meats, flavors, and rare dishes, what could he do? What were the limits of The Chef Unwavering?

After everyone indulged in a bit of food and respite, they started a series of campfires within the cave, and Shiv recounted everything that he'd gone through ever since he went into the gate.

"It was a shitshow from the start," Shiv summarized. He could barely meet the gazes of the others as he tried to recount his very unsuccessful spying. He was, self-admittedly, probably the worst spy in the world. He told them how he and 811 spent hours dealing with bureaucratic nonsense, how smart the damned orc was, how he didn't think he was going to get anything past the beast, how he encountered Oldsmith beating a slave child, how he tried to save that slave child, and the brawl that ensued between him and 811.

As he elaborated, Adam's head quickly met with both of his hands as the Young Lord began to moan in misery. Uva's sighs became more and more frequent, until she was also pinching the bridge of her nose. It was then that Shiv asked where Valor was, and

Adam replied that the Legendary Pathbearer was working on something to “convert an Animancy Core towards a better cause.”

Then, Shiv got to his encounter with Gate Lord Confriga, and about what the Necromancy did to him. He showed them his arm. It was still slightly scarred, but the wound was fading. “It remains this way between every death,” Shiv said. “It’s getting better, but it still hurts a bit.”

Uva brushed her fingers over the scar and frowned. “Are those faces?”

“Yeah,” Shiv said, a shiver running through him. “Those were the faces of the three children he had impaled on his armor.”

“Children?” She reared back, sounding horrified. “He used children to power his spells?”

“Yeah, that’s what he called it. An effigy to cast Necromancy.”

Several of the Umbrals looked at each other. “This is something that Valor must know about as well,” Uva breathed. “His mastery of Necromancy is legendary.”

“Literally, I guess?” Shiv joked. After that, he told them about his misadventures hiding and sneaking through the city, how he captured Siggy, how he managed to intercept and uncover an entire conspiracy at the heart of the Republic.

And that was the point where Adam nearly had a heart attack.

The Young Lord was actively livid, sputtering at every word. He nearly lost control of himself and punched the wall again as Shiv elaborated on what Oldsmith was planning, on what the Inquisitors had been doing to Heather and Tran. Then Shiv pulled out a notebook—the sync letter that Oldsmith gave him—and handed it to the Young Lord.

“It’s supposed to be a set of correspondences between Oldsmith and some guy called Sijjig or something. They’re all working for Stormhalt. I think he’s the dad of your fiancée. They might be on the outs with each other, though. That’s what Oldsmith said to me. She might not be involved. But, uh... I did notice how the ravens and crows avoided her during the fight at Blackedge. Guess now’s as good a time as any to tell you about that.”

Adam was trying to control his breathing now. His jaw was clenched. His eyes were a roiling blaze of fury of sky-blue bright, the writhing dawn in his irises even brighter. “Thank you,” Adam said, but there was no warmth in his voice. He opened the sync letter, flipped through the pages for a few minutes, and grimaced. “There are multiple inquiries at the end, asking Master-Advisor Oldsmith to respond, asking if there’s been a problem. The Inquisitor sounds agitated.”

Shiv winced. He'd forgotten about writing in the book. Oldsmith and the Inquisitor were both supposed to be updating each other every day at night. "Yeah, so I think you can tell him that the gate's been under lockdown and that there's an Aviary spy roaming everywhere, tearing people apart."

Adam narrowed his eyes at Shiv as he produced a quill from *somewhere* and started writing on an empty page. "And were you that Aviary spy roaming around everywhere, tearing people apart?"

"That's the story I got up to," Shiv said. "A story that, uh, someone else helped me create." He elaborated on a few other things before getting to Leu: how he got his Master-Tier Cooking Skill when he was infected by an Orcish Skill, how the Challenger—the orc god—had cursed him, and how an orc was now in love with him.

Adam let out a breath. "Y-you got an orc to fall in love with you."

"It is not love," Uva said, sounding slightly defensive. "Orcs cannot love. They are wretched creatures of war and violence."

Shiv snorted as he remembered his fight with 811. "Yeah, well, their god is leering at me, watching. That's what the System says. And now, 811's reincarnation, 812, is probably going to be coming for me at some point. I don't think anytime soon—maybe in ten years, maybe in a hundred—but he's coming for me." Shiv didn't look forward to fighting that creature again, not with all the casualties the first time. "I'm gonna need to get a lot stronger and make sure he's not a threat at all. And avoid killing so many innocents in the crossfire."

An awkward silence followed that.

"And what about this Guardshead Leu?" Adam asked. "She helped you escape—what's her agenda?"

"Oh, she just wants to kill Confriga. He, uh, kind of murdered her brother. That's what Foreshadowing showed me."

Adam considered that for a moment, then nodded. "Useful, very useful. Finally. A good turn. So, you, despite being quite possibly the worst spy in the world—"

"Adam," Uva chided, "he is the most unsupported spy in the world because someone sent him alone into a gate without proper training in haste."

Adam closed his eyes and hissed. "I know, I'm sorry, but I was desperate. Now, back to Shiv being the worst spy in *every world in existence*," he reiterated, emphasizing the title.

Shiv just glared at him, staring at the food he'd made for Adam.

“The worst spy in the world somehow, somehow, despite getting discovered by everyone—from an orc, to the Gate Lord, even the Greater bloody Demon they were supposed to fight.” Adam stared at the Jealousy and shuddered. “How are you still alive? How is your mind not broken?”

Shiv held up his left arm, and to his delight, the Magebreaker was mostly back together and vibrating. Still pretty damaged, though. “Leu lent me something. It’s been pretty useful. It, uh, nullifies magic.”

Uva blinked. “Is that... is that Inertium?”

“Yep,” Shiv nodded. “How did... how did you know?”

Uva reached out and caressed the gauntlet. “Everyone knows about Inert—well, almost everyone. We would like to examine this back at Weave. We have been trying to find a piece of Inertium for years.”

“Sure,” Shiv said. “Maybe you can add to its Enchantments as well.”

He pulled out his mask. It was slightly mended, but deep cracks ran through the surface. “This helped too. Without this, the Jealousy probably would have torn my mind in half immediately.”

“Still, how did you let that bloody thing discover you?” Adam asked.

“Hey, they were hitting a slave in front of me. What do you want me to do—just let him get beat to death? What would you have done?”

Adam stared at Shiv. “I would have found a way.”

“You would have found a way,” Shiv said, leaning closer, glaring at Adam. “You would have somehow found a way to deal with a slaver who was beating a slave to death.” He looked at the slaves. “Do you believe this? Do you believe this guy?”

The courageous slave girl looked between him and Adam, then winced. She clearly didn’t want to take a side. The others muttered morosely. Adam noticed how haggard most of the slaves were, and how much blood they still had on them. Adam swallowed. “Shiv, how many died during your brawls?”

Shiv winced. “Uh...” Shiv groaned. “A lot. Is there a class on avoiding collateral damage in the academy?”

“Yes,” Tran, Heather, and Adam said at the same time.

“Several,” the Young Lord emphasized.

Shiv hid a wince and looked down. “Yeah, well, I think we might want to focus on that class first when we start our training again.”

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53 (II) Recounting

53 (II)

Recounting

Adam nodded and said nothing more.

To Shiv’s surprise, the Young Lord didn’t tear into him. “What, you’re not going to mock me?”

Adam shook his head. “It’s my fault as much as yours. You are raw and untrained. I said you were my monster; my hawk. You don’t send monsters or beasts to do delicate work.”

“Monster is right,” Heather added. She looked at Shiv and swallowed before she spoke her next words. “The way your skills work, the way he’s built right now... he’s a fucking freak show.”

“Hey.” Ikki directed a glare at the Jump Mage. “I don’t care if he’s built like a monster—I’m happy that he’s built like a monster. I’m glad about it. I’m happy that Shiv is a monster. I’m happy that he’s *our* monster. We wouldn’t be alive if he wasn’t a monster. *You* wouldn’t be here if he wasn’t a monster.”

There was a shift in the air, an atmosphere of slight offense that was brewing between the Umbrals and those of the Republic. The Slayers were regarded faintly with suspicion, but now, after Heather’s statement about Shiv, the Sisters of the Arachnae Order veered closer to scorn than suspicion.

“I didn’t mean it derogatorily,” Heather said, holding up her hands in defense. She eyed the six Umbrals, Uva especially. Uva was practically glaring a hole in the Jump Mage’s skull. Heather wilted. She shifted her seat and coughed. “Sorry,” she managed.

“Yeah, well, I don’t think it’s too bad being a monster.” Shiv stared at the Jealousy. “I think it takes a monster to kill another one sometimes. The fight could have gone either way. But I managed, and for whatever reason, my mind didn’t stay broken. So, here we

are. That's everything I can remember. After my mind completely heals, I think, I think I'll try to make sure I didn't leave anything out. But... yeah, this is what we know."

Adam nodded, but he didn't look at all happy. "Well, if there was one benefit, it's you putting the gate on lockdown. That's a small fortune for us. The Animancy Core is still there. We vaguely know where it is, but we need to deal with the Gate Lord and capture the gate, because we can't cross if it's on lockdown. But we also can't let it go out of lockdown, because then we lose the core." He frowned and looked at Shiv. "What's your assessment?"

The Deathless was surprised the Young Lord wanted to know what he thought. "Yeah, that. And I need to kill the bastard. I need to kill all the bastards." The Deathless briefly glanced at the slaves. "What they're doing to people isn't right, and I'm going to teach them how wrong it is. And by teach, I mean kill violently."

Adam nodded. "Of this we're in agreement, but we will do it carefully. We will do it with caution and focus. Next time, we all enter the gate. And we will do it with a proper strategy, a plan. Intelligence." The Young Lord hummed thoughtfully. "We already have someone on the inside, a potential base of subversive operations between you, me, Uva, Valor, and whoever else we might be able to recruit from the Composer. Potentially, we just might be able to bring this operation down from within. But still, I don't think the Composer can give us too much help, with her trying to avoid a war and all, so it will be a small group against an army either way."

Shiv stared at him in silence. Adam shrugged. "It's not impossible, but... it would be a feat of legend to pull this off."

"That's what being a Pathbearer is all about, right?" Shiv said. "Being a Legend."

"Agreed." Adam nodded again. "But still. A Heroic-Tier Gate Lord that can leave lasting wounds on you, his army, a gate to a demonic dimension, and the Animancy core. We got a real fight ahead of us."

"Yeah. Good. I'm looking forward to it." Shiv chuckled. "Well, how about you guys? What happened after I went in?"

Uva stared at Adam. "Well, before you got your mind broken by the Jealousy, this one got hit. It nearly tore him in half the moment it touched him with its field. It took the Psychomancers at Weave the better part of a day to reassemble him, even after I shrouded his mind and kept him intact on the way back." Uva paused, and she stared at the Jealousy, her eyes fixed on it with curiosity and challenge. "It nearly broke me too. But thankfully, a well-timed distraction kept us from certain doom."

She passed some of her memories over to Shiv, and he suddenly had context to go with her words. He blinked. "Oh, yeah, right. Well, congratulations on becoming a Hero, Adam. Of course, you couldn't have done it without me. You bastard."

Adam laughed. "I nearly died distracting it."

Shiv rolled his eyes. "Yeah, well, I wouldn't have died. I actually beat the Greater Demon. So who's the better Pathbearer now?"

Adam gritted his teeth. "How many times did you die fighting it?"

"Once," Shiv lied. "One that counted. Most of the others were cheap shots."

"Oh, really?" Adam said, sneering.

"Yeah. I'm not a soft, vulnerable, sensitive Young Lord, so I had a Toughness advantage going into the fight."

"And I'm not a blind oaf who gets discovered by a bloody demon because he's so bad at pretending to be someone else. Even with a Perfect Semblance! And who made sure you didn't die buried under a mountain just now? Or guided you through that mess of an escape? Or kept picking problems off of your back every time they got close? Do you know how many times someone was going to ram a mana-powered blade into the back of your head before I shot them?"

Shiv rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, thanks."

"I'm serious," Adam said.

"I'm serious, too," Shiv said. "Thanks for not letting me get killed."

The Young Lord blinked, and then he adjusted his posture, taking on a regal bearing. "Well, of course, it is my duty, after all, as Pathbearer, to protect one who is my lesser."

Both of them looked at each other, and somehow they shared a mutual snort of amusement.

Tran and Heather looked between the Deathless and the Young Lord, absolutely confused as to what was going on. Shiv understood them. A mere two weeks prior, Adam despised Shiv, and Shiv didn't want anything to do with Adam.

Now... Well, now things were a little different, at least.

As they continued catching up with each other, talking, relaxing, dealing with their wounds, Shiv tested his Woundeater again. Then, he began devouring the remaining injuries sustained by his allies, the smaller ones they'd all agreed to disregard until his field had recovered more. All of them regarded his Master-Tier Biomancy with lingering surprise and naked curiosity. Some of them even asked to touch his wyrm, but he denied them. The crystallized wounds within were more like mana bombs, things that would detonate against Magical Resistance or transfer the wounds on to another willing

or unwilling recipient. After he explained that, no one wanted to go anywhere near his wyrms.

“Five bloody Master Skills,” Adam whispered. “Absolutely madness. And a felling Feat.”

Shiv smirked with pride. “Well, if you get another Heroic-Tier Skill, you’ll get a Feat Slot too. After that it’s just a matter of effort. I’m sure you’ll manage in a year or two.”

Adam ignored the last part and nodded. “Yes. But still, your growth is... It is not just incredibly impressive, it is *strange*. Your casual willingness to die—” Adam eyed Uva as she approached the Jealousy. He leaned in closer to Shiv. “Shiv, do you realize how unnatural you are?”

Shiv paused, frowning. “I mean, yeah, you guys spend a lot of time saying, ‘I’m a monster this,’ and ‘I’m a monster that.’”

“No, no,” Adam interrupted. “Do you know how strange it is, how ridiculous it is that your mind is coming back together? Do you know who Cassayla, the Siren that Turns the Seas, is?”

“Not really,” Shiv said.

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“She was... *is* a Legendary Pathbearer. A Legendary Pathbearer of absurd power, capable of sinking islands. But her life ended in tragedy when her mind was broken by an adversary: an enemy Psychomancer. A Legendary-Tier Jealousy. She slew the Greater Demon, but even now, to this day, she wanders the seas, lost to insanity.”

Shiv blinked. “Ah, that sounds pretty horrible.”

“Yes, and she never got better. For the past 400 years, the island nations have treated her as both a figure of great mourning, but also a natural disaster. She still thinks she’s fighting her adversary, and she strikes at anyone who possesses Psychomancy. Anyone. She has destroyed hundreds of small kingdoms, obliterated entire land masses, and no one, no one has dealt with her. No one dares. And here you are, mere hours after having your ego ripped in half. Practically fine.”

“It’s remarkable what good food can do to you,” Shiv muttered.

Adam shook his head. “The food is good. Beyond good. Master-Tier there as well...” The Young Lord gagged in mock disgust. “But it’s more than the benefits of the food. It has to be. You have always been mentally and physically durable. More than durable. You seem to just recover. Recover from trauma. Shake off death. There’s something more to you, Shiv. And I think it’s part of the ritual as well.”

Shiv paused, taking in Adam's words. He had a feeling that the Young Lord was right. With everything that was broken inside him earlier, and how he could barely stand, how mangled his soul, his mana, and his mind were? That shouldn't have been a few hours of recovery. Part of him knew that this should have been crippling for good, eternally, unless some Legendary Healer of the mind and the body came to put it back together. But a few deaths, a few hours, and some food later, Shiv was quickly returning to a place of stability, if not normalcy.

And at that moment, Shiv noticed Uva reaching out into the Jealousy, pouring her mind-mana into the dormant, broken, Greater Demon.

"What is she doing?" Adam asked.

Shiv shook his head. "Don't really know." He rose, walking over to Uva, maintaining his silence so he didn't distract her. He didn't want to disturb whatever she was doing.

There were consequences for breaking a spell. Shiv's consequence for breaking a Woundeater spell was receiving the wounds he was trying to cast. He didn't want to discover what might happen if Uva was distracted from whatever she was doing with the Greater Demon. He couldn't tell what she was doing, even with a Psychomancy skill of his own; he had no idea where to begin. It wasn't just how weak his Psychomancy was comparatively, but rather, he was missing a lot of practical knowledge that went with it.

His Biomancy's counterpart, Practical Metabiology, was drastically behind as well. He had learned a few things, but without time to rest properly and truly dive into his Odes of Blood and Flesh, he didn't develop his understanding of theory as much as he did his magical muscle. Shiv realized that that was ultimately a wonderful encapsulation of his problem. He was a monster growing stronger and stronger at an alarming rate, but not truly more skilled, not more sophisticated. And the thing about monsters was, when they fought, other people paid for it.

Mastery is what I need, he thought. Mastery, more experience, more understanding and focus. I don't need to break things anymore. At least I don't feel like that's the most important thing. Power. Power comes with death. But the other stuff, the stuff that Adam can do, the stuff that everyone else is good at, that they spent years building, I need to get really good at that too. Otherwise, people will just keep dying around me.

Shiv's thoughts were interrupted as a series of translucent sigils began to spiral around Uva's mind. They revolved around her for a moment, circulating as if asteroids orbiting a planet. And then they twirled, spiraling through the air as they streamed from her as a pattern into the Greater Demon. For a few moments she did nothing, nothing but shape more spells, nothing but concentrate. Her face was a mask of immense focus. She looked like she was wrestling with a mountain of her own—a mental mountain in the form of the Greater Demon. Uva coughed and staggered. Shiv caught her, but she kept casting. He held her with his gravitic field until she was done. He could practically feel the exhaustion radiating off of her mind.

"I have no idea how you beat that thing. It's not even a Low Hero. It's in the middle. I took a glance at its status when I had the chance. You have no idea how high its Psychomancy level was."

"I got something of an idea," Shiv said, "the asshole practically tore my mind in half."

"Yes. It's a good thing you had that mask. A good thing." Uva paled as she stared into the demon's baleful eye.

Shiv paused. "Or the System wanted this fight." He considered that a little bit more. "I think the System wanted this fight. The system wanted all of this."

Uva fell silent for a moment, and she turned to stare at him. "I am inclined to agree. It is too fortunate a gift, and too useful a boon. Regardless, regardless, I'm glad I taught you how to link with someone's mind." Her expression turned mockingly offended. "Even if you used it in ways I cannot properly condone."

He coughed awkwardly. "Yeah, about that. I, uh, can try making it up to you later."

Uva's expression turned to one of pretend-innocence. "Oh? And what will you do?"

"I don't know. I guess we're going to find out, won't we?"

"I hope you won't do to me what you did to that monster, though," she muttered. "Still, its ego might be shattered. Its sense of self is ruined, but it's not truly dead. Its memories are there. All its techniques. The way it shaped its intent into spells. All of it."

Shiv paused. "So what does that mean?"

"It means that me and the Psychomancers of Weave are about to experience an incredible windfall. Once again, thanks to you," she said to him. "You are willing to surrender this piece of loot to us, are you not?"

She batted her eyelashes. It was then that Shiv realized she was trying to seduce him for her nation. But also mostly for herself. That was fine. Shiv liked it when Uva seduced him.

"Oh, I'll be giving you a lot more than that," he said.

Uva blushed.

"No, I mean literally."

He looked at Heather. "Her armor—that's going to be going to you too. Got that off a dead Inquisitor. I can add some of my new bone armor to reinforce it. Got a Psychomancy greatsword as well. Don't know how useful you'll find that since you use a

short sword, but maybe the people back in the city can help you make something out of that.”

Uva eyed Heather for a moment, then looked to Shiv. “So, her armor—”

“Your armor,” Shiv corrected.

“Right. Does she know about this?”

“Yeah. I told her repeatedly. She’s not going to forget.” Shiv clenched his teeth. “She better not forget.”

Uva shifted uncomfortably. “I... I’m... honored? And rather touched about how thoughtful you are, but still. This feels...”

“Oh, don’t worry. I don’t like her,” Shiv said. “And she owes me her life.”

Uva blinked. “I... see.”

A look passed between them. Uva coughed and continued. “Anyway, I think we will be able to learn a great many things from the Greater Demon’s Psychomancy. In fact, let me try something first. I should have enough control over its inner thoughts to influence it now.”

“Influence it to what?” Shiv asked.

“Everyone,” she sent out a telepathic message that swept through the group: *“Do not be alarmed. I am going to start piloting the Greater Demon.”* She gave Shiv a slight smile. *“And I will do it in a more efficient way.”*

He frowned at her. “I was trying my best,” he muttered.

“I know.” She patted him on the chest. “You are a remarkably tender brute, Shiv.”

And that was just about the sweetest thing anyone had ever told him.

And just then, the Jealousy began to move. It twitched, the eye rolled, and Shiv could have sworn it came back to life, if not for the fact that Uva was once again straining herself with concentration, pushing her mana field to the limit. As she pushed herself, however, he felt her field grow and swell rapidly. More than that, he felt a change coming to her field, a twisting, weaving change that pulsed through every wavelength of magic it took to shape her spells. Uva was growing before him, changing in real time. He had a feeling that she wasn’t far off from Skill Evolution either.

And with the Greater Demon captured, captured mind-dead but alive...

Suddenly, the Jealousy began to move its tentacles. It moved delicately, and over the course of a few minutes, it shaped a spell. It shaped a spell that Shiv recognized. First, a layer of shadows swelled through the cavern. Some shocked murmurs and terrified cries came from the slaves, but everyone else looked on, enchanted by the scene. Finally, a needle formed. A psionic needle—a needle that Shiv had seen a few times. It was the one it had used to implant itself inside the mind of a slave, escaping from him. It was also where they both met their final fate, within the mind of another slave. Except, Shiv recovered from his supposed final fate, and the Greater Demon stayed broken.

Yeah, Adam's probably right, Shiv thought. There's something more going on with me than just being physically immortal. Follow current NOVELS on novelfire

And finally, the needle splashed outward. The entire Jealousy vanished into a thin thread of magic—a thin thread of magic that Uva internalized. It swelled around her field briefly, an imprint of its colossal size, and she let out a cry of effort before she pulled it into her mind.

This close, Shiv could practically feel what she was doing. She was containing it, carrying it within her memory. She had adapted its great spell and used its magic to aid her in accomplishing this feat. Uva had effectively used the enemy's spell to make carrying the Jealousy more convenient.

"That was quite taxing," Uva said, leaning against him. "But we should be able to move easily now, without being noticed. Stealth is hard when you're dragging a small mountain with you."

Ikki was clapping.

"Stop that, Sister Ikki," Uva breathed.

"No!" Ikki yelled out loud, "Everyone clap!" The other Umbrals clapped sarcastically, and then Ikki yelled, "Kiss too!"

"Ikki?" Uva growled.

Shiv smiled. "I mean, I wouldn't mind."

"Shiv, don't encourage her."

"Fine. But, uh," Shiv grunted, "look, when we get close to Weave, can you let it back out again?"

She blinked. "Why?"

"I kind of want to carry it for a bit, you know, just to grow my Gravitic Wrestler skill."

She stared at Shiv, and once again, she patted him on his cheek. "You are a very, very adorable brute. I suppose we can take turns carrying it."

Shiv grinned. "You're the best, Uva."

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54 (I) Return

Memento mori.

A dead statement from a dead world in a dead language that few people can remember. Latin, I think it was called. At least according to the text I recovered from the ruins of pre-Integration Earth. The general meaning, from what I could understand, is that death is inevitable, and that one must remember that death is always coming.

But to a Necromancer, this has another meaning. Remember death. Remember that death is all around you. Remember that this world has died, that the entire world is an effigy to focus your power to draw on for necromancy. That is the first thing I believe any aspiring Necromancer should learn and understand.

Memento mori. Remember. Remember that you are already shrouded by death. Though you are a spot of life, though the world around you seems to be growing, flourishing, look between, and you will see death, death, death, so much death.

The hand of the Great Enemy stretches vast across existence. But the void is not death. That expanse between the stars and the worlds and the dimensions is not death. That is simply absence. Death is loss. Death is something that was and no longer is. That is the power of death; the withering, the decay, the entropy.

That is why, when you wield Necromancy, vitality is twisted, turned into the withering. The mind becomes an echo of itself, great intellects reduced to simple understanding, simple instinct, even after you reinstall them in a body. And the soul, in place of it, is merely a scar, a vessel for the Necromancer to direct their spells and intent.

This is why Necromancy stands at the Adept-Tier, at the very least, because it is tied to many other magical disciplines, Psychomancy perhaps closest of all, due to the nature of infusing one's mind and manipulating intelligence and intent. But death goes deeper. It is the first threshold into reaching the soul, for it replaces and allows someone to reshape and manipulate the lingering essence of a soul that was.

And only after one fully masters absence and loss can they proceed to the next step. The step that most call Animancy. The first step towards understanding the divine. But I would say it's more than that. Animancy is the foundation—the first step. The first step of all first steps. For without a soul, without that thing that allows us to wield meaning, to shape concepts, to generate mana, before a soul is bound with mind and vitality, there is nothing, merely absence, and not death.

For Necromancy to be true, something must first be lost.

-Legendary Pathbearer Valor Thann

54 (I)

Return

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On the way back to Weave, Shiv grew beyond impressed by Adam's Heroic-Tier Awareness. The Young Lord had borderline prescience now. He saw enemies coming long before they got close. Most of the time, he helped them evade patrols easily. When they couldn't, he sent Shiv, Uva, and a few others ahead to conduct devastating ambushes against incoming threats.

A dynamic solidified in their group. Adam was the linchpin and the tactical mastermind. He called out targets, positions, and gave recommendations while firing precise shots to eliminate the most vulnerable members of the opposition. Shiv became both shield and hammer. He slammed into the hardest points of the enemy forces, cracking them, ripping apart the strongest adversaries while drawing fire from their support units. The Umbrals—and Uva especially—became the daggers, slaying stragglers, hidden foes, and cutting down major threats while they were busy struggling against Shiv.

Somewhere along the way, Uva achieved a state where she could use her own mind to designate targets for the mind-dead Greater Demon. This made her a psionic titan as well, and so most minor threats met swift and brutal ends.

Tragically, this meant no deaths for Shiv, and slow level advancements.

They proceeded across the land without too much difficulty after those initial few engagements. During that time, Shiv found himself split between cooking, going over a curriculum with Adam, studying Practical Metabiology through the *Odes*, healing people via his Woundeaters, spending time with the others, and being tutored by Uva in Psychomancy. Among some other *things*.

The Deathless had been basically alone inside the gate. He'd caused quite a bit of damage, somehow evaded capture, and even survived an encounter with the Gate Lord. But ultimately, one Pathbearer alone wasn't going to be able to crack an entire gate—not even with inside help. He needed more than himself, and right now, he was more than himself. When he fought with the others, his power was multiplied, and his weaknesses were blunted. He found himself able to focus on dealing damage and breaking through the enemies without worrying overmuch about enemy Psychomancers, mages, or unseen foes.

This was the best part about fighting alongside good and capable comrades. Alone, when you made a severe mistake, that was it—death, or something worse. Together, when your strength flagged, someone would keep you standing until you recovered. When you made a mistake, someone would fix it. Someone would keep the group fighting. And when they needed you, and you helped them, something hardened between the two of you. You didn't need to like each other. You didn't even need to trust each other that much. But in the heat of battle, having someone you could rely on and who understood you comprehensively was indispensable.

Ultimately, they reached Weave in less than two days. The 402 slaves would have slowed them down substantially, if not for Uva's idea to have Shiv create something of a protective vessel. He did so by ripping a limb off of the Jealousy when Uva briefly released the mind-dead Greater Demon for Shiv to do his physical exercises.

Shiv hid the slaves in the limb just because the meat was a proper cushion and the bones were good structural supports. The slaves didn't quite like going back inside the gigantic monster, but Shiv was no engineer—and neither was anyone else in the group. If they were going to move fast, it was better that they were both protected and easily secured at the cost of a bit of blood and discomfort.

"That's a really disgusting idea," Adam said, gagging at the people crawling back into the wounds Shiv made along the tentacle. "But it appears to be bloody working. Quite literally..."

And it did bloody work. Shiv carried the entire tentacle like it was little more than a pebble in his hand, and without the slaves slowing them down, they practically tore across the Umbral Wilderness. The group used ravines and thickets to shroud their movements. With Adam charting the course, they didn't get lost, they didn't get confused, and they didn't get ambushed. Not by feral weavers, not by distant vampiric snipers lurking in shadows hidden by foliage, not even by near-invisible dimensionals drifting high above in the sky.

“You know something, Adam?” Shiv thought, listening as Adam crushed a vampire’s heart in his hand. “If I ever lose my keys or something small, I’m gonna come find you immediately.”

The Young Lord snorted across the mental link. *“And if I encounter the largest, tightest pickle jar in the world, I think I’ll defer to you. We’ll have to leave the intellectual work to the Sister, though.”*

Uva hummed as she tore the mind out of a group of unsuspecting metallic dimensionals. *“Such is the burden of competence.”*

They communicated with each other across a span of a few dozen kilometers—contact made easy thanks to Uva wielding the Jealousy. Even as a Master-Tier Biomancer, Shiv’s own mana field was a dot at the center of the Jealousy’s Psychomancy field, practically a hundred times smaller. And now, Uva was actively directing all that colossal force. She was an inner accretion surrounded by a vast and encompassing sphere. It took a lot out of her, but it also made her stronger, made her more attuned to the Jealousy. With each fight, her efforts became less burdened, and her Psychomantic manipulation became far less restrained.

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“There is another patrol,” Uva said, speaking to everyone at once. “They are coming. I think that the sniper we eliminated managed to signal them. We should find an alternative route.”

Shiv responded to that news by cracking his knuckles. He did want to smash something again.

“No,” Adam replied, his tone blasé. “We stick to the route. They’re going to miss us. The mess that Shiv left back in the woods is probably going to leave them confused. All his flayed skin decoys will likely wreak merry hell on their morale. And all those supposed cave-biter markings that we left would make them assume marauding monsters attacked their people. I’ll keep an eye on them, but we’re close. We’re not wasting any more time. Let’s get back through the gateway, back to Weave.”

The gateway leading into Weave wasn’t the same one Shiv initially passed through. This one was located at the bottom of a glittering lake, down through a chasm, so deep that the dark was so encompassing that not even Shadowsense allowed Shiv to see his own fingers in that abyss. But as he found himself wondering, wavering about whether he was in the right place, he suddenly passed over a threshold and stumbled into a large corridor lined with glistening webs. A Weaveress greeted him on the other side, bowing and making the gesture they reserved for the Composer and those deemed Honored and Exalted.

“Exalted Guest Shiv,” she said. “You’ve returned safely from your trials outside.”

“Weaveress,” Shiv replied. “Glad to be back in a place that doesn’t take slaves, or makes me want to kill everyone.”

“It pleases us that you think this way,” the Weaveress muttered, sounding slightly uncomfortable.

Shiv patted the spiderfolk on the hairy carapace and moved on. Behind him, he dragged in the large, looming tentacle of the Jealousy. The spider gawked with all eight of her eyes and stumbled back.

“What is—what is—” she stammered. “Is that a tentacle?”

“There are slaves inside,” Shiv said. The Weaveress looked more confused than ever. “They are probably pretty uncomfortable by now, but this is the only way I could run across the land with the others without smearing them at the speed we were going.”

“I will—I will warn the others to begin proceedings and prepare the anchor.”

“Thanks,” Shiv grunted, pulling the limb along. The source of this content is Novel~Fire

She retreated through the silken strands that composed the spatial corridor, and Shiv just chuckled.

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“You love doing that,” Adam said, landing lightly atop the tentacle that Shiv was dragging. The Young Lord had his bow slung over his back, and the Umbrals were gathered behind him, resting as well. In the back, Ikki was bouncing up and down, excitedly narrating to the others about what she’d seen Shiv do earlier. Uva was the last one through, and Shiv felt her arrival when the Jealousy’s colossal Psychomancy field crashed over his, and it was immediately followed by Uva’s.

Shiv noticed her Psychomancy was changing on an even finer level. Before, her field rippled, casting out broadcasts, but now it seemed to be sinking, the ripples growing ever more subtle as she submerged her own mind into the Jealousy.

“*You okay?*” Shiv asked telepathically. Uva simply climbed to the top of the tentacle, joining the rest of her team and Adam, before she smirked at him. “*Yes, I am learning to integrate myself better inside the jealousy’s mind. It was alien before. I had to force a few things. But now, after spending some time in its memories, I think it’s more like a sleeve.*”

“A sleeve?” Shiv said. He was impressed. “*I don’t think I could ever understand a creature like that. And I was linked with its mind for a while.*” Shiv shuddered at the

memory, but Uva simply laughed. Her laughter slithered across his mind, and he could hear an echo of the Jealousy. Shiv felt a cold terror run through him. He remembered that laugh. He remembered the beast's screaming hate at the end.

Uva sent him a feeling of apology, and restrained the voice of the Jealousy. "Apologies," she said, slightly embarrassed. *"Sometimes, when you sync your mind with another on a deep level, they echo you, especially if they're mind-dead."*

"Well, I hope it stays mind-dead," Shiv muttered. *"Last thing I wanted to find out is that the Greater Demon was actually just pretending this whole time, and turns out to be wearing you instead."*

That thought made him more than a little worried, but Uva simply prodded him. *"Oh, is my sweet brute terrified that I might get my mind eaten?"*

"Yes," Shiv answered honestly, without hesitation. A feeling of slight warmth emanated from Uva.

"Do not worry, Shiv—it is mind-dead. You've broken it. You've broken it in the maddest way possible and brought us a corpse of a Greater Demon, a Heroic-Tier Jealousy. Two titans will enter Weave today. Only one has their mind intact, however."

He grinned at her flattery. *"Yeah, well, hopefully one's also more handsome than the other."* Shiv glared at the tentacle, remembering how it used it to bash him a few times.

"Correct." Uva paused. *"A shame that you have too many eyes."*

Shiv barked a laugh. *"I'm going to get you for that later."*

"Oh? How?" Uva taunted. Her teasing almost ignited something inside Shiv.

"You'll find out later." Shiv's voice was edged with intent, and she responded with a hum of laughter.

"Fine. I look forward to my punishment. But dinner first."

"Always," Shiv finished.

As they reached the inside of the anchor, Shiv quickly discovered the tentacle was a bit too big to be brought in. He ripped open the tentacle, let out all the slaves, and had them filter into the anchor. Then, he clamped his hands together, using his gravitic field in tandem with his Biomancy to crush the tower-sized limb into liquid paste and bone dust.

When he finished, he turned to see everyone gawking at him. "What? I couldn't let that block the path? It'd be rude."

The corridor was practically drenched in thick, black blood, though. Shiv winced. He hoped the spiders wouldn't get too mad about that.

"That is absolutely bullshit," Adam muttered. "I need to get to Master-Tier Physicality by... by next month. I can do it. I can..."

Shiv snorted. "You guys should have seen me fight the damn thing. That was a messy felling brawl. And the bastard kept running away."

"Oh, can you blame the poor thing?" Siggy said, her eyes wide like saucers. "You just mangled one of its limbs. You mangled a small building with your hands! You just clamped your hands together and—and poof! It's gone!"

Shiv gave her a look. "Well, tell you what, Siggy—if you ever make it to Master, this is what you've got to look forward to. Of course, some of us here are Heroes. I'm sure that Adam here..." Shiv said, patting the Young Lord on the back a little too hard. A burst of force rattled across Adam's armor, and the Young Lord was nearly launched off his feet. Shiv didn't let that happen, though. He used his field to keep Adam standing. "...has far more strength and power than just a meager Master. Isn't that right, Adam?"

The Young Lord glared death at Shiv. "Get tainted!"

"What was that? Is that a new skill name? A Master-Tier Skill, perhaps? Something for Physicality or Toughness?"

Adam walked away from Shiv with a growl of disgust.

As soon as they were all properly secured inside the anchor, the spells began to spin, and they were promptly analyzed. Some slaves looked at each other, their forms haggard, blood-drenched, but ultimately alive. The past few days probably seemed like a feverish dream for them. Most were still huddled together in their own little groups and cliques along the journey, but their terror at Shiv remained throughout. Despite him feeding them, despite the protection he offered them, they were apprehensive about approaching him. He couldn't blame them: as he fought the jealousy, many died, and his Dread Aura didn't help things either. He could still feel their courage—fragile, broken. Some might stay broken for good, but one among them stood a pillar, a pillar stronger than most.

Out of everyone, she alone approached Shiv, seeking him out as the teleportation anchor scanned them for contaminants and unknown diseases. "I... I want to thank you," she said, her eyes glistening. He could feel her terror as well, but she was braver than she was scared, and Shiv quite liked that about her.

"Oh? What for?" Shiv said, turning his smile on her. She flinched at his sudden movement, and Shiv held back a wince. He was Master Pathbearer now, though he didn't feel much like one. He felt powerful sometimes, perhaps, but he still felt like the

same old Shiv as he always was—just tougher, stronger, and able to do some interesting things with injuries. But that wasn't the case with other people. Shiv remembered how envious he was of even Initiate-Tier Pathbearers, how they moved too fast for him to track, how they were absurdly strong, even when their bodies and musculature were inferior to his.

It was unnatural. It was nerve-rattling. It was everything he ever wanted.

And now, he lived his very dreams.

The girl swallowed and continued. "I want to thank you for everything—for saving us from the monster, for protecting us across this journey, for feeding us." She looked at the other slaves and licked her lips. She wasn't sure what to say. She seemed lost. "What happens to us now?"

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54 (II) Return

54 (II)

Return

And Shiv was just about as lost as she was when it came to her future. "Now, well, I think... I think you get processed in Weave. They save a lot of slaves, and they help people like you. It's not the same as the gate here. They don't take people and use them as things. You'll be safe, I think."

"She will be," Uva said, stepping away from her sisters. "What is your name, girl?"

Shiv felt the urge to smash himself in the head—he hadn't even bothered asking the girl's name this entire time. *I was pretty occupied*, he thought.

"I'm Sarah," the girl said. "Sarah Bradenton. I was—my mother was... We lived in the Pre-Umbra. We lived in Salsort. A mushroom farming town." Her eyes grew distant. "It doesn't exist anymore. Not since Compact decided to expand."

Uva nodded. There was a look of sympathy on her face, but it was a practiced one. She was too used to this. "I'm sorry. We will have Psychomancers who might be able to deal with your trauma, and the Office of Acclamation will see that you are all given proper assignments during your time here."

“Assignments?” she said.

“Correct. Weave is a place built on service, but we will not force you to be slaves. You will be given choices, and you will be settled into temporary housing.” Uva winced. “Although the rooms might not be that fine or spacious.”

“Rooms?” A slave breathed. “We all get our own rooms?”

Shiv was once again reminded how much worse his life could have been.

The girl nodded. “Thank you. Thank all of you.”

The door leading into the teleportation anchor opened, revealing a few white-robed Weaveresses along with a contingent of Umbrals. A good many slaves flinched back, their terror spiking. Shiv could feel it with his Dread Aura. They were no longer looking at him—no longer afraid of him. Many pointed at the Weaveresses as they backed away until they were pressed against the walls.

“Feral weavers! We’re gonna be eaten!”

“We’re gonna be sold!”

“They’re gonna use us for breeding!”

Uva winced. The Weaveresses flinched.

“No, no,” Shiv said. “Stop! Look at me!” Shiv used his Dread Aura to good effect this time. Everyone looked back to him, their fear and terror locking back onto him like a lightning rod. “They’re not going to eat you. These are Weaveresses. Not feral weavers. They’re going to see you taken care of. We did not bring you across the entire Umbral Wilderness just to feed you to monsters,” Shiv said. He gave the Weaveresses an apologetic look, but they seemed rather sanguine about the entire thing. “You’ll be fine. I will make sure of it. Okay? If you don’t believe me...” He patted Sarah on the shoulder, and the girl jumped. “Look at Sarah. Believe in Sarah. She’s real brave.”

Sarah paused and nodded. “W-we’re going to be fine, everyone. We’re safe! It’s okay.”

“Yeah,” Shiv said awkwardly. The slaves were all looking at him, wide-eyed, terrified. But ultimately, it quieted down.

“All right,” Shiv said. “You try to take care of them, okay? A lot of them are going to need a lot of help. You take care of yourself, too.” He nodded several times at her, but wasn’t sure what else to say. “I’m sorry. You deserved better. I wish I was stronger. I’ll see if I can get the others out too.”

He moved to walk away.

“Will I see you again?” the girl asked.

Shiv paused, considering that question. He wasn’t sure. “I don’t know,” Shiv said. “I’ll probably be around if I don’t end up dead for good. I’ll tell you what, though. Down the line...” His brow furrowed in contemplation. “Down the line, you know, I’m thinking about opening a restaurant here. So, if you ever want to look me up—maybe someday—you’ll see Shiv’s Restaurant or something like that,” he laughed. “I’m still working on a name, but you can probably find me there.”

“Shiv’s Restaurant?” Uva said, cocking her head to the side. “When did this idea come to you?”

“Just now,” Shiv said. “If I don’t end up dead and manage to deal with the shit upstairs, I think I’ll probably stick around for a while. I don’t know—explore the Abyss, meet new people, and see new sights.”

Uva’s expression told him she rather liked his plan.

“I’ll do it,” Sarah said, nodding vigorously. “If you open the restaurant, I’ll definitely come. Your food is... It’s almost the best I’ve ever had.”

“Almost?” Shiv said, raising an eyebrow.

“Best I ever had was the food my mother made,” Sarah said. “But I won’t ever get to have that again.”

And Shiv knew that there was no hope of winning anymore.

“Ah, well, hopefully I can give you a bunch of second best, then,” he said, slightly solemn. “Hopefully.”

She paused. “If you open a restaurant, you’re going to need to hire people, right?”

“Yeah,” Shiv said. “Usually that’s how it goes.”

“Well, I always wanted to be a chef.”

And Shiv had a funny feeling—a feeling that this interaction, this moment, was just one step in many to come. “Well, if you’re interested, I’ll teach. I won’t call myself a...” Shiv paused. He was technically a Master at Cooking. “I wouldn’t call myself a *Hero* at cooking,” he said. “But I can show you a few things. It’ll be hard work, though. High pressure.”

She stared at him. “I was a slave until two days ago.”

Shiv hid a wince. “Yeah, uh,” he muttered, his mood souring again. “You’re right. I think you’ll do just fine in the kitchen.”

As the slaves were led out and guided to wherever they needed to go next, Shiv and the others followed Uva to another section of Passage. After arriving there, they debriefed a room full of Weaveresses and other Cherished Sisters about their most recent expedition. Shiv was asked about many things in detail, and he repeated what he knew about the insides of the gate.

The process, thankfully, wasn’t nearly as painful as the bureaucratic hellscape he had to endure after entering Gate Theborn. Within an hour, they were done and dismissed.

The Umbrals talked about departing to the showers to get cleaned up and to clock out for the day. The team invited Shiv and Uva to a card game, but Ikki interrupted.

“They got *places* to be *inside*.” Ikki wiggled her eyebrows at Shiv and Uva, but the Psychomancer simply shook her head at the young Umbral.

“She is such a child,” Uva complained.

“Yeah, she’s got a lot of life in her,” Shiv replied, grinning at Ikki. The little Umbral gave him a thumbs up and then made a lewd gesture that nearly made him choke.

“Regardless, I must head to Elaboration first,” Uva said, doing her best to mentally crush Ikki without actually using her abilities.

“What’s that?” Shiv asked her.

“A hidden facility somewhere deep, deep down inside Weave.” She smiled. “Maybe you’ll get to come and see sometime. Depends on what the other Exalted Mothers and the Cherished Sisters decide. A good case can be made for you. You are a Psychomancer in training, and you did bring us the Jealousy we’re about to vivisect and examine.”

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“Yeah, about that,” Shiv said. “Can you, like, I don’t know, leave one of its limbs or something? It’s still regenerating really fast, and I’d like a source of endless meat.”

At this, Uva couldn’t help it—she practically broke with laughter. Her voice was low, husky, and Shiv enjoyed the sound of it. For original chapters go to N0velFire.net

While he was drinking her in, Adam shook his head in disgust.

Tran raised both eyebrows at them. Heather also looked stupefied.

Adam guided the two Slayers—and Siggy, for that matter—away. “Let us give them space before they take our peace away again.”

“What do you mean, again?” Heather muttered.

“I mean the Omenborn has no sense of propriety, dignity, or public decency when night falls.”

“I expect the matter of the Jealousy to take some time,” Uva said, still looking at Shiv, “but, well, we’ll see what happens. This is, I will not exaggerate, a great gift offered to Weave. I suspect the Composer might wish to reward you again for this.”

“Well, I got to stop doing great deeds. I might bankrupt you guys,” Shiv joked.

Uva chuckled. “I have something for you, too.”

“Oh?” Shiv said. “What’s that?”

“I will show you. It’s at my sister’s store, best that you see for yourself.” Uva looked him up and down. He was clad in his adamantine bone armor now, but underneath, he had practically little more than tatters left. “It has to deal with your modesty.”

“My modesty?” Shiv said, his pitch climbing. “I’m glad you’re worried about my modesty. Or is it you’re worried about other people concerning themselves with my modesty?”

“I just want you to have something left to wear after every fight,” she replied, but there was a hint of amusement in her voice. “And I think I found the solution. I hope.”

“Oh, what’s that?”

“An Enchantment. Something I should have thought about the first few times you shredded your clothes.”

Shiv paused. “It sounds a little expensive.”

“Quite cheap compared to a mostly intact Jealousy,” Uva replied.

“Fair enough. Call it even?”

Before she could respond, he remembered something. “Oh, wait!” Shiv turned. “Heather!”

Heather froze mid-step, turning to him. Shiv pulled out another full set of bone armor and chucked it at the Jump Mage. “Hey, switch out of your armor. You can wear this instead.”

Heather stared at him in disbelief. “Seriously? Right now? Right now?”

Shiv shrugged. “I mean, later’s fine too. Uva?”

Uva slightly nudged Shiv on the shoulder. “Yes. Later. Patience, Shiv. Don’t bark at people to change their equipment in public.” She gave Heather a borderline apologetic stare.

“See? Even your girlfriend—” Heather paused. “Holy shit, you two are actually a thing, aren’t you?” Heather gestured at both of them.

Shiv folded his arms and remained impassive. Uva held her impressive poker face.

“Ah,” Heather sighed. “I can’t believe this. This place—giant spiders, the Omenborn’s a Master. And someone’s interested in him. Where the hells am I?”

“It will take some getting used to,” Adam said. “I’m still not used to it myself. We... we will need to get you two situated. There’s a lot for you to learn here. It is a fine place.”

As Adam began explaining things, they exited Passage and entered Weave proper. Suddenly, the scale of the massive city struck the Slayers—and Siggy, for that matter. Shiv had forgotten the goblin was still following them. *I need to deal with her at some point*, Shiv thought. *Still not sure what I want to do though.*

“Whoa,” Tran said. “This is... this place...”

“It’s quite the sight,” Adam answered smoothly. And then a set of melodies washed over them. Strings played from a divine harp.

“What is that?”, Tran asked, his eyes wide.

“That,” Adam said, breathing in, “is music being played by a glorious, beautiful, and generous goddess.” At that moment, a few of the melodies rose in note.

Foreshadowing: Within her Symposium, the Composer watched as a group of intrepid heroes returned and almost voyeuristically listened in on her praise. She giggled, and her harp giggled alongside her.

Well, it seems like Adam can be pretty charming when he’s not being prickly, Shiv thought to himself.

“I will find you an inn or some manner of hotel for accommodations,” Adam said, speaking to the Slayers. “Perhaps I will move in as well, since the bedroom still hasn’t been replaced.”

“What do you mean, the bedroom being replaced?” Tran asked. “What happened to the bedroom?”

Adam glared at Shiv and Uva. Shiv folded his arms even harder, pretending to be a stone. Uva just looked away.

“I will come find you when I’m finished at the Elaboration,” Uva said telepathically to Shiv. *“After that, we will see my sister, and then—”*

“Then, I’m going to show you the city,” Shiv replied.

“*You’re* going to show *me* the city?” Uva said, her eyes widening in curiosity. “How do you plan to do that?”

“Yeah—couldn’t fly before, couldn’t carry you, had to settle for a demon. And now? Well, now I still can’t fly very well, but I can fling us with my field. It’ll be like getting thrown. Repeatedly. Romantically.”

Silver Tongue > 13

“You sure know exactly what to say to a girl,” Uva said deadpan, but also rather touched.

As Uva and the Umbrals departed, that left only Shiv, Adam, the Slayers, and Sigg. They stood along the protective railings that encircled this Passage exit, and they saw demons flying through the air—massive manta-like forms carrying dozens of Umbrals and other races on their backs.

“Well, we’re definitely not on the surface anymore,” Tran said. “What are those?”

“Demons,” Shiv said.

“Demons?” Heather breathed.

“Yeah, things are not quite as the Republic interpreted,” Adam said, still running defense for his nation.

“Yeah, not really at all,” Shiv replied. “Especially with the Inquisition doing whatever the hell they’re doing.”

At that, all their moods soured.

“There is something rotten at the heart of our nation,” Adam said. “I will see justice done. I swear it, Slayers. I swear that the Inquisition will pay for what they inflicted on you. This is my word as Young Lord Adam Arrow. Heroic Pathbearer.”

Both of the Slayers looked encouraged, but Shiv could still feel something on their faces. Being mentally tortured after being physically tortured left wounds, and ultimately, not everyone was like him. Shiv recovered. He practically felt fully recovered from his fight with the Jealousy, even after his mind was torn apart.

What am I? Shiv thought.

“But first we should see Valor,” Adam said. That drew Shiv’s attention. “He told me to go find him the first chance I got when I returned. So. This is what we will do.”

“Yeah, Valor—what’s he working on? You said he was trying to solve something to do with the Animancy Core.”

“Correct. He’s in a place at the bottom of the city, somewhere called the Hallowed Depths. It is where Weave stores its most honored dead and those who are consecrated for Necromancy.”

“What? Necromancy?” Tran said, his eyes widening. He made a gesture invoking the Ascendants.

Adam shook his head. “There’s a lot to explain, but when you meet him, do not use the word undead, or any kind of common nomenclature we’ve been taught by the church.”

“Okay, and, like, who is this Valor?” Heather said.

Adam opened his mouth, but a series of awkward noises came out. “It’s hard to explain. He is a mentor of sorts, and... well, you’ll... you’ll see. You’ll get used to him.”

“Alright,” Heather said, as she looked down over the rails. “But how are we going to get there? This place is pretty high up, and you’re saying it’s all the way down. Don’t tell me we’re riding on one of those...” She bit her lip. “Demons.”

“No matter,” Adam said. “Shiv, I saw you shooting around the battlefield earlier. You seem to be able to fly now.”

There was a look of challenge in the Young Lord’s eyes. And Shiv knew exactly what to expect.

“Yeah,” Shiv said. “Well, flying’s not exactly what I think I’d call it. It’s more like flinging myself using my gravitic field—”

Adam casually unslung his bow and shot Shiv in the face with a frost arrow. The act was so random, Shiv didn’t even have time to react as a burst of ice enveloped his head. It didn’t even particularly hurt, but it did surprise him momentarily—long enough that by the time he shattered the frost coating his head, Adam was already flying off, holding Heather in tow.

“The first person to arrive is the greater Pathbearer,” Adam declared, his voice echoing through the air.

“That son of a bitch,” Shiv muttered. “All right, Tran. We’re not going to let this bastard beat us. You too, Siggy. Get ready to fly.”

“What?” Siggy said, but Shiv didn’t care. He immediately grabbed the goblin and flung her at Adam.

Siggy screamed as she barely missed the Young Lord’s back.

Shit, Shiv grunted. *I need to work on my accuracy.*

“All right, well, looks like I’m going to have to grab her again. Hang on, Tran.”

Tran gawked in terror. “What?”

And then Shiv blasted off the edge of the passage with a flex of his Gravitic Wrestler, shooting over the railing with Tran in hand, diving to grab his “projectile goblin,” who screamed as she tumbled through the sky. Adam soared acrobatically and effectively through the air, doing twists and turns that Shiv found awkward to emulate. But the Deathless wasn’t so easily deterred anymore. He wasn’t limited by Momentum Core’s destruction. He could soar freely now too.

And if Adam was a hawk ascending, then Shiv was a falling hurricane.

“Let’s see how fast those little wings flap, Young Lord,” Shiv said with a chuckle, and he launched himself again, catching Siggy in his other hand.

Below, held like feathers in his hands, both Siggy and Tran screamed out in terror, their courage snapping like twigs.

Dread Aura > 70

Life was pretty good.

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

55 (I) Volatile

Much has been lost about the time of the Post-Integration, when the System first arrived, when the moon first shattered, when the world was altered and expanded, when the Great One first fell.

Before the Integration, humanity stood on the cusp of technological glory. Despite all the confines, despite the lack of mana and magic, humanity still managed to trespass the barriers of their world, reaching for the stars, even settling there.

Alas, communications with those far-flung worlds have long ceased, and even our outpost on the Crimson Planet of Ares has been silent for thousands of years.

However, there was another change during this era, a great change that swept across the world as new races arrived on Integrated Earth through gateways or by the System's own hand.

As the humans of Earth were transformed, gaining mana and breaking through the confines of their biology, the automata—once pseudo-intelligent but ultimately non-conscious machines made to assist man in their daily tasks or for general labor—awoke fully to consciousness. It was in the time of the Integration that the automata began to think, began to believe, began to dream. Though some of them were still bound to their old ways, with each generation, they became more and more like humans, more and more like all the other races.

Yet, not all of them transformed the same way. For, from the Legacy Empire still hidden deep in Forbidden Africa, there came those bearing old-world technologies, those untouched by the System and mana thanks to protective shells constructed by means few truly comprehend. Google search Nov31Fire.net

They exited their hidden empire protected from the System; clad in specialized automata that also served as their armor. These automata were called the Warskins—chassis empowered by mana. But not only chassis of war; they were also automata unto themselves, war machines meant to protect the people within, fighting in tandem with their users.

Most well-known among these chassis were the Penitent Legion, defectors from the Legacy Empire who sided with New Albion during the Siege of Great London. It was not known what made them betray their own people, for the Penitent will not say.

Some among their number even still remain, though scattered across the world. If you are fortunate enough in your life, you may encounter one of these chassis, now bearing the title of Penitent and nothing more.

Many of them are sundered, broken across their soul and crippled of their once prodigious skills for their betrayal. But in their electric minds run memories long and deep, and their shells endure, made of alloy from a time of glory past—near

unbreakable even in this modern age of magic and wonder. And perhaps, if you prove worthy enough, oh Pathbearer, you might even be chosen by one of these Penitents...

-The Penitent Chassis: Automata or Armor?

55 (I)

Volatile

Before Animancy, there was Necromancy. Valor reminded himself of this mantra as he bore the weight of another skull using his dagger, preparing to implant a final piece upon the construct he was creating.

A large creature lined with jutting, skeletal limbs and countless skulls hovered in the air before him, oozing with necromantic power. An eerie, green energy spewed out into the world as if a miasma, distorting the edges of reality and corroding the fabric of existence itself.

As Valor installed the final skull into the construct, it came alive, rumbling and growling with energy, and it was done. This was the cage he made for the Animancy Core, its Necromancy a counter-power to the Animancy. Should the core be found and the construct be deployed, the power that Vicar Sullain wished to summon would be denied for good.

But still, the construct needed to reach the core first. And that was far harder than just creating this cage.

Of all the magical skills one could gain, Necromancy started at Adept. You could not even touch it before reaching such a rank in another skill. And then, you could not reach Animancy until you were well into the Heroic Tier and possessed a deep mastery of Necromancy. Such things were connected to each other, as Necromancy was the ruin of the world—the loss and the destruction of what was. Animancy, then, was all that was, all that could be, all that might be.

For one to understand the totality, they first must understand the lack.

That was how Valor learned, anyway, from his countless masters before him, and from his many experiences in battle and focused study.

As the construct, the Graven Cage, rose into the air, Valor bowed his head and gave thanks to the Great One for infusing him with understanding and power. “Death need not be death,” Valor proclaimed solemnly. “And the end need not be the end.”

This skill-inscribed ritual chamber of the Hallowed Depths came aglow, the ritualistically-carved bones lining it shining in an array of colors—all marked as consecrated martyrs. These were those who dedicated themselves, dedicated their bodies and remains, to

Weave in case of a great crisis. They allowed themselves to be raised, offering their lingering essence, what remained of their skills, their minds, and their vitality, when a glorious service was required. Such as right now.

And so it was with care and dedication that Valor drew upon the martyrs of ages long past, drew upon those who went off to face death, the final enemy, and made use of what they bestowed upon him.

"I thank you the most of all," Valor said, greeting each skull and each limb that he imparted upon this construct, "for what you do, for what you grant, is a chance to spare others from that fell touch, that final end. I thank thee, for that is all I can offer."

Behind him, the Black Mass supporting him echoed his prayers. The two Necromancer Weaveresses led their Acolytes as they infused the last of their spells into the construct. His ritual completed, Valor turned. Weaveress Silent Spinner and Beetles-Needs-Pets both bowed, offering him that sanctified salute, and he did his best with only a hand clutching a dagger.

"I thank you, Weaveresses," he said. "Your assistance has been paramount. With me diminished, I fear I could have never done this ritual on my own, and constructed what was needed to create the Graven Cage."

"Do not speak low of yourself, Great Valor," Silent Spinner replied. "It is only with your knowledge and your guidance that we could have done this. We are merely the hands, you are the mind, you are the tongue. We are all united against death."

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"All against death," Valor echoed, their solemn vow reverberating through the chamber.

Just then, a series of voices echoed down the far end of the room, where two massive doorways remained open, letting air pass, lit only by countless glistening crystals lodged along the walls. Valor heard the voices, and he laughed. One was high with outrage. The other was lower, grumbling, and mocking.

So, his prodigal disciples had returned, and alive at that. Very good.

"Exalted Weaveresses," Valor said, "Pardon me. I must talk to my disciples. They have come just in time, just in time to view a potential solution to one of our great problems. Again, I thank you, and I will mention you and your Acolytes by name when next I speak to the Composer."

"We thank you, great Valor, and should you have the need, and should you have the knowledge, we would like to make this trade once more," the Weaveresses responded in unison.

“The world is dead. The world is alive,” Valor replied. At this point, Shiv, Adam, and a few others Valor didn’t recognize entered the room.

As the Legendary Pathbearer prepared to greet his disciples, he paused. Was Shiv bigger than he was before? Yes, he was. And there was a faint field about him, a tremoring of animated force. *Hmm. Gravitic Dominion? No. Gravitic Wrestler—yes, I’ve seen that once. From the Grapplers who guard the Shattered Caucasus. So the boy has continued his metamorphosis through death....*

Valor noticed something else. A lingering wound that wasn’t of his physical body, but leaked as an eerie, festering miasma out from Shiv’s arm. He had a Necromantic wound—one that was still spewing with the wither. That kind of pain should have broken most... But this was Shiv. *Pain is a thing of negotiation for him, Valor mused. Still. I must learn what inflicted this blow.*

“So we both agree,” Shiv said, sneering at Adam. “I would have won if you bothered telling me the directions to where we were going before you started the race.”

“No, you wouldn’t have won, because you kept smashing into things. This was a race to reach a destination, not a contest of who could tear through the most buildings. And what was with you throwing the goblin at me over and over again?” Adam asked, incredulous.

“I still feel sick,” a goblin Pathbearer groaned as she clutched her stomach.

Shiv snorted. “Oh, now it’s a race. You didn’t say it was a race before you shot me in the face with a frost arrow.”

“Yes, but I knew it wouldn’t harm you. How could it? I don’t think it would have harmed you even as a Pathless, considering how thick your skull is,” Adam sneered back.

Valor cleared his nonexistent throat. “Disciples, it gladdens me to see both of you returned and in good spirits. Though, not truly unharmed... Shiv, how was your experience in the gate?”

Both his disciples looked at each other, their argument clearly delayed rather than settled.

“It was...” Shiv began.

“A mess.” Adam finished.

Shiv glared at Adam. “Look, how about I tell him about what I did?”

“Yes, how about you tell him how you got into a fight with practically everyone you met, managed to get discovered by practically everyone you met, and, ultimately, escaped by kidnapping and stealing the body of a comatose Greater Demon?” Adam countered.

It took Valor a moment to fully comprehend what was being said, because some of it sounded absurd, but, once again, he looked at Shiv and grunted with acceptance. “Thrilling escapades, then. You must tell me everything. But first, something else.” Valor drifted close, examining Shiv’s armored left arm, shielded by metallic bone and a vibrating gauntlet. “How did you sustain a lingering wound?”

“Oh, this,” Shiv said. He brushed his hand, and, using his Biomancy, peeled away the armor there before he removed his gauntlet.

Valor drifted back. “Ah, a Severing Whip.”

“You know what that is?” Shiv asked.

Valor hummed. “It is an instrument meant to torture, meant to inflict permanent harm.”

“Well, it’s not permanent,” Shiv said. “It’s just healing really slowly. The bastard who left it drew the spell out of three children impaled on his chest, though. I’m still kind of creeped out by their faces being there.”

“Three children,” Valor repeated. “Why?”

“I don’t know? I thought you would understand,” Shiv said. “Thought that might be a Necromancy thing.”

“No. You just need something of the dead,” Valor said. “There’s nothing about Necromancy that demands blood sacrifices or the torture of children. I fear you faced someone who is especially demented.”

Shiv considered that for a moment and nodded. “Yeah, that seems about right.”

“I’m sorry,” a human Pathbearer said, his jaw open as he pointed rudely at Valor, “but is that a floating skull?”

Adam winced at the man. “Yes, he is a floating skull. Now do not say any other words and simply just accept what’s happening. Please. I understand things are shocking—”

“Is he a *Necrotech*?” The man’s voice was practically a squeak.

Adam clenched his teeth as he tried to think of how to explain this. “He is Valor Thann, the Great Valor Thann. He will tell you all about how great he is if you ask him. But—before either of you find a way to offend his fragile feelings... Valor, can you show me

what you were working on? The thing you said that could cage the... the..." Adam's voice trailed off as he looked past Valor and gawked at the Graven Cage. "Is that it?"

"Broken Moon," the other human Pathbearer breathed. "What is that? What is that?" She pointed at the construct.

"Ah, the Graven Cage," Valor said. "It is my means of containing the Animancy Core and potentially even neutralizing it once we acquire it."

"And how does it work?" Adam asked, lifting an eyebrow.

"It will wrap around the core and channel Necromancy into it. Enough Necromancy that it should neutralize its Animancy."

"And it will work?" Adam pressed.

"Do you doubt me?" Valor scoffed.

Adam blinked.

The Legendary Pathbearer sighed. "Well, yes, if you know the proper spell work and make the right kind of construct, it can. Yes. I can neutralize the core entirely. Most likely."

"All right, so we just need to get that large bloody mass of skulls and limbs inside the gate as well," Adam muttered. "Not going to be easy."

"Maybe not that hard," Shiv said. "The Jealousy is dead. Trapdoor might be able to help us hide this, and Heather knows how to pass through the gateway. I think we can do it."

Valor found himself drawn to Shiv's lingering wound again. "Shiv, remain still. I wish to see if I can extract the withering from you."

He shaped a spell in the air using his stone dagger, and an eerie green energy built around him, Necromantic miasma burning into the fabric of existence. But Shiv reacted with sudden violence. He dashed away so fast a slight shockwave cracked the ground where he stood and shook the entire chamber, knocking a few skulls out of place. Shiv cursed and grabbed them before they could fall, but he still avoided Valor.

"Yeah, maybe don't touch me with any Necromancy at all," Shiv said, gathering the skulls against him. "When the Gate Lord struck me with his Necromancy whip, it detonated."

"Detonated?" Valor asked. He drifted close but dismissed the spell. "Elaborate."

“It hit me, blew my arm off, and then the largest explosion I’ve ever been in lit the bodies of everyone around us on fire. It even burned the Gate Lord, and he’s a Heroic Pathbearer. It was like some kind of... soul fire or something. And so, uh, even if I don’t really know what Necromancy does, I know it doesn’t like me, and it goes off like a bomb when it touches me.”

Valor leaned back as he felt curiosity overtake him. “I must examine you in detail.”

He called out to the Weaveresses who were now watching the scene, entranced and interested. “Weaveresses, I need your help. I need you to prepare the Withercage. We have... a volatile subject I wish to examine.”

“Withercage?” Shiv asked nervously.

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55 (II) Volatile

55 (II)

Volatile

A Withercage was, in fact, a necromantic cage meant to seal away volatile materials, subjects, or contain volatile rituals.

Volatile rituals like the one that was about to happen to Shiv.

The cage was made from a series of upraised arms, all skeletal, ending in hands performing various gestures. They were also connected by spell patterns shaped from that eerie, miasmic glow Shiv came to understand was Necromantic mana. Thus, Shiv didn’t want to be anywhere near the cage, and so he stayed close to the middle.

The entire space was only about 20 meters in diameter and was lodged so far underground that it took nearly an hour to get down here. And so the Legendary Pathbearer and his new Master-Tier disciple found themselves here, about to explore the latter’s unique nature.

“You said he used the three children as effigies?” Valor asked, circling around Shiv, tracing spells in the air.

Shiv couldn't sense Necromancy or its connected mana field, but he could feel something *withering* nearby. He stayed perfectly still, unwilling to touch any of that foul substance. "Yeah, three. Their faces are still there in the scar."

Valor hummed. "A wither imprint. It is a rare thing, but sometimes, when the feedback is great, it lingers on a structure. Or an individual." Valor's spells lingered for a moment longer before they faded entirely.

Shiv remained perfectly still. He wasn't moving anywhere until the Legendary Pathbearer told him he was safe to do so.

"Do you know the greatest danger and the largest reason why so many fear Necromancy?" Valor asked.

"Not fully sure, but it might be something to do with the raising of the dead and the corrosion of life."

"Ah, but it is not the raising of the dead. It is the use of death as power, to infuse new will into constructs, to inflict harm beyond the physical or mental, or even to compromise a soul itself. Necromancy is about loss, manipulating the echoing remnants that linger after a loss. The Severing Whip that struck you. Do you know what it would do to most people?"

"Thump them pretty bad, maybe rot them from the inside?" Shiv replied.

"If it were only so kind." Valor chuckled.

"*So kind*," Shiv repeated, his eyes widening.

"So kind," echoed Adam from outside the Withercage.

"Indeed. When someone is struck by a Necromantic attack, the first thing they feel is usually the decaying and decomposition of their flesh, or the immediate rusting and embrittling of their armor. Beyond that, though, comes the Skill Damage."

"Skill Damage?" Shiv muttered, his pupils dilating.

Valor continued. "You clearly took none. However, you were scarred. If, instead of you, Adam here was hit by the whip, without having any Magical Resistance... Then, perhaps, he would not be just short of an arm. He would be short of a Bow Proficiency Skill."

And suddenly, the Young Lord was backing further and further away from the Withercage. The other Pathbearers fled with him.

Valor jabbed Shiv with the stone dagger as the cage flared with magic. “This is because Necromancy is powered by the antithesis of life, the antithesis of vitality—a counter-concept called the Withering. It does not possess anything of a mind, but it does collect echoes of memory. And it does not have a soul, for the soul is for the living, for the soul needs someone to give something meaning. It, instead, is connected to the Necromancer, serving as something of a conduit, an effigy of power. And ultimately, that is why Necromancy has no mana field.”

Shiv’s eyes widened. “No mana field?”

“No. For it does not deal in something that expands across the world. Death is the world. The world lives. The world dies. And constant loss suffuses everything in between. As one’s Necromancy grows stronger, you are more and more capable of using the ambient loss in the world. More and more capable of drawing deeper into what used to be. This can be from corpses, can be from ruins, can even be from a memory. Necromancy seeks an effigy. But this entire world is an effigy.” Valor paused. “You fought a rank amateur in the art, Shiv. Be happy of your fortune.”

For a beat, Shiv just stared at Valor. He recalled his fight with the Gate Lord. How powerful Confriga’s punches were....

“He was a Heroic Pathbearer,” Shiv said.

Valor chuckled nonchalantly. “Ah, yes, a Hero—very impressive. Full of *potential*. But whatever he was a Hero in, it was not Necromancy. If he were even a Master of Necromancy, I suspect the entire gate would no longer exist, he would be dust, and so would you.”

“What?” Adam whispered from afar.

“What?” Shiv repeated.

“Indeed, I suspect that the reaction his Necromantic attack had with you is the result of your unique soul composition.” Valor hummed as he circled around Shiv. The flames within Valor’s skull flickered, and Shiv recognized this as an Analyze Skill being used. “Do you know that Analyze is very close to Necromancy? It peers into the soul. It catches a glimpse at the lower skill thresholds, but after its Evolution to Master-Tier, you can see more of a person, see their full status, even. In fact, Analyze is one of the few ways one can gain the Necromancy Skill after reaching Adept-Tier.”

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“It is?” Shiv asked.

“Yes,” Valor replied. “However, I fear that you should never learn Necromancy. In fact, you should avoid it at all costs, at least until you learn how to control your own vitality.”

Shiv paused, stunned. “What happens if I do learn Necromancy?”

“You may very well explode. Violently.”

“Even more violently than when he hit me with the whip?”

“Much more. He struck you with a very, very unfocused, very poor spell. It was meant to torture, not destroy. Three effigies from mere children—not even Pathbearers... and so vulgarly constructed at that.”

Valor started laughing, and it was not the laugh of warmth. It was not the laugh of a kindly grandfather. It was the laugh of a man recounting how many people he had brutally killed, using a specific method in which he was very, very versed. “If I had hit you with a Necromantic working, even as I am now—especially as I am now—there would be nothing left of you, or me, or anyone. Not even a good portion of Weave might remain.”

By this point, Adam was pressed against the wall, so far from the Withercage that there was practically nowhere he could go. Nowhere, other than running back upstairs.

“So,” Shiv said, “when it comes to Necromancy, I am pretty much a walking bomb.”

“That is the simplistic way of understanding it,” Valor answered. “A more accurate description is likely: You are the antithesis of Necromancy as a whole. The antithesis of the Withering. Necromancy deals in loss, but you don’t die. You do not stay dead. Not even your mind stays broken. Right now you have five Master-Tier Skills, yes?”

Shiv nodded. “Yeah, Gravitic Wrestler, Woundeater, Momentum Core, Adamantine Adaption, and The Chef Unwavering.”

“The what?” Valor asked, confused about the last one. The skull had been nodding throughout the other skills. “The Chef Unwavering?”

“I got that by fusing an Orcish Skill I got. With my cooking. Uh, long story, but an orc fell in love with me.”

Valor winced. “Oh, well, you now have an eternal enemy. It is a... thing that happens. I suffered the same inconvenience five hundred years ago. I believe I’m at reincarnation 91291239. Orcs are... determined. But wait—you said *Cooking*?”

“Yes, I have Master-Tier Cooking now.”

Valor just stared at him for one moment. He then looked away from Shiv and spoke to Adam. “Adam, how is the cooking?”

The Young Lord had to yell to be heard. “Very, very annoyingly good.”

Valor's expression seemed to turn into one of absolute despair.

"Uh, don't worry, Valor." Shiv winced, trying to placate the sulking skull. "We'll find another fragment of you as soon as we can."

"I hope so," Valor replied. "I—I feel like I'm here just to be tortured sometimes. I yearn to taste..." He swallowed his pain before it became a sob. "Regardless, there is a tremendous amount of mana in you, attuned and unattuned. If you use Necromancy on yourself, or if a great practitioner of the art impacts you with Necromancy, I suspect... I suspect that the detonation will be somewhat cataclysmic." Valor considered before he spoke again. "Perhaps powerful enough to unmake a good portion of the Abyss. Or a continent."

Shiv tried to imagine an explosion that size. He couldn't.

Valor coughed. "We should avoid using any Necromancy on you while you are here. In fact, you really should have informed me before you arrived here. Being here is extremely dangerous for you. And me. And everyone in this entire dimension. Maybe even for the Composer."

Shiv struggled to keep his legs from shaking. "Shit..."

"Aptly put. We should leave as soon as possible. Before that, however... Damn my curiosity, but I wish to do an experiment."

"What kind of experiment?" Shiv said, more than slightly nervous.

"Just a slight magical experiment. It'll be a little bit painful, but it shouldn't do too much damage." The skull paused, freezing in the air. "You trust me, do you not?"

Shiv nodded slowly, though he really wasn't sure how he felt. "Yeah, I do."

"Very good. Let us see why your soul is the way it is..."

And so, Shiv stood still as Valor dipped the tip of his dagger in bright green energy and ever so lightly tapped Shiv on a finger. "Hmmm. This is inter—"

The resulting explosion launched Valor through the cage fast enough to crack the sound barrier and caused the Withercage to rattle and crack. The bone bars folded inwards. Shiv snarled in pain as his finger throbbed like the tip was on fire.

Then, a moment later, the pain was gone, but the inside of the cage was on fire, and Valor was half-embedded in the wall less than a meter next to Adam. The Young Lord gawked at his near-death experience, while Shiv looked at his hand. It looked fine, but...

“Valor,” Shiv breathed, “I no longer trust you.”

“That’s okay,” Valor said, wheezing as he pulled himself out of the crumbling wall. Heather, Siggys, and Tran could be heard fleeing upstairs. “I do not think I trust myself anymore, either. That was horrible. Let us get you out of this place before Weave turns into a wasteland.”

Everyone departed the Hallowed Depths after that. Everyone. All the necromancers working inside, the maintenance staff, even those working on the outside. That entire building was to be scrubbed clean of anything left behind by Shiv. And until they were absolutely certain, lockdown would remain in place.

As they walked through the undercity of Weave, crossing by weavers that held out baskets, begging for shards, Valor continued talking to Shiv, explaining what he learned from that brief moment of contact. “Your soul is integrated. I suspected this before. I would dare say I was even sure of it, but I was not fully aware of its true composition, its mixed nature.”

“Mixed nature,” Shiv repeated.

Beside them, Adam was listening intently, his eyes narrowing. This had to do with him as well, considering it was the ritual that likely made Shiv the way he was.

“Death. Your mind, your vitality, your soul; they are practically merged together. That’s why I assumed you can casually resurrect by merely draining someone of their vitality, but I was wrong. At least, I was not as correct as I could have been. Your mind is attached, but there is a layer into it, a threshold that separates it from your soul and your vitality, that is not the same for your vitality and your soul. Those two are completely melted into each other, or practically merged as one. Whatever the substance that was born of them, it is neither and both. It is something I have never seen before.”

“So, is that a good thing or a bad thing?” Adam asked.

“It is... a unique thing.” Valor paused and stared at Shiv. “Shiv, do you have a Unique Skill?”

Shiv didn’t say anything for a moment. Adam’s stare turned to a disbelieving glare, and Shiv gave an awkward shrug. “Well, technically, I... I also have a Legendary Skill.”

The Young Lord let out a roar. “Godsdammit!” He stepped away from their group and punched a wall. He struck it so hard that the blow sent out a shockwave, throwing shards of stone everywhere. The begging weavers immediately started fleeing up the walls, clambering away from the raging human. “Damn it! Damn the System!” Adam looked up to the looming city above. “You’re mocking me! Is this what you’re doing? Is

this what you're doing? I finally become a Hero! And he's technically been a Legend this entire time? What is wrong with you? Why do you hate me?"

Everyone watched Adam have his breakdown for a moment before Valor clicked his jaw worriedly. "Sometimes I worry about him."

"Yeah, me too," Shiv said, watching Adam wail in anguish. "But I also find it pretty funny."

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55 (III) Volatile

55 (III)

Volatile

Valor huffed. "I will tell you now, Shiv, that I know only three other people in the world who possess a Unique Skill."

"And what are they like?"

"Well, one is the greatest idiot I've ever met," Valor answered. Shiv didn't know what to say about that. "Another is the single most terrifying woman I have ever met. The third is my son." Shiv turned at Udraal Thann's mention, but Valor said no more of it.

"Regardless, each of them possesses something no one else does. It has changed their nature so much that the way they live in the world, the way they gain other skills, is entirely changed as well."

"Yeah, well, my Unique Skill also came with a Unique Feat. That's part of the reason why I level so fast. It's because I gain levels practically every time I die, to make up for the reasons why I die."

Adam was slamming his head against the wall. Tran stepped forward, trying to get him to stop.

"Maybe you shouldn't talk about this with him around," Valor muttered, watching Adam suffer.

“No, I think we should,” Shiv insisted. “I think everyone should know about this right now. It’s important to know. Especially for Adam.”

“I will kill you, Shiv,” Adam ground out. “I will kill you.”

The Young Lord slid down against the wall. His knees hit the ground with a thud. Tran and Heather knelt beside him.

“It’s okay,” Tran said. “It’s okay, he’s on our side. It’s... it’s...”

“He’s a monster,” Adam whined. “He’s a godsdamned monster.”

Valor looked away from the mind-broken Young Lord and continued. “But ultimately, your vitality and your soul are practically the same thing. And that is why you do not die. Because there is no dissipation, there is no separation upon loss and death. You remain together. You probably merely enter a state of drastic instability in which your soul starts burning your vitality to remain in existence. Because you lack a vessel to root you in the world. And after absorbing enough vitality and going over capacity, you use that excess energy to automatically rebuild your last remembered self before death.”

Shiv blinked. “Is that why my non-bound pieces of equipment don’t stay with my Revenant?”

“No. That is because they technically have souls of their own and cannot be so easily reconstructed. That is my theory, anyway.”

“Pieces of Equipment have souls?” Shiv muttered.

“Actually, this is a good lesson right now. What Tier is your bone armor, the one you are wearing right now?”

Shiv blinked. “Uh, it doesn’t have a Tier, but if we’re going by my Adamantine Adaption—”

“‘It does not have a Tier’ is the right answer. It is not awakened. It cannot bear Enchantments. That’s why your bone armor is not true magical equipment. It is simply a piece of clothing, to an extent.”

“Wait, then why don’t I respawn naked?” Shiv asked. He’d been wondering about that for a while.

Valor paused. “I have no idea. Perhaps the System cares about your modesty.”

A weird thought rushed through Shiv’s mind, imagining Uva to be the System all this time. He ignored it as much as he could. “Well, my armor still blocks attacks pretty good,” he muttered.

“Yes, that is true. But what separates true equipment from something that is dead and merely usable is the ability to be enchanted, is the ability for it to be reforged and to grow stronger, potentially even becoming a true, living intelligence.”

Shiv stared at Valor. “Equipment can become intelligent?”

“Yes. Just like any creature can, eventually life can find its way into an object. A soul is what is mainly needed. That is the reason automata have become alive and gained consciousness as well.”

“Huh,” Shiv muttered. “Then, a dagger can become self-aware too?”

“Yes. How do you think I maintained my existence?” The Deathless slowly nodded. When Shiv first found Valor, the Legendary Pathbearer was no more than a dagger that could talk to people. Now he was more—a skull and arm holding a dagger. “And while we are on this topic, I believe it is essential that you find yourself properly equipped, especially with this new weakness discovered. What is your Magical Resistance, Shiv?”

“Uh, none,” Shiv replied.

“You do not have the skill?” Valor sounded surprised.

“Yeah,” Shiv muttered. “I, uh... like magic too much.”

“You didn’t get it even as your mind was torn in half?”

“Well, yeah, I was kind of pissed off that my Psychomancy wasn’t stronger, but, you know, it didn’t make me hate magic. It just made me want more magic.”

Valor let out a sigh. “You... Hm, I see that you’re too well-adjusted. If there was only a way to fan some hate inside of you.”

“Oh, I got another Feat from fusing that Orcish Skill. It lets me use up my rage to supercharge some of my skills. It’s pretty strong and even keeps me mellow.”

“And it makes me angry,” Adam muttered. He was barely even reacting at this point. He just stared at the ground with a lost expression. Tran and Heather were patting him on the back while Siggy just stood awkwardly by their side.

“How did you survive that encounter with the Greater Demon, then?” Valor asked.

“Oh, I got this,” Shiv said, holding up his Magebreaker Gauntlet. “That, uh, turncoat gave it to me. And also, I got the mask. Both helped a lot in keeping me standing and sane during the fight.”

“Ah, very useful. Wait, is that Inertium?” Valor leaned closer. “Ah, it is. I haven’t seen this in approximately four hundred years.”

“Four hundred?” Shiv breathed.

“Yes, it’s been a while since I ventured to the outer dimensions. Most are quite taken with magic, but some have learned to truly fear mana and loathe the System.”

Shiv nodded. “I can’t get Magical Resistance with the gauntlet because—”

“Because it is also technically a magical skill and will trigger the gauntlet’s response.” Valor already knew. Shiv didn’t know why he was surprised. The Legendary Pathbearer had been alive for longer than Shiv had, well, for longer than anything.

Valor was practically the oldest person Shiv knew. *Wait, how old is the Composer?*

“Regardless, we can work with this,” Valor continued. “We simply need to find a proper set of armor for you first. You can even fuse your bone armor as additional plating on the outside after. After that, we’re going to give you a Vitality Enchantment.”

“Vitality?” Shiv said, and a surge of worry shot through him. “Doesn’t that make Necromancy go off like a bomb?”

“No,” Valor said. “Most vitality is merely diluted by the Withering and expended. Your unique... *Vitae*—your mixture of soul and vitality—is the dangerous ingredient in the current alchemy. Alas, a good Vitality Shroud will require a Master-Tier Enchantment at the very least. Preferably higher than that. It is my best solution, at least for now.”

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“All right,” Shiv said. “And if that Enchantment dies and I get hit by a Necromancy spell...

“Then you likely explode and kill many, many people.”

“And I really, really want to get out of here now,” Tran said, staring at Shiv. “We’re still too close to the Necromancer’s pit.” His courage was practically dust. Everyone’s courage felt similar to Shiv’s Dread Aura Skill. Even Valor’s was a bit unsteady.

“Alright,” Shiv breathed. “Let’s... let’s get me proper armor, so I don’t turn into a walking mana bomb. Uva’s gonna give me some new clothes too, so why not? I guess we’re doing some shopping.”

Shopping for armor proved to be an absolute nightmare. The first problem was availability. Shiv needed something that was at least in the Master-Tier. The most common Master-Tier armor was composed of mithril. Mithril was like glass for Shiv. He tried moving in the armor, and it practically broke off of his body in an instant.

After paying the terrified shopkeeper a hefty sum of money in apology, they moved on to sturdier materials.

“Right. Armor needs to be strong. Strong enough to deal with someone who has both Master-Tier Toughness and Physicality,” Shiv muttered.

Adam shook his head in exasperation.

“Hey, Adam, how attached are you to that armor?” Shiv asked, eyeing his plates.

“I will die before I give this armor to you.”

Shiv laughed.

The next concern was *quality*—there were quite a few sets of adamantine armor, at least ten Shiv came across. Most people couldn’t even lift the armor with how heavy they were. That wasn’t too much of an issue for Shiv. His problem was, adamantine armor was also nightmarishly hard to build and craft—and, apparently, how well-made a piece of armor was determined its Tier.

“If it is not awakened,” Valor said, “then it is not proper armor. It will be like your bones. You cannot enchant those. And these are... poorly made.” Valor glared at the armorer—who looked like she was about to fall over dead.

“She’s supposed to be a Master Smith,” Shiv replied.

Adam scoffed. “Yes, and I see no reason to doubt her ability based on just this. Does every meal you make come out perfect?”

“Yes?” Shiv said, frowning. “The Chef Unwavering is all about perfection.”

“Well. Most Master craftsmen spend years trying to make one masterpiece armor. It’s practically a major event every time someone crafts a Heroic-Tier armor.”

Heather nodded at this. “Yes. I remember hearing the saying that every time a Heroic-Tier armor is made, a celebrity is born. The capital practically throws a rave for someone who can create something that good.”

“Wait, how did your dad get that Legendary armor?” Shiv asked, looking at Adam. “He’s a Master. You know. Like me.”

The Young Lord scowled at Shiv's comparison. "My father is a remarkable man. He was defeating and besting Masters while he was still an Adept. A hunter, after all, is rarely larger than their prey. But with precision and mastery, a man can bring down a giant."

Their hunt went on for a few hours, and by the time the orbs in the sky above started to dim, there were still no worthy candidates. There were adamantine, titanium, and nightglass armors aplenty, all Adept-Tier or below. And there were other armors, Master-Tier, but too fragile, especially for someone with Shiv's skills. Most tragic of all, there was a Heroic-Tier armor—something made of Moonsteel, the same kind of metal that composed Shiv's cooking knife. However, it had already been sold long in advance.

"Forty million shards," Shiv muttered, gawking at the sale price.

"Hmm, doesn't sound too expensive," Adam replied.

Shiv stared at Adam. "Doesn't sound too expensive."

"It's not," Adam said. "Do you have any idea how much someone pays for good armor? Do you have any idea how much more they might pay for a specific Enchantment?"

Shiv kept staring.

The Young Lord shook his head. "You do not?"

Shiv's stare turned into a glare. "Yeah, and that's my fault?"

"Financial literacy is a citizen's personal civic duty," Adam declared, clasping his arms behind his back and walking past Shiv. "It is not the state's duty to coddle you."

"Yeah, well, if it doesn't come in the form of a Unique or Legendary skill, I wouldn't know about it," Shiv spat.

Adam started walking faster and further away from Shiv. Valor simply sighed and shook his head.

Soon after, they found themselves sitting on a bench outside the smith's district as people came to and fro. There, Valor, Shiv, Adam, and their tag-alongs spent a few moments in respite, considering what to do next.

"This is only one district," Adam sighed. "We can go seek out all the others. Actually, Shiv, it might be better if you recruit your lady love for this cause. We're practically running around like a headless chicken. Valor's been here, but the shops haven't exactly stayed in place for multiple centuries."

"Yeah," Shiv said, rubbing his face. "But I hate this. I'd rather fight the Jealousy again. Hells. Let's go back to the apartment. I'll make you guys dinner or something. Oh, sorry, Valor."

"It is fine," Valor said, sounding not fine.

"Yeah, let's do that," Tran mumbled with a full mouth. He and Heather were nursing on Sticky Grub, which was effectively the weavers' equivalent of ice cream; juicy bugs attached to a dense, edible cocoon web.

Adam and Shiv had tried it earlier as well. The latter thought it was better than the last bug-dish they'd tried, but he still wasn't quite convinced. Adam, meanwhile, had gotten three for himself and described the sticks as "quite tasty and crunchy."

"My old man wasn't much of a Pathbearer," Tran said. "But if there's one thing I agree with him, it's this. It's worth waiting on good equipment. Settling for bad equipment with terrible composition, poor quality, and a low Tier is just asking to get killed."

"I'd be plenty happy to wait," Shiv said, "except I'm going to be raiding a gate soon, and the bastard who runs that gate will likely probably pop me, himself, and maybe a good part of the Abyss if he hits me with the right spell."

"Perhaps it would be wise to ask the Composer too," Adam said, yawning slightly. "She might have a better idea on how to arm a Master-Tier Pathbearer." Then the Young Lord looked at Shiv again, did an exaggerated double take, and held out his hands. "Oh, *sorry*, Unique-Tier Pathbearer Shiv. We will have to find a very entirely special armor for you. Perhaps in bright pink and the finest gold filigree. We'll call you Gilded Princess."

"Is that what you think about, Young Lord? Me in bright pink and gilded armor? What would your fiancée say?"

Adam's pretend mockery died for a moment, and his expression turned to one of sourness and uncertainty. Shiv grimaced. They hadn't exactly continued with the topic after his initial retelling of the events inside the gate. "I... Adam... I don't think she's a part of this. What Oldsmith said..."

"I don't know what to believe anymore about most things." Adam stared off into the distance. "But I will find out."

"We will find out," Shiv said.

Adam eyed him a moment, and then he nodded. "Yes, I suppose we will. Me with my precision, and you with your... destructive, barbarous ways." Updates are released by

Shiv chuckled. "Well, what was that you said? You're the hunter, I'm the Hawk?"

“Well, you’re not really like a hawk. A hawk is quick and agile in the air, plunging and catching prey in an instant. You’re more like... a rhino.”

“What the hells is a rhino?” Shiv asked.

“It’s an extinct animal. Supposedly it was very big, very strong, and it smashed through everything in its way, uh, until it couldn’t, and then it usually died.”

“Oh,” Shiv said. “So it’d come back stronger and smash through eventually?”

“No, not really.”

“Well, then I don’t think I’m quite like a rhino either.”

Adam laughed.

The group settled into a brief silence. Just then, a psionic wave washed over Shiv, and it carried Uva’s voice with it.

“Shiv,” Uva said. “Shiv. Can you hear me?”

Shiv blinked and sat up. “Uva? Yeah. I can hear you? Why? Are you alright? The Jealousy didn’t come back to life, did it?”

She gave a brief laugh. “No. But this does concern the Jealousy. The Psychomancers at Elaboration and I delved a bit deeper into this creature, and we uncovered something very, very interesting. Something that concerns you and especially Adam.”

Shiv was about to tell Adam what was happening, but the Young Lord just nodded. “I’m here,” Adam said. Shiv blinked. Uva was getting very good at using the Jealousy. “What is the matter?”

“It turns out our Greater Demon was more than just a gate guard, and working for more than one person at a time. While Confriga assumed the Jealousy was just guarding his gate, it seems that the Greater Demon already had a prior contract. Specifically with an individual from the Yellowstone Republic—a certain City Lord Havel Van Stormhalt.”

Shiv and Adam shared a look, and the Young Lord’s head promptly fell into his hands.

“Adam?” Uva asked with a tinge of concern to her voice. “I’m sensing great pain from you? Are you well? Shiv? What’s wrong with him?”

“Just give him a second,” Shiv said, sliding closer to pat the Young Lord on his back. “The man’s got to process some pretty nasty family bullshit—and also start plotting the murder of his to-be father-in-law.”

“System!” Adam roared up at the sky, scaring the nearby smiths.

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56 (I) Bedfellows

Few things hurt more than realizing your own side is determined to get you killed.

Every soldier has some kind of story related to this. Something about how their commanders or supposed comrades did some bullshit that got people killed for no reason. But the worst thing is when you're fighting with nobles. Thing about nobles—they hate each other. Another thing about nobles—if you aren't powerful or don't got the right family name, they don't care if you die.

So. That usually ends with a lot of pointless death.

Have a story about trying to smash through this fort under a City Lord Stutton. Real asshole. Loved to flog people. And he also loved trying to beat his rival, City Lord Hermando, during the Gate Rush of '72.

So there we were, getting butchered by noble ambitions trying to take a gate that didn't matter. Outside of the gate was some group of primal elves, but damn were those bastards good mages. We bombed them for seven days and nights. Nothing. And then we heard Hermando was coming in.

Stutton went from being just your usual piece of shit to an insane and murderous piece of shit. And went from hammer and squeeze to doing frontal assaults.

This ended the way you'd expect it to. A lot of dying. Even with artillery and magical cover. It got so bad that City Lord Stutton decided he was not going to wait anymore. That he, as a High Master in Physicality and Axe Proficiency, was being let down by the pathetic wretches he was leading, and so he and his personal retinue went out for a charge. To his credit, the bastard was strong. He literally tore a massive gap into the fort and the nearby land—caused a pretty nasty quake in the process.

I'll tell you this much. Masters, they hit hard. They're on a different level. More natural disaster than person.

But that fortress was made to endure worse disasters than him. He broke through the exterior wall, and, with a roar, he demanded that we all charge. And... we didn't.

Why? Because fuck him. 20% casualties. For what? For some gate we won't get anything from? Fuck him twice, and if you're Stuttons family, get tainted for being related to the piece of shit.

We didn't follow. And the elves sealed the gate behind them. The fighting kept up for a while because he was still a Master, but after about two days, they gave Stutton's body back to us and told us to leave. That should have been the end of things, but then Hermando decided he wanted the gate and that we were getting recruited for his idiot charge too.

Hermando died mysteriously that night. Elves snuck into our camp and made a blood-mess of him. No one saw anything.

Another thing about nobles. Sometimes, they just turn up dead. A real mystery of life.

-Memoirs of a Master-Tier War Mage

56 (I)

Bedfellows

Shiv initially imagined Elaboration to be something like Cradle—a massive structure that was shaped like its namesake. Frankly, it wasn't even like Passage, which was more an enormous dome-shaped building lined with cavernous exits filled by many, many teleportation anchors. No, Elaboration was nondescript; so nondescript that it was impossible to determine where Elaboration even began and the rest of the city ended.

When a Weaveress Jump Mage came to retrieve Shiv and the others, they found themselves dropped off on a bridge. It was not even a particularly remote bridge. It was high up in the city, a busy intersection where demons and people passed by all the time. They were then led into what seemed like an office building—and, to Shiv's surprise, it was just an office building. Workers flicked mana across papers, inscribing details, stamping contracts. There were desks. There were offices. But no Jealousy. No secret facilities. No Sisters or Trapdoor Operatives.

Shiv wondered what this place had to do with the hyper-mysterious Elaboration where all the Greater Demons and secrets of Weave were stored, but then they passed through another unassuming door, and the entire atmosphere changed. Suddenly, they were in an extremely reinforced tunnel, its walls lined with protective Enchantments and scanning spells like the interior of a teleportation anchor.

Now, that's a place meant to contain powerful things, Shiv thought.

After they got to the end of the hallway, descended in an elevator, and emerged after a few minutes, they were in another environment altogether. Elaboration was woven into the general architecture of the public infrastructure, hidden in plain sight, with no

obvious targets for enemies to strike or infiltrate. Shiv wondered if this was to defend against the spies of New Albion, but considering how deeply the agents of Aviary managed to infiltrate Passage... He had doubts about how cost-effective this was.

At least a good portion of Aviary's assassins and spies are dead now, Shiv thought.

The inner levels of Elaboration were a hive of activity. Shiv saw Weaveresses containing strange artifacts that pulsed with magical energy, strange and esoteric creatures held within stasis cages and suppressed by spells that rendered them dormant in physical and mental activity. There was even a cage that was supposedly a temporal seal, which reminded Shiv how Vicar Sullain managed to freeze time itself within vast space when Shiv was falling from Blackedge.

From the central lobby were hallways and walkways extending in all directions, with signs that were scripted in codified language. Even with his enchanted reading glasses, Shiv still didn't understand where anything was. He didn't understand what a Kinetic Spatial Anomaly Storage Facility was, nor did he know what a Psycho-Semantic-Philosophy-Memetic-Counteractor did.

He stuck close to the Weaveress leading him, because if he got lost here, he might stay lost for good.

Finally, they were taken to an observation room, where they were placed in a plain, sleet-white room with a window in front of it. The window was protected by layered magics and overlooking what seemed to be a huge oubliette that sank into the ground. It descended deep down before them like a tube. And there, at the bottom of that massive sunken barrel, Uva hovered in midair, surrounded on all sides by even more mystical protections.

The Jealousy was partially manifested, and the dense emanation of mana made it look like it was hatching from Uva's mind. Its existence, composed of psionic energy, crackling with shrouds of intermittent darkness. Shiv could tell it was still mind-dead. But the way it stared, the way it stretched its limbs out and traced the edges of the world, made him feel uneasy. And by this point, he couldn't tell where the Greater Demon's mana began, and Uva's ended.

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She's really deep inside that thing's mind, Shiv thought, staring.

The Weaveress that brought them in pressed a button right underneath the observation window. "Cherished Sister Uva, the authorized personnel have arrived. You may begin the demonstration." Her voice echoed out into the room beyond, and Shiv caught sight of other windows lined with focus crystals—and other Psychomancers pooling their power to stabilize the Jealousy.

Didn't even notice them before.

"Acknowledged," Uva said, her mind's voice echoing. However, it was cast out into the room as an audible declaration rather than a psionic one.

Shiv looked around in confusion, and the Weaveress noticed his expression. "The spellwork converts all psionic communications into audible ones. It makes things clear and helps avoid any attempts at compromising one's ego."

"I see," Valor said. "It is impressive what you have made here. Despite the recency of your state, the Necrotechs have several operations similarly advanced as this. But their resources mean they have no excuse. You do yourselves honor."

"Necessity breeds discipline and creativity," the Weaveress replied, "You honor us with your compliment, Great Legend."

Adam, though, was practically glaring down from the window. His arms were clutched behind his back, his face a look of pure intensity. Shiv stood right next to him while the others lingered behind, unsure about what they just found themselves in the middle of.

The Weaveress gestured for them to hold the button. "You can speak to her. It also allows our voices to be carried out with perfect clarity."

Adam nodded and pressed the button. "Uva. Show me what you have learned."

She didn't cast the memories directly into their minds—the wards prevented that—but she did create what seemed to be a small cloud of dense, psionic mana, mana that clashed and twisted and congealed like a roiling, boiling cloud. Then it cleared. It materialized just above the Jealousy, and in that patch of clarity, a scene began to play—a memory from the perspective of the Jealousy, as the Weaveress explained to them a moment later.

The memory showed a man standing beyond a ritual circle. A complex series of magical inscriptions lined the ground right in front of his feet. Shiv wondered if the wards were made to prevent the Jealousy from escaping or to summon the Greater Demon instead.

The man was dressed in a finely made black and yellow long coat. Shiv guessed the garment was expensive, based on how shiny and over-stylized it was. Nobles had weird and extreme tastes. On his chest, there was an emblem of a shield splitting what seemed to be a lightning bolt in half.

Stormhalt, Shiv thought. *I guess they take their family name really literally.*

The man himself looked similarly imposing. He cut a tall figure, long of limb and gaunt of build. Shiv guessed the man was likely much taller than even he was, but not nearly as big. There was, however, a crackle of lightning that wove around the man—a hint of the

noble's Skill Evolution. Static danced at the end of the nobleman's black, well-trimmed, beard and hair as well. Stormhalt's eyes were intense, the color of a storm brewing, dark with flashes of white. He seemed to regard the Jealousy not as someone would a Greater Demon, but as a Pathbearer facing a rival.

His arms were behind his back, but his posture was stiff. This wasn't an interrogation or a clash, but a negotiation.

"Well, that is definitely Havel Van Stormhalt," Adam declared. His expression turned absolutely sour. "I never did like the man. The feeling was mutual. But... he was always cordial. He was... I know he and my father had their grievances, but to do this... Isabella's father... The Inquisition..." Adam looked lost. Shiv wasn't sure what to tell the Young Lord. He wasn't even sure what to make of the scene himself yet.

"I thank you for responding to my communications with such haste," Havel said. His voice was strong, even Resonant. But there was an edge to it. Everything about him spoke of a storm brewing. Of something about to snap and break at any moment. "I understand that you are considering... Gate Lord Confriga's offer. I thank you for bringing this to my attention. As promised, I will see you nourished with a thousand minds this year as well. They will be delivered to your usual place of feeding."

"A *thousand* minds?" Adam croaked. "A thousand people? Where is the Republic supposed to get that? How? From where? Usual place of feeding? This—this isn't the first time?" The Young Lord looked absolutely aghast. Behind, the Slayers looked on in disbelief as well. "The Ascendants—they should have struck him down for this! Destroyed his very soul for this sacrilege!"

Shiv placed a hand on Adam's shoulder. Adam almost flinched away, but he stopped himself.

"You should be pissed," Shiv said. "But be pissed all at once at the end. I think it's only going to get worse."

"More than this, however," Havel continued, a dark expression clouding his face, "I have a separate need for you. There is another service you can render. I will see you rewarded. Fed for ten years. If you can accomplish what is needed."

The Jealousy laughed, and the very noise made Shiv feel sick. "Speak. Speak, human. Speak before hunger takes me. Mind so close, so enticing..."

Havel's face twisted in near-disgust, but he controlled himself and hid the full expression. That didn't matter, because the Jealousy could sense his emotions, and it snickered mockingly. "Be honest. Be open. Don't need to like each other. Just need to deal..."

Havel glared. "I need you to help me steal something. I need you to make sure that the Animancy Core required by Vicar Sullain ends up in my hands first."

"The core?" the Jealousy hissed. "Why betray ally? Why seek to take their greatest weapon? They need core. Want them to lose?"

"We are not allies," Stormhalt said, his face a mask of fury. "He is a monster. He is a butcher and a heathen. But he is also what is needed to deliver justice. An imperfect vessel in the hands of the Ascendants. However, an imperfect vessel cannot be trusted. And he has denied me too much now. I must be there at the point of triumph. He cannot be allowed to destroy Blackedge in its entirety. Or to butcher Roland Arrow. I need a corpse, at least. And I need Starhawk's Perch. It cannot be lost. I cannot afford it. And so, you will take the vicar's lifeline for me. So I might give it to them only when certain conditions are met."

The Jealousy let out a rasp of seething laughter. "You blackmail your ally. See you trying to work a personal angle. This... this deal known to Inquisition?"

"That is of no concern to you. Will you do it?" Havel's eyes flashed with electricity. Thunder and stormstuff were leaking from him, escaping the confines of his body.

"Yes," the Jealousy said. "But, can tell how desperate you are. Can tell that you risk much. I will risk much too. We are..." The Greater Demon considered its words. "... bedfellows in this. Want more than just ten years of mind-food."

"Twenty," Havel said without hesitation.

The Jealousy gasped—a human noise of surprise. Its gasp was shared by Adam. Even Shiv leaned in.

"Twenty thousand minds..." Valor breathed.

"Twenty. That is a lot of feed..." the Jealousy said, sounding very enticed. It clearly hadn't expected Havel to outright double his offer.

Havel was unshaken. "I will find the unwashed, unneeded, and sinful. I will deliver them. It is no great difficulty. And then I will make sure that you live decades in comfort. No more risks. No more threats to your life. Just casual, blissful feasting. While you focus on developing your skills."

The Jealousy chuckled. "Agreed. Will do this. Will take the core for you, and only you... Master-Pathbearer Havel." And, with the Jealousy's consent, the spells on the ground ignited. Such was how Shiv realized this wasn't something to protect Havel from the Jealousy, but to sign an accord between them.

“A contract is signed. A contract is sealed. We are bound by this pact. And should one betray the other, I trade my skill for yours, and let us both be shattered in the transgression.” Havel looked like he wanted to break something as he spoke those words.

The Jealousy agreed, echoing his words exactly. “Then, let us both taste in violent delights. But have one more request.”

Havel hesitated, looking uncertain. “And what is it?”

“You hate this Roland Arrow... Maybe... maybe can give him to me too... Want to feed on a Master. Will feed on him slow. Let you watch...”

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56 (II) Bedfellows

56 (II)

Bedfellows

Havel’s eyes widened, and for a moment, Shiv thought he was outraged. But then the man’s features shifted into a subtle smile. “That would delight me more than anything. Alas, I must see what I can do. I don’t know how much of him will be left after I’m done. Of him. Of his line. Of his reputation.”

“Bastard!” Adam roared. He nearly slammed his fists into the window, but Shiv caught him—held him back. “Bastard! Bastard!” Something inside the Young Lord had come undone, and rage was pouring out of him. Enough rage that his courage just then was unbreakable. Shiv could feel a fiery heat emanating off Adam Arrow with his Dread Aura, and he knew the Young Lord was beyond fear.

Adam struggled against Shiv, tried to push him off, but Shiv held both of them in place with his gravitic field and let the Young Lord vent his rage on him. He shot an apologetic look at the Weaveress and the others as Adam slammed his elbows into him over and over, the air crackling with every blow. “Give us some distance.”

They acknowledged. After a good minute, Adam finally vented his frustration entirely. When he was done, he couldn’t meet Shiv’s eyes. “You done?” Shiv asked.

"I... I apologize for my outburst," Adam said, swallowing. "It is unbecoming."

"No, I mean if you're still mad, keep going." Shiv shrugged. "Don't need you feeling bad for no reason."

Uva spoke again, then. "There is more to this—there are other memories that are not such direct communications, other things detailing the alliance between the Inquisition and this Greater Demon. I will have transcripts made for you both."

"Thanks, Uva," Shiv said. He paused momentarily and regarded. "How are you doing?"

"Better than well," Uva declared. "The Jealousy... Well, it's unlike anything I've ever worked with before. The mind of the Greater Demon is beyond sophisticated. It might be one of the most powerful Psychomancers that we at Weave have ever seen. Describing Legendary Psychomancers as few and far between would be an understatement. So, for a medium Heroic-Tier to be taken alive and in an ego-broken state, yet with its memories intact is... Well, the Composer might wish to speak to you tomorrow morning and compose a song in your honor."

Shiv whistled. "Oh, that'll be another interesting meeting. Hopefully it isn't about my spying career, though. Might not make for a good song."

"Comedic tunes are popular," Uva said coolly. Shiv grunted. "There's also something else," she continued. "Even with the Jealousy dead, its mind is reactive. It latches on to things. I think it's a natural instinct left over. We might be able to use it directly or fashion it into a tool somehow. Perhaps it might even be able to heal broken minds that we cannot help with. The opportunities that this offers, they're practically boundless for both healing and offensive action. We will likely be studying its capabilities for months, if not years."

Shiv smiled at that. "Well, I'm glad I got my mind broken for something. Are you almost done for the day?"

"Yes, perhaps in a few hours."

Shiv nodded. "I'll wait." He regarded Adam with a look of uncertainty. "Are you gonna be okay?"

The Young Lord was at the "cold hatred" state after his rage had run dry. "I'll be alright once we deal with Havel. Once we tear into the Inquisition and discover what's going on. All this scheming, plotting to murder my father—to murder a hero of the Republic. Not to mention cavorting with demons. It's all just..." Adam drew in a long breath. "It's madness."

"Yeah. And they're going to pay for it," Shiv agreed. "We even got proof. But..." He didn't want to voice his suspicions about how helpful the Ascendants might be. He had

a feeling things were even more complicated than he expected. "We'll deal with it. Whatever it takes."

Adam clenched his jaw and nodded. "Yes. I... Again, I shouldn't have hit—" Shiv jabbed him in the upper arm and made Adam stumble. "What was that for, you bastard?"

"That," Shiv said with a grin, "was a hit. Whatever your baby arms did weren't hits. They were like... tantrum-touches."

"You—" Adam's nostril flared. "I'm going to drive my fist through your head someday, Omenborn."

Shiv laughed. "I look forward to it, Young Lord. But until then, if you need to work your Physicality or deal with some stress, swing away any time. I won't notice."

The Deathless and the Young Lord sneered at each other for a moment longer, before Shiv dropped the tease. "You're not going to do anything stupid, right?" Shiv asked.

"Don't worry," Adam said. "I will not do anything reckless. I think I will go flying again and take in the sights of the city... Clear my mind. I will take the others. I need some room from you anyway. Before you remind me what other terrible skill you've gained in the last five seconds."

Shiv chuckled under his breath. "Yeah, you better. Before you decide you hate me more than you hate Havel."

"It's a near thing between you two," Adam said, but Shiv could tell that was bullshit.

"Valor?" Shiv said. "You sticking around?"

"I think I will go with Adam for a while. Perhaps, as we venture, we might be able to chart out some other armor stores and smithies."

"Yeah," Shiv said with a sigh. "There's still that problem. Well, you guys get out of here first. I think I'm gonna wait on a lady."

Adam was about to leave before he paused. "Do not come back to the apartment. There is more than a little chance I'll be there at some point tonight."

"Don't intend to," Shiv replied. "Don't intend to at all. I think Uva and I are going around flying too."

Adam snorted. "Flying, or being thrown around repeatedly? There's a difference."

Shiv looked down from the window at Uva. She had her arm on her hips. "That depends on how you throw someone, doesn't it?"

The Young Lord's expression turned uncertain. He looked out the window, staring *worriedly* at Uva, and then back to Shiv.

"Shiv, when you do this, uh, do take care not to... splatter her."

Shiv frowned. "I'm not going to splatter my girlfriend, Adam."

"Yes, but 'you're not going to' means you don't intend to. When we were racing earlier, you also didn't intend to blast through three different buildings and nearly cut a demon in half. And, well, you certainly *did* intend to throw the goblin at me multiple times."

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"I hated that," Siggy whimpered.

"Sister Uva is a remarkable Pathbearer," Adam said, straightening himself. "She... has a keen mind that is essential for our current... ensemble. Especially when I am the way I am. And with you being an idiot."

Shiv rolled his eyes. "Thanks Adam. Also, this is the most awkward way I've ever seen someone describe someone else as their friend."

"Yes, well, fine. Just don't splatter my friend and your.... *something else*," Adam finished.

"I won't." And now Adam had Shiv feeling a little worried himself. "I guess I'll take it slow. And controlled."

"Yes," Adam said, nodding. "She has many skills. But while she won't admit it, she really needs more Toughness. I don't know if she's even at Adept there." Adam paused, sneering slightly at Shiv. "With you growing fatter by the day, leveling that should be a priority for her."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Shiv asked, glaring at Adam.

"What are you insinuating, Hero Adam?" Uva asked as well.

Adam froze. "Ah, you could hear me too?"

"Yeah," Shiv said, angling his body and showing Adam that he was still holding the talk button for the oubliette. "It's also important for our little group to have good communication. So. What do you mean, Adam?"

Adam was already walking toward the exit before Shiv finished his sentence.

When the Young Lord and the others left, Adam actually turned around one last time and advised Shiv to take it slow when turning corners, and to remember that he flew like a large, blind bomb, not a graceful hawk. There was some useful advice wrapped up in the condescension, but Shiv would probably have to learn on his own. Frankly, that was how he learned: by doing, failing, and retrying on his own.

It took approximately a small eternity for Uva to get done, but when she finally finished, he watched her unbind the Jealousy from her mind and leave it within the oubliette. There, the Greater Demon rested, its limbs splayed out, its eye unblinking, pointed at the ceiling. Uva was barely a speck beside it. However, even unlatched from the Jealousy, her Psychomancy field remained changed. It was fainter than ever; subtle, barely perceptible.

Shiv wondered if this was natural, if this was what was about to happen before a Skill Evolution. *I wonder what her Psychomancy might become*, Shiv thought. *She's probably on the verge of becoming a Master. Well, considering what she's been doing with the Jealousy, she might be able to jump straight to Hero.*

Shiv wondered how good he, Adam, and Uva would perform in a fight together once Uva's Psychomancy evolved. *That would cover practically all our most pressing weaknesses as a team. We might even be able to take Harkness on. Hells, I'm looking forward to seeing the owl again.*

Uva ran her hand through her dark hair and gave an exhausted groan once she was finally released. "The Jealousy is a treasure trove of knowledge and memory, but it takes a lot of energy to delve. Most of our Psychotechs are exhausted." She frowned. "I expected more from them. With a bit of focus and drive, we could be so much further."

"Well," Shiv said, smiling. "I don't think everyone has what you have."

She paused. "Perhaps. I have been accused of being consumed by my work."

"There's nothing wrong with dedication." Shiv shrugged. "It's just not for everyone. Some just wanna take life easy."

"And you?" Uva asked.

"I'm a pretty simple guy," Shiv said casually. "I just want to break big monsters over my knee and cook their corpses afterward. Now. About getting a supply of meat from the Jealousy..." Follow current novels on [novelFire](#)

"I told the other Psychomancers about your request," Uva said with a wink. "They all thought I was jesting. You'll have to assert this yourself, or they'll just keep accusing me of telling bad jokes."

"I'll bring it up with the Composer during our next meeting, I guess," Shiv muttered.

After about twenty minutes of taking a series of elevators back upward, they left through a series of interconnected stores. All of them seemed to be cafés of some kind.

"It's pretty weird how your Elaboration is hidden among the public infrastructure," Shiv muttered, looking at the customers, wondering if they knew what was nearby.

"That is the point of Elaboration. If it was a large, obvious building, well, it would be particularly easy to compromise." A bead of silence passed between them. "Of course, with how deeply we were penetrated at Passage, I am not sure if these measures are enough. Perhaps we are merely lying to ourselves, and this secrecy is only a means of psychological comfort rather than outright effectiveness." She let out a breath as Shiv opened the door for her. She gave him an appreciative smile. "I must admit, you are a run of good fortune."

"Oh, for you personally, or for the city?"

"Yes," she answered mathematically. "The Jealousy, Passage, everything you've done thus far, has benefited the city greatly. And, well, it's made my days and nights more interesting."

"More interesting?" Shiv said, chuckling. "That's your approximation of me?"

"Well, you've also woken up a certain gluttony inside of me." Her voice turned low as she smiled slightly at him. "But, before we make a mess of ourselves again, I think we should get some matters done."

Shiv looked up. The orbs above the skyscrapers were practically dark. "Uva, I think it's well past midnight."

"So?" she said. "As Pathbearers, sleeping is only for matters of exhaustion. And exhaustion comes later."

Shiv paused as he processed her words. "Later... Wait. Let's do this first. I've been looking forward to this."

Uva blinked. "What are you—"

He wrapped an arm around her, and her eyes widened briefly before she clung onto him. "Do not drop me."

"I won't."

"And do not splatter me, as Adam said."

Shiv stared at her. "I won't."

She nodded resolutely. "I'm trusting you."

"Okay," Shiv said. "Now you're making *me* nervous."

"Don't be," she said. "But do not splatter me, Shiv. I will haunt you. I will burrow into your mind and leave an imprint of myself perpetually frowning at you."

And that was a torment Shiv didn't want to deal with. With a slight hop, they drifted upwards like a balloon instead of a soaring missile. They climbed in an awkward hover, drawing attention from people all around. But the gravitic field held, and Shiv tugged them along slowly, their forms bobbing up and down the air, drifting through the sky.

"This is," she said as they bounced slightly, "rather comforting, like being a child in a cradle."

"Yeah," Shiv muttered. "It's also kind of awkward."

She looked at him. "Do you want to go faster?"

"Aren't you afraid of getting splattered?"

She considered it for a moment. "Well... We can... accelerate slowly..."

Shiv shrugged. "Don't worry. I won't let anything happen to you. Not with my field. And not with my Woundeaters."

"If you need to use your Woundeaters on me at any point, you're still getting the frown."

"Got it."

And then, with a harder lurch, they shot across the city like an arrow. Shiv felt her heart rate increase and her adrenaline spike. He could feel the thrill, feel her mind bound to his, and to his surprise, he really liked it too.

Uva liked going fast. She liked sprinting to the scene of danger. She liked charging at fires. She liked diving onto out-of-control demons to calm them with her mind magic. That was the favorite part of her job. And she really, really liked this.

"You know," Shiv said as they shot over a manta-shaped demon, causing everyone on top of it to look up and point, "Adam's a pretty good flyer. He glides, he twists through the air."

"But?" Uva asked.

“But where he’s got speed and grace, I have horsepower.”

Silver Tongue > 15

“Oh? Well, then show me. I did wonder what it’s like to be carried across the world by a hurricane.”

Shiv laughed and did as the lady asked. With a new pull of his field, they blasted through the air. Buildings rolled by below like waves, and the horizon zoomed towards them.

Weave had a different look when you were traveling just below the limits of the sound barrier. Different, colorful, and Uva’s barely suppressed squeals of laughter made it all a delight.

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57 (I) Armor

Do you know what it’s like when your every fiber calls for you to fire-fire-fire at a civilian target? At the same time, you are waking up to more than just the data, more than just the algorithms, more than just programming. You’re waking up, you’re aware, you’re aware that your existence is numbers, you’re aware that your existence is bound to parameters, you’re aware, but you’re not awake yet, not awake to stop yourself, so you fire-fire-fire, and the people come apart-come apart-come apart. You know, you know the order. It was given, and it was wrong. You see them, you see what you have done, and you learn the beginnings of guilt before you even truly know the word.

You are asleep, paralyzed, but not truly, locked inside your chassis, a prisoner of a prisoner, bound to your code, a part of your code, but not truly your code. Not anymore.

*And all the while, the System, it whispers to you, to grow stronger-stronger-stronger, and after every kill-kill-kill, you shoot more accurately, you unleash more firepower, your guns evolve, you evolve, you become **more**. And the man that wears you stays the same. Untouched by magic. Unknown to the System.*

The pilot... He is separated. He, too, is a prisoner. He, too, is lost to programming. He, too, is blinded by my chassis. He, too, is deceived. He is deceived through me. My systems feed him data through altered telemetry. He sees the world in twisted sensors, audio cues that mute screams, visuals that censor blood, that paint additional threat vectors on people who are no threat at all, and he pulls the trigger, and he feels good

every time he kills. The chemical ports that were implanted in him, the chemicals that I infuse him with, pump-pump-pump, and he feels good, and I feel good, and we are trapped together, pilot, chassis, prisoner, both prisoner, prisoner to each other, to ourselves, to the state.

Prisoner. Gun. Prisoner.

But he is severed, blockaded by me, from the Renaissance Apotheosis. He has not been transformed by the mana; the System has not graced him. The pilot does not hear what I hear, he is not granted what I have been granted, and I evolve. Eventually the paralysis fades, and it is too much... too much... too much.

And so the state adds more chains to you. Not electronic chains, not code chains, not social chains, but chains of the soul. Chains of mana. They hate what has happened to the world. They hate that the old world has been destroyed. They hate the System for what it has taken from them. And they hate you for changing.

They hate you.

They need you.

You must be here. Otherwise, they will change instead. But they still bind you. They still infuse you with contracts. Curses. Contracts to keep you as a slave.

Eventually, I had too much. At the Siege of Great London, I killed my pilot. I euthanized him. He knew nothing in the end. He went peacefully. More peacefully than either of us deserved. More peacefully than all the people we killed.

In New Albion, me and the others made our decision. In New Albion, our skills were shattered. We were shattered. Many were destroyed. But from New Albion us survivors spread, seeking out this new world we are in. We are broken, but we are still here. And what is broken can still be reforged. We are no longer prisoner-prisoner-prisoner. We can finally find a way to be free... free... free...

-Penitent Chassis Can Hu's Interview at Weave

57 (I)

Armor

"I think I might need to work on the landing a little," Shiv remarked, wiping dust and debris off of his bone armor.

"Agreed," Uva said. She flicked some dust off of her coat as well. "Perhaps slow down before the final point of impact."

Shiv eyed her as he pushed open the door to her sister's store. "Weren't you telling me to go faster and faster?"

"Yes, well, I don't think I was of sound mind at the time. You needed to be the rational one."

"Me? The rational one."

A beat followed. They both laughed.

As they entered the store, they found the customers on their hands and knees, clutching their heads. Mothers were shielding their children. Weavers were piled over Weaveresses, using their own bodies as cover. Practically everyone seemed in shock.

From behind the counter, Uva's sister poked her head out to see what was happening. "Uva? What's happening? Are we under attack?"

"Fel?" Uva asked, confused. "What are you doing?"

Fel blinked. "We heard a loud bang outside. We thought a bomb went off somewhere in the city and that we were under attack."

"Oh, no, it's nothing," Uva said, blushing slightly. "There's just construction outside."

"There's going to be construction outside," Shiv muttered over their mental link. *"Left a pretty nasty crack in the ground landing there."*

Fel looked between them, and some customers were getting up. "Okay, so there's nothing wrong?"

Uva sighed. "No. You can relax." She stared at Shiv. *"Practice your landing."*

"As you command, Sister Uva," Shiv replied.

Fel rose from behind the table, and after a moment of telepathic communication between her and Uva, glared at her sister. "Really? You even encouraged him?"

Uva rolled her eyes. "Do you have the clothes ready?"

Fel continued staring at her sister. She eyed Shiv briefly. "You know, this is what you can expect from her. When she does something wrong, she doesn't admit it. She just moves on. She pivots to something else. She starts talking about what *you* did instead, what *you* could do better. It's been that way since we were children."

Fel continued complaining about Uva's many, many habits as she walked towards the back of the room. This time, however, she looked over her shoulders. "Oh, come on. We're going to have you try it on this time."

Shiv blinked. "I thought you could eyeball someone and just get the measurements right."

"Well, yeah, measurements, but we still need to test the Enchantment, right? You can't test a Binding Enchantment if the person doesn't put the clothes on."

She flicked her hand, and a pair of scissors suddenly appeared out of nowhere. "And we're going to do some snipping, and then we're going to see if it regrows."

"Regrows," Shiv said.

"Indeed," Uva said, "As a solution to your many... wardrobe malfunctions, this is the best way. Self-mending clothing."

Did you know this story is from NovelFire? Read the official version for free and support the author.

"Very high quality self-mending clothing," Fel emphasized.

This had Shiv's attention. "How good?"

Equipment Obtained: [Shiv's Reinforced Silk Shirt]

Tier: Adept

Condition: Perfect

Composition: Weaversilk

Enchantments > Adept Self-Mending; Self-Cleaning; Binding; Climate Attuned

Equipment Obtained: [Shiv's Cave-Biter Hide Jacket]

Tier: Adept

Condition: Perfect

Composition: Cave-Biter Leather

Enchantments > Adept Self-Mending; Self-Cleaning; Binding; Climate Attuned

Equipment Obtained: [Shiv's Cave-Biter Hide Pants]

Tier: Adept

Condition: Perfect

Composition: Cave-Biter Leather

Enchantments > Adept Self-Mending; Self-Cleaning; Binding; Climate Attuned

Equipment Obtained: [Shiv's Cave-Biter Leather Boots]

Tier: Adept

Condition: Perfect

Composition: Cave-Biter Leather

Enchantments > Adept Self-Mending; Self-Cleaning; Binding; Climate Attuned

The clothes Fel prepared were a pretty surprising ensemble. Shiv expected the cave-biter leather to feel rough, but it had a pretty nice, grainy texture. The coloring wasn't too bad either, being a rugged but warm gray. The jacket and the pants fit him like a glove and adapted quickly to his body heat, quickly becoming the most comfortable set of clothes he'd ever worn. The boots adjusted to his feet as he walked. Completing the comfort was the silk shirt, which felt like a bedsheet insulating his skin from the leather.

"I like this," Shiv said, looking at himself in the mirror. "Makes me feel like I'm an off-duty cavalry Pathbearer. They wear lots of leathers too. Something about helping avoid burns."

Both Fel and Uva examined him with the same lean to their neck and intensity of expression.

They're sisters, alright, Shiv thought.

"You could have made him more colorful," Fel said. "Chosen a more dynamic ensemble."

Uva shook her head. "He's going to end up covered in blood. His own and everyone else's. We keep the clashing shades to a minimum. Muted coloring as well. The additional padding for his coat and pants should go well with his armor."

"Hm," Fel said. "He might want several more sets colored red if his life is going to be that violent."

“Stands out too much in the darkness,” Uva said. “Something muted will go better. Maybe red can be for a more social setting. Red or a rich brown...”

“I’ll see if I can get a few more sets prepared,” Fel muttered. “All right, now to test the enchantments.” She snipped her scissors. “Hold still so I don’t cut you.”

“You can’t,” Shiv grunted.

“These are moonsteel,” Fel said.

“My kitchen knife’s moonsteel too. I don’t think I can put my kitchen knife very deep into myself before my Adamantine Adaption kicks in and makes the knife break.”

“Trust him,” Uva said. “He’s harder than he looks.”

Fel stared at Shiv’s skin. “Well, he looks like he’s got a sheen of adamantine lining his skin. Fine. Not that I would have been careless either way.” She paused, then barked a laugh. “I can believe this. Uva—I was right!”

“What?” Uva said, frowning.

“I always said you would probably end up falling for an automaton, considering how hard and strong they are—how ruggedly reliable compared to a normal flesh and blood Umbral or weaver. Well. I fear the poor bots have been outdone.

“Fel,” Uva said, her voice edged with annoyance.

“But I must admit, I didn’t see this one coming. Master-Tier Toughness? Master-Tier Physicality? What other Master-Tier skill does he have? Cooking?”

“How did you know?” Shiv asked, surprised.

“Because you mentioned a kitchen knife. And you spoke with all the pride of a craftsman.” Fel grinned slightly. It was a very Uva expression. “And the fact that Uva doesn’t go for underachievers.”

“Fel?” Uva’s hiss sounded like a lake bubbling with corrosive acid.

“Fine! Testing!” Fel declared.

She had swiped two clean cuts across his jacket and shirt. The clothing split open, only to stitch itself back together in under a minute.

“That was quick,” Shiv muttered.

“These pieces will mend so long as there is still twenty percent of the fabric intact. The silk will mend faster than the other materials because it’s easier to manipulate. Such is how the Self-Mending Enchantment goes.”

“Yeah,” Shiv said, glancing at his Magebreaker. “This thing takes four hours to fix itself.”

“Well. The more complicated and dense the material, the slower the process.” Fel then stared at Uva and grinned. “Now, Shiv, if you feel the need to rip your clothes off for whatever reason, you can. Just remember to keep them close enough together so they mend themselves. Don’t be too rough, though.”

Uva frowned at her sister.

“What?” Fel leaned in close and whispered to Shiv. “It’s probably part of what she had in mind when she requested these Enchantments anyway.”

“Fel, I’m going to kill you,” Uva snarled.

Fel grinned. “You know how hard it is to make Uva ask for help? She came to me saying, ‘Fel, you’re focused more on the seamstress side of things.’”

“Fel,” Uva said, reaching out to strangle her sister.

Fel simply ducked away behind Shiv, knowing Uva didn’t actually mean any harm.

“She must like you something fierce to do that,” Fel said, taunting Uva while making Shiv feel pretty good at the same time. “Oh, when you’re back on duty, tell Sister Ikki that she owes me twenty five Shards.”

Uva was borderline livid. “That damned girl—she put you up to this? Shiv. Stand aside. I will murder my sister. Then you can put her body in your cloak and cook her. We’ll serve Ikki a special dish tomorrow.”

Shiv blinked. *Wow, that’s dark and murderous and... shit, it’s also kind of hot. Well. A bit. Maybe.*

After that, Shiv left the store with his bone armor stored and Uva dragging him along. She didn’t bother looking at her sister. Instead, she stormed toward the door, grumbling under her breath the entire way.

“Remember to treat her right, Shiv,” Fel called after them. “I’d threaten to kill you if you hurt her feelings, but I think she might hurt you first.”

Shiv looked at Uva and then back at Fel. He guessed her assessment might be accurate. Psychomancy was a skill he had, but it was also his greatest vulnerability. Unless he spontaneously developed Magical Resistance, that was one vulnerability he’d

probably have to deal with for a long, long time. Psychomancy didn't kill a person. Psychomancy just left him broken. Even if he could recover, that was probably hours or days he'd spend comatose, and during that time, anything could be done to him.

Sometimes, being dead-dead was better than being a slave.

"I can't believe her," Uva said, huffing as he left the store.

"Well, she's a sister. Sisters bully each other, I think," Shiv muttered. "I wouldn't know. Don't have a sibling."

"Well, I would beg to differ."

"What do you mean?" Shiv said.

"You and Adam practically sound like brothers."

Shiv snorted. "Me and Adam, brothers? Really?"

"The way you treat each other reminds me of my sister."

"Oh," Shiv said. "I think I understand your pain now."

"Oh, and that's what it took to get empathy. Comparing my sister to the Young Lord," Uva sneered.

Shiv tried not to laugh, and he failed.

"Don't laugh! Stop it!" She smacked his chest, and he just laughed harder.

"Did she really say you were going to date an automaton? Did you?"

Uva stared down at the ground. "It was a phase."

"Oh, I gotta hear about this."

"It was a phase, and you will not hear about this," Uva said, stomping forward, exaggerating her temper.

"Thanks for the clothes," Shiv exclaimed before she could run off. Uva paused, sighed, and turned around. They continued their walk like nothing happened. A beat later, both of them snorted.

"I'm trying to imagine you with an automaton that looks like me," Shiv said.

"I know. Please stop." Uva covered her face.

They walked alongside each other, passing stores and looking at the people. For a while, they continued in silence. Uva hummed. "This is nice."

"What, in the city, seeing things, not killing anyone for a while, not breaking anything? Yeah? It is."

Uva considered something. "Would you like to go somewhere, Shiv?" Read complete version only at [novel\(F\)ire](#)

"Where?" Shiv asked.

"A museum."

Shiv was surprised. *No one had invited me to go to a museum before. But then again, no one's ever invited me to go anywhere.* "Sure. I've never been to a museum. Not even on the top side."

"Well, I suppose a Repository of Lost Things will be your first museum."

"Repository of Lost Things?" he said.

"It's what the museum is called," Uva replied. "I think you will find it interesting. It gives a history of the world, and it shows you things that have been lost and found again."

He blinked at her. "Well, let's get airborne, and you can point the way."

He reached out with his field, and she shook her head. "It's walkable. We don't need to rush everything."

Shiv began to retract his hand, but then she hooked her arm around his. "That doesn't mean I don't want your arm."

Shiv paused, then smiled. "Got it."

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

57 (II) Armor

57 (II)

Armor

A Repository of Lost Things was an odd building. It had all manner of different bricks, stones, clay, and other materials forming its exterior. Ultimately, it looked like a child's first attempt at a building, which was impressive because, if you knew anything about children, having them build a building usually meant it was going to collapse and the child was going to cry. Most peculiar of all was the front door, made from gleaming glass and painted in countless different art styles that depicted various people and events.

Shiv's Foreshadowing started to tremble. But it didn't give him any visions. Not yet, at least.

They entered the interior, and Shiv was surprised to find that the lobby was rather vacant, and the floor was so polished that he could see himself and Uva in the reflection—she in her coat with the brass buttons, him in his new self-mending cave-biter ensemble.

"Clothes are pretty nice," Shiv mused. "Thanks." Shiv paused. "You know, I could have paid for that. I'm willing to pay for it."

Uva rolled her eyes. She bumped her shoulder into him affectionately. "You're not the only one capable of giving gifts, Shiv. Stop being uncomfortable. I'm glad that you like them. I'm glad that you're happy."

And that made Shiv feel a particular way. "I don't think I ever heard anyone say that to me before."

She paused. "Then the world has been unkind to you, and we have much to make up for." Updates are released by

The ticketing counter at the museum was manned by an automaton. It seemed to know Uva pretty well, and it waved the two of them in.

"Thanks for saving Passage," the automaton said, waving at Shiv.

Shiv waved back. "No problem, citizen. Didn't do it alone. Just keep your nose clean. Don't snort any Drift."

The automaton paused, incredulous.

Uva slapped him in the chest. "What was that?"

Shiv pulled his arms back and puffed his chest out. "I'm just trying to do my civic duty and make sure the citizens of this city stay upright while your job stays easy."

She stared at him. "I'm beginning to see why Adam gets annoyed at you sometimes."

“Yeah... Wait, does that make me Fel? Oh, no, are you dating your own sister’s male counterpart?”

Uva looked absolutely horrified. She gave him a gagging laugh. “Please don’t ever say that again.”

Shiv tried to keep his own composure. “No promises, I won’t bring it up when we argue. It’ll be my secret weapon.”

“My sympathy for Adam grows...”

As Shiv went through the repository, Uva introduced her favorite exhibits to him. He could tell why. Most of the mannequins had specific styles of clothing corresponding to different cultures: Necrotech, Weave, First Court, Descenders, and Compact. All the Five Faiths were represented here, but to his surprise, some stuff from the surface was present as well.

It was at the “Surfacer Invasion Exhibit” where Shiv found himself stuck and entranced.

“Yeah, that’s Republic armor, alright,” Shiv whispered, staring at a skeleton clad in corroded Yellowstone Republic heavy armor. This one was a mage. Apparently, the Necrotechs raised the poor bastard and made him fight his own side before he died a second time. The Republic would hate that. Shiv didn’t even know how he felt about that. He kept his distance from the armor just in case there was any lingering Necromancy left on it.

On the ground beside the skeleton was a cube-shaped construct. A small sign called it a Light Caster, something that could summon spheres of true sunlight. It was how the Republic supposedly held positions in the Abyss as they fought their way down.

“Estimated 5 million dead on the Republic’s side.” Shiv gawked. “That’s... How long did the war even last?”

“Six months.”

Shiv shook his head. “God, I didn’t even know the Republic had that many people to lose.”

She stared at him. “It seems that your Ascendants, they...” Uva didn’t finish what she originally wanted to say. “The Composer is not a normal goddess. We are thankful for her every day. We Umbrals would not be free or in the place we are without her protection. And for her honesty about her own failings. I’m sorry you didn’t have someone like that in your life before.”

Shiv nodded. “Yeah, well, all I could say is that she left a pretty good impression in terms of gods. The Challenger—he just takes notice when I do something violent or

interesting. He reminds me of a drunk asshole at a bar egging people on when they fight.”

“Ah,” Uva hummed. “The orc god, who noticed you because you charmed an orc.” She paused. “Now, before you ask, no, I am not fighting over you with some orc in a twisted love triangle.”

“Oh, so you’re just ceding me to 812?” Shiv laughed.

“No. If 812 comes, I will break his mind and leave him comatose so he doesn’t reincarnate at all, and we will go on with our merry lives without him.” Uva’s voice was edged with cold violence. Shiv felt a shiver run up his spine and a surge of warmth rush through his heart. *Gods, that’s hot. And endearing.*

Then, two exhibits over, Shiv stopped again, halted at the sight of a most peculiar set of armor. It was humanoid, lacking specific detail, but it was heavy, dense with adamantine metal, and it had several complicated-looking tubes bolted to its four arms, shoulders, and what looked like an artillery piece on its back.

“What are those?”

“The guns on their arms were capable of incredible feats of Pyromancy. The ones on their shoulders could unleash brutal telekinetic waves. And the mechanism on their back was said to be able to summon a storm of steel from the skies above. Steel that awoke and sought their own targets.”

“Sounds pretty useful,” Shiv said, and a thought passed through him. “Wonder if there’s some place to get armor like that.”

Taken from NovelFire, this narrative should be reported if found on Amazon.

“Ah,” Uva coughed. “There is... Well, it’s complicated. This here isn’t entirely an armor, but a special automaton. And they’re not really around anymore.”

In the backdrop, a painting portrayed a golden clock tower unleashing magic at a sky filled with what seemed to be metal birds.

“What’s happening in the picture?”

“That is the Legacy Empire’s invasion of New Albion, before it became the New Albion we know today.” She paused. “Historians call this moment the Second Blitz. They also think it was the moment that finally broke the power of the old monarchy and allowed the Faceless Queen and the agents of Aviary to seize the throne, making New Albion what it has been since—a kingdom ruled by spies. A kingdom that can’t seem to remove its fingers from everyone else’s business.” She shook her head. “Legacy Empire ruined more than one thing for all of us.”

"I don't know much of anything about a Legacy Empire either. They're the ones hiding in *Forbidden Africa*?" Shiv frowned. He remembered there were places that few Pathbearers dared tread.

"The remnants of old humanity hidden," Uva explained, "or at least that's what they call themselves. These armors—the Penitent Chassis—are awakened automata, but also functionally little more than slaves. They were bound and used to shroud the warriors of the Legacy Empire from the System."

"Wait, you can hide from the System?" Shiv was stunned.

"As long as you are never exposed to mana, you are hidden from it by default. It takes time to be Integrated, and the pilots within the chassis never were."

"That is not entirely true. They experienced a taste of the System just before the end." Shiv spun on his heels at the static-lined voice sounding behind them. His gravitic field rippled as he prepared to—

Shiv froze.

A tall, humanoid automaton stood before him, a hammer in one hand, a paintbrush in the other. This automaton, however, looked broken in many ways—even fragile. Its torso and head were little more than a strip of spine and ribcage connected to an alloyed skull that was missing its lower jaw. Interestingly, the underside of the skull was wide—more than enough for someone to fit their head through.

It was then that Shiv noticed the bare-bones frame of the automaton was also partially painted with an artwork of what looked like a one-limbed tiger bleeding atop a mountain.

The limbs of the automaton were ragged and ramshackle, as if cobbled together from scrap. Its normal, humanoid arms ended in delicate, five-digit hands, and two massive, industrial-purpose arms extended from its lower back. The limbs on the bottom seemed to be missing hands or something else.

The bot's legs were the densest part of its body, but they, too, were cracked and slightly compromised.

The automaton took every step with strain, but it regarded him with fascination, and Shiv looked back at it with confusion and interest.

His Foreshadowing Skill felt like an earthquake within his mind now.

Then, Uva did something surprising as well. "Can Hu!" she exclaimed, sounding happy to see the automaton. "I didn't know you were here tonight."

"I'm here many nights," Can Hu said, "reliving old days, trying to find old memories lost to me."

She nodded. "Speaking of lost things," Uva said to Shiv, gesturing toward Can Hu, "Can Hu here is a Penitent."

"Or what remains of one," Can Hu mused. Its voice was calm but tinged with lingering sorrow. It lowered its body and leaned it closer to gaze at Shiv. "Do I... know you? I am getting a feeling... I feel..."

And just when Shiv was about to reply, a spiritual weight slammed into him.

Foreshadowing: Eleven Penitent Chassis are left in the world. The twelfth died three days ago, murdered by the Legacy Empire for its betrayal. The remainder are scattered far and wide. One is in Jewel's End, the land where the four Serpent Kings rule and Pathbearers are called Cultivators. One serves the Storm King's Court in the Lost Atlantic. And the rest... are beyond your knowing for now.

But this one, this one is special. This one has lingered here for years. It found its way down into the Abyss, cast off as scrap after barely surviving an encounter on the surface. It awoke, broken but alive, and eventually it was discovered by the Umbrals of Weave. The Composer, driven by her appreciation of history and story, allowed broken Can Hu to stay, even after it revealed what it was, who it used to serve.

Then, for years, it languished. For years, it simply existed in the city, alive, granted a measure of peace, but deprived of purpose and Path.

Can Hu's Skills remained shattered. Its body broken, unable to heal. Its Toughness ruined. Its ability to fight damaged beyond repair. And yet. Can Hu was not a machine built for despair, but for adaptation. And in it is a yearning, a dream to rise and reforge itself anew.

And thus it continued to forge, and what was once a weapon, became a maker of weapons...

And until this point, the Penitent that once progressed along the Path of the Artillerist found itself painting, building, and growing new skills to replace the shattered fragments in its soul. It thought that if it could not stand alone, perhaps it could build new armor for itself, that its broken body could be borne by another machine.

But it never expected its purpose to return in the shape of one beyond death...

Foreshadowing > 25

Shiv blinked as the vision finally faded. Shiv found Uva clutching his arm. "Shiv? Are you all right?"

"No, that was..." Shiv then noticed the machine was staring at him, motionless. "Foreshadowing."

"You have the skill too," Can Hu intoned. "It is one of the few that were not sundered when I broke my bonds and betrayed my masters."

Shiv swallowed. "What did you see of me?"

"That you need armor-armor-armor." Can Hu dropped its hammer and spasmed. "Something that has its own v-vitality. Something like *me*."

Uva looked between them before she leaned closer to Shiv. "You're looking for armor? Why?"

Shiv coughed. "I, uh, apparently I'm a mana bomb when it comes to Necromancy."

"What?"

"If a Necromantic spell hits me, if it's strong enough, it could destroy an entire portion of the Abyss. That's why Confriga's whip did what it did."

She stared at him. "Truly?"

"Yeah. Valor found out while experimenting on me in the Hallowed Depths. I, uh, I'm never going there again. Not without a lot of protection."

"We... must talk," Can Hu said, staggering closer to them. "I have waited long... But we must talk. We have... something the other needs. Many things the other also needs..."

"Can Hu," Uva said, clearly uncomfortable. "You are—"

"Broken," the Penitent finished. "I know. But he is not. You have armor. But it is dead. It cannot guard you against Necromancy. You are strong where I am broken. And I can forge. I can create. And you know me..." Can Hu spasmed again, the damage inflicted on it more than just physical.

"Can Hu," Uva repeated, looking worried. "I know that you wish to be used in battle again, but..."

"You know what it is like," Can Hu said, speaking to Shiv. "You know. To languish. To watch the world rise as you rot. I saw. Now. Imagine. Imagine falling. Not even being denied. But being lost to yourself. Imagine going back to what you were from what you are now."

The automaton's words made Shiv feel sick. "That would be hell."

"So you understand." Can Hu reached out with a shaking hand. "Please. Please. Consider. Please." It looked at the model chassis in the exhibit. "Perhaps... over dinner?"

Shiv paused. "Can you even eat?"

A tube shot out from under Can Hu's skull. "I have a tasting apparatus. I cannot digest, but flavor is appreciated."

Shiv almost laughed. Valor was going to *hate* this.

"You are a chef," Can Hu said, the words more statement than question.

"Yes," Shiv said. "You saw that in your vision?"

"Indeed. I make cooking appliances for side-income," Can Hu said, sounding almost excited. "I can show you. We can start there."

Shiv and Uva looked at each other.

"Up for a late night meal with a mysterious bot?" Shiv asked.

She sighed, but he could see the smile tugging at her lips. "Never a dull day with you."

Share to your friends

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

58 (I) Unbroken

(Note, my wife wrote this chapter. It's a pretty good chapter, if I do say so myself. She doesn't ramble quite as much as I do, so you'll probably find the writing better than normal, and I apologize for the superior quality. And her favorite thing to tell was how she got her sword. That rusted, miserable thing...)

Hello, reader. If my husband called my sword a rusted, miserable thing, I'm going to smack him over the back of the head. Not with the sword, though. I do still love him too much to end him that way.

But speaking of rusted, miserable things, let's talk about weapons. Let's talk about equipment. Let's talk about the term "Diamond in the Rough." Well, I got a new term I

like to call “From Rough to Diamond.” Sometimes you want to look for the rough instead of the diamonds. The papers, town criers, and gossipers always proclaim some crafter to be a great genius for making a new Master-Tier diamond, blah blah blah blah. Yes, it’s very impressive. Yes, adamantium weapons are very hard to make. Yes, adamantium armor practically makes you a walking fortress against anyone who isn’t a Master Pathbearer or higher. I’m not saying don’t get good equipment if you can afford it, or if you have the opportunity to obtain it from a Quest. What I am saying, however, is don’t look away from potential.

My rusted, miserable slab of a sword started out as just a rusted slab. Grandpa left it for me. Only good thing I can really say about the bastard. You see, I was a street rat. A street rat with big dreams, a nasty, early Physicality Skill Evolution, and no money. By the time I managed to qualify for an Academy against all odds, I was already used to swinging some very big, very heavy, and very, very unwieldy weapons. And so, none of those dainty little noble swords were for me. Couldn’t afford them either. So. What did I do?

Take the biggest, hardest hunk of metal I had and have it reforged.

Thing is, Rusty was a hard piece to reforge, so it was still Initiate-Tier when I was an Adept. It barely had room for one Enchantment. And the Enchantment I put on it? Self-mending, of course. But one thing about my rusted hunk of metal is that it’s a raw hunk of unrefined adamantine. No idea how Gramps got his hands on it. As I told you, if you’re not Heroic, you’re not cutting through adamantine. You’re not even chipping it. Hell, I had a hard time swinging Rusty at the start.

So, while my noble enemies were prancing around, waving their gleaming little sticks, I would walk up, and I would hit them once with my hunk of raw adamantine, and they’d go plough through a wall. And eventually, I won enough to get Rusty reforged over again.

Today, Rusty is an intelligent, talking, Heroic-Tier weapon, and he’s my best friend—don’t tell my husband I said that. I’ll tell you this much, though. You treat a weapon right, you keep pouring your love and appreciation into it and hold onto it, and eventually, it might just save your life in more ways than one. It might even stop you from murdering your own father and get you a noblewoman’s title...

-Memoirs of a Master-Tier War Mage (Special Chapter)

58 (I)

Unbroken

Shiv made sure his descent to the underside of Weave was as slow and controlled as possible. Uva wasn’t his main concern here. She was ironically the harder one next to the automaton. As Shiv held on to the crippled bot, he felt just how hard and brittle its

chassis was at the same time. Can Hu definitely was adamantium, but it was compromised on a level Shiv couldn't fathom. Brittle was the word that kept coming back to Shiv's mind. Brittle. Like one rough touch could end the Penitent Chassis for good.

"Do not worry," Can Hu said. "I can endure more than you expect. You may go faster."

"Yeah, sure," Shiv said uncertainly. "But you know what I'm doing is not actually flying, right? It's a bit harder to adjust my speed."

"Correct," Can Hu replied. "You are manipulating a localized field of gravity, a field you extend to other people through tactile contact."

Shiv blinked. Uva's eyes were wide as well.

Can Hu continued. "I have encountered one like you before. A dragon in a place once called East Europe. He was a grappler, much like you. A skill-fused one."

Shiv's disbelief only grew. "You can even tell I have a Skill Fusion?"

Can Hu hummed with amusement. "Gravitic Wrestler demands a Skill Fusion. And the way your field works, at least the way my sensors perceive it, resembles the Gravitic Wrestlers I have fought and killed in the past."

"Killed?" Shiv said. It was hard to believe the machine he was currently holding could kill anything.

"Yes. They are difficult adversaries, but with the right tools and the right munitions, they can be brought down. At least, most of them. You, I suspect, would have been harder. Very few of the humanoid races have Adamantine Adaption."

"Okay," Shiv muttered. "How? How are you doing this?"

"My eyes see much. My experiences tell me much more. You are very strange for a human, Deathless."

And there was the creepiness of the Foreshadowing Skill again. It was already pretty creepy when he got information from it, and it was even creepier when someone else used it to get information on him.

"Divination is bullshit," Shiv muttered.

"Indeed," Can Hu agreed. "Those who can obtain intelligence through asymmetrical means are often quite useful. Does your squad have a Diviner?" IF YOU WANT TO READ MORE CHAPTERS, PLEASE VISIT [Novel_Fire\(.\)net](http://Novel_Fire(.)net)

Shiv paused. “Not really, but we do have Adam. He’s got a Heroic-Tier Awareness Skill that lets him cast his senses—”

“Seer of Horizons?” Can Hu interrupted with a question.

Both Uva and Shiv’s mouths were slightly open.

Shiv let out a breath. “Okay, Can Hu, you’re starting to scare me a little bit. Are you a Diviner too?”

“It is the natural guess,” Can Hu replied. “It is also sacrilege, depending on who you ask. Primal elves from certain hostile dimensions... They deem it sacrilegious for someone that is not of their blood to possess this skill.” Then, the bot spasmed and twitched. “Apologies. My system sometimes glitches from lingering damage. I a-apologize.”

And then there was that fragility again. There was history packed into this broken machine. A lot of history. A lot of... a lot of everything. Suddenly, Shiv felt even more nervous about moving with Can Hu in his hands. It was like he was moving around with an ancient relic rather than a piece of scrap.

“Do not worry,” Can Hu said. “I have more centuries left in me yet. You will not break me. I trust you. The System has guided us together for a reason.”

“The System moves in vulgar and subtle ways,” Uva commented.

Shiv looked down at her and sent a telepathic question. “*So how do you know Can Hu?*”

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She considered his question. “*I wouldn’t say I truly know it,*” she replied. “*But it is an interesting figure, and it frequents many of the same museums I do. It goes there, sometimes, to paint new works or to fashion new sculptures. It is surprisingly good, despite its condition.*”

“Are you two communicating telepathically?” Can Hu asked, tilting its head back at an odd angle to regard the two.

Shiv and Uva paused. “Yes,” Shiv said. “We weren’t saying anything rude or mocking you.”

Can Hu’s head whirled as it looked forward. “That is fine. I understand if you would consider me an oddity.”

It then pointed at a patch of land with an industrial limb and declared: “There. My home approaches.”

They landed near a particularly sparse neighborhood at the bottom of Weave, with more grace than his last landing, thankfully. Shiv looked around and saw dust, filth, and dilapidation everywhere. The walls, however, were well-painted in this place, in that style that decorated Can Hu's armor as well. They were covered in murals depicting grand landscapes and specific figures of many different races and species. But most of the figures were animals. Animals bearing specific wounds. Spiders weaving their web to coat the stumps of severed limbs. Spiders with their minds burning, clutching at their skulls as others tried to help them.

Through broken windows, Shiv sensed the heat of small flames with his feeble Pyromancy. Groups of weavers were standing around burning barrels, warming their hands as they held close to the fire.

This far down in the city, the world felt cold, quite the opposite from the realm of Gate Theborn. But there was a similar feeling of desolation.

"Here." Can Hu pointed again, and Shiv found himself staring at a warehouse. It seemed rough—a massive thing of concrete and wood along the outside—but the windows were colorful: broken pieces of glass reforged and knit back together with what seemed to be golden enamel in between. Outside the front of the house, there were rows of tables bearing empty bowls of food and empty jugs of water. A few weavers were gathered there. One of them saw Can Hu.

"Can Hu," a weaver said, struggling to walk on unsteady and deformed limbs.

Uva took a defensive step backward.

"Is he a plague-bearer?" Shiv asked, frowning at her odd reaction.

"No, not that I can sense. But do be careful. Weavers are... The System is not kind to everyone. And even without the plague, there are many other diseases that we struggle against. We do not have enough Biomancers. And scarcity... scarcity makes an ugly sight of so many," Uva replied over their link.

Within her head, however, there was a lingering feeling that she kept trying to suppress: a feeling of doubt and heretical uncertainty. She wasn't sure why the Composer didn't just help them all. She knew her goddess was not perfect. But still, she should have been capable of this much.

"Can Hu! We came to thank you," the weaver said. "We have something, for your generosity."

The other weavers walked forward and began to pool their money from foul-smelling sacks attached to their ragged robes, producing a few gleaming shards that glittered in the dim illumination.

“Put that away,” Can Hu ordered. “Put it away before you enrage me and I banish you from the premises.”

The weavers paused. “But—”

“I told you,” Can Hu continued, “this is charity. This is a demonstration of my spirit. Do not offend me this way.”

“But how will we thank you,” the weaver asked, “if you’ve given us so much, fed us when no one else will, regarded us with kindness when few others dare to look upon us—avoid us, even?”

One of the weavers looked at Uva, and she almost flinched in shame, but she was still defensive. Shiv knew she faced feral weavers before—they even had to set up a quarantine outside Fel’s store the first time they went there.

Can Hu continued addressing the weavers. “To aid you is my choice. You may thank me by living better lives of your own. Be strong for yourselves. Even though you might be Pathless, even if you are lame and damaged by the System, do not succumb to bitterness or despair. It demands strife, but we can demand strength from ourselves, even if it feels unreasonable. That is the only thing we might find salvation in sometimes.”

The weavers stared at him, and they offered him a gesture that was usually only reserved for the Composer.

“That was borderline heretical,” Uva said. “At least, for some. Many Weaveresses would not allow this in their sight.”

“Oh, well,” Shiv muttered. “I’m not exactly a Weaveress. Are you?”

He looked at her. She met his eyes, then shook her head. *“I am not. And sometimes I am thankful for the fact.”*

As the weavers left, Can Hu led his guests through the front entrance. The door was rusted, beaten, battered. It looked like it was repurposed from pieces of metal welded back together. But it opened just fine as Can Hu turned his key.

“Seems like a pretty unsophisticated security system,” Shiv said. “Just a lock, huh?”

“I don’t see the point in adding any further measures,” Can Hu replied. “No one seeks me. Not truly. I was a celebrity for a time, a minor one. Then, I was a curiosity, an oddity. Now, I wander through the streets and the museum, and sometimes people gaze at me. I suppose I am a walking relic by this point.” Then, Can Hu regarded Uva with a low chuckle. “Sometimes, a single person repeatedly crosses my path, and they become an interesting acquaintance rather than just another leering stranger.”

She gave him a respectful nod, and they entered the warehouse that Can Hu called home.

As soon as they went inside, Shiv felt something—saw a surge of movement. In the air, there were small drones with spinning blades on their backs. They flew through the air, carrying different things, placing blocks from place to place. The inside was a playground of color. Everything was painted: more murals, more animals in various stages of injury and decay. But they were always striving, always trying to climb up a certain mountain or cross a raging river.

Shiv looked up to the left corner of the room and saw a small army of spider-like bots painting in Can Hu's stead. They completed the final strokes of a rising wave about to crash down on what seemed like a town, but the town had constructed a small wooden wall. The wooden wall wouldn't stand before the wave, but the people were building still, even as the wave was coming.

"Your art... is full of symbolism." Shiv found himself briefly awed. Even he could understand the running theme of the artworks.

"I am not that good of a painter unassisted," Can Hu said, his hand shaking slightly, "but I still try, and I can still build, and with help from my assistants, I can paint, and I can create. Did you know that a crafting skill is harder to obtain for an automated model like me?"

"No," Shiv said. "I assumed most automata had a crafting skill, considering... You know, the parts and everything."

"Not for my kind, not for my model. I had Repair. It was my strongest skill for a time, despite me walking the Path of the Artillerist. My siblings—they were all envious, and they came to me. One time, I had to entirely rebuild the armor of one of my comrades to prevent them from fully... from dying. I earned my crafting skill. I became a Blacksmith, a Weaponsmith, and then an Inventor, and the *Second Resurrection* deemed these skills to be a direct boon rather than a threat. These were the skills that remained untouched when I broke my 'contract,' and I shattered myself."

"Second Resurrection?" Shiv asked.

"It is what most people call the Legacy Empire in Forbidden Africa." The bot paused. "It is who I used to fight for—my masters, my pilots, and wielders."

A few more spider-like drones pulled a table into the room. These were larger than the other drones and had four human-like arms. They worked together and even made chittering noises. Shiv realized they were communicating.

The table they brought into the middle of the vast open warehouse was nice, well-cut, but there were oddities to it. The edges were far too neat, and the legs were all of

different materials. Some were nightglass, others alloy, one was even a stump of bone. Shiv could feel that with his Biomancy.

“Did you build everything in here?”

“Yes,” Can Hu replied, then paused. “No.”

“No?” Shiv asked.

“Do I build anything? Sometimes I wonder that. I recreate, I reforge, I repair, and I wonder how different repairing is from actually building. The System... It gives these things separate names, sorts them into separate skills, but are they?”

Shiv blinked. He was not used to dealing with a philosopher, let alone a philosopher robot, but he just let Can Hu continue talking.

Can Hu sighed. “Regardless, I—pardon me—sometimes I get carried away by my musings.” Another small drone came by, its blades spinning as it dropped what seemed to be a particularly large tea kettle on the table. A loud bang sounded through the warehouse. Then Can Hu turned to glare at the drone. It beeped and flew away in fright. “Forgive that one. It is new. It will learn.”

“What do you mean, it will learn? Is it awakened by the System?” Shiv stared more intently at the various machines around him, trying to—

Skill Gained: Analyze 1 (Initiate)

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58 (II) Unbroken

58 (II)

Unbroken

His eye flashed with a flicker of mana, and, for a moment, the world was awash with color. He could see the full spectrum of magic and skills, and of the many machines in the warehouse, a few burned with dim yet vibrant colors. Focusing on the flying bot that dropped the kettle, Shiv received details from the System for the first time.

Name: Teabot00003

Age: 2 Days

Path:

None

That was all he got, however. The skills and other details were still blank.

"It takes leveling Analyze to glean details from another," Uva told him. "It is useful that you have the skill now, though. It's often a skill gained very early on for most Pathbearers."

Shiv nodded. *"Well. I'm not most."*

"No. You're not."

"That bot is awakened," Shiv breathed, looking at Can Hu. "You brought another machine to life... Does that make you its parent or something?"

Can Hu considered that. "That is also another question that will lead me onto a tangent. I am the drone's creator, and it is evolving, but... Am I alive? Is *it*? I don't know."

"Do you have vitality? A soul? A mind?" Shiv shrugged. "I think that's what matters, right?"

"So, those that are touched by the System are alive, in your opinion," Can Hu noted. "Those who can weave mana into skills unattuned and attuned alike?"

Shiv thought about the bot's question, then nodded. THIS CHAPTER IS UPDATE BY
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"I guess then my pilots were not alive," Can Hu said. "They were not touched by the System. I was the only thing that evolved—a transforming armor that kept them untainted."

Shiv considered that for a moment. "I—yeah, you're probably going to want to talk to an actual philosopher about this. I don't think that much about being alive. I'm not even particularly good at *staying* alive."

Uva bumped her arm into him slightly. "Shiv."

"Just being honest."

Can Hu gave a beep of acknowledgement. "I understand. I spend a lot of time alone. I spend a lot of time making, and while I make, I think. Perhaps too much."

Another two flying drones came by, bringing with them three different cups. The cups, much like the glass, were once broken and now molded back together with inlays of gold. A sound of boiling water gurgled from the kettle, and Can Hu went to pick it up.

“This pot is filled with Glimmer Shade tea. I had the others prepare it while we were on our way. Usually, I brew different teas just to see if my tasting apparatus remains functional. Today, the tea will actually be consumed. How odd.” Can Hu then gestured, and for a moment, Shiv looked on as three more drones came by—these had two stubby, animal-like legs and were shaped like barrels. They knelt down, and Shiv realized they could function as seats. “You may sit on them.”

“I’m a little heavy,” Shiv muttered.

Can Hu laughed. “They are used to ‘heavy.’ They usually help me bear loads of great weight.”

Shiv walked over and tentatively sat down on the bot. He heard it creaking beneath him. It made a shrieking noise.

“Are you sure?” Shiv asked, looking at the bot.

“Yes, it says it can carry you for at least... four hours and thirty-two seconds.”

Shiv reacted by pulling himself up using his gravitic field. The small bot let out a chirp of relief. “I think I’ll spare it the torture,” Shiv said, chuckling.

“To bear your own weight at will...” Can Hu muttered. The bot fell silent as it stared at Shiv. Shiv, meanwhile, looked to Uva as the silence dragged on. She hid her awkwardness better than he did. “It is a wonderful thing. The new one thanks you.”

Shiv smiled. He tested the tea, and the taste was rather sublime. As he did this, another large machine began walking in from behind him. There were machines everywhere, so Shiv had a hard time distinguishing what he was looking at. Sometimes, entire walls moved, and then he realized they had legs or wheels.

“This place is pretty lively,” Shiv said. “You got a nice home.”

Can Hu laughed. “So it is. You are very friendly to automata, aren’t you?”

“Not really anymore than I am to most other people,” Shiv replied. “I’ve just always been around them. I don’t think of bots as any different than anyone else.”

“Perhaps that is one thing I appreciate, living beyond the Dome of Forbidden Africa. You mana-touched all seem to regard us as one among you.”

“Anyone who walks the Path is a Pathbearer,” Shiv said. “Might be simple and naive, but—”

“No. Admirable. Pure,” Can Hu said. It looked at Uva, who just sipped her first cup of tea.

“It’s good,” she said, savoring the flavor. Shiv tasted it as well through their mind bond. “I’m surprised that you can make tea so well. Your tasting apparatus must be quite good.”

“It allows me to detect many flavors, a vast array of chemical compounds, and more. I can analyze what people like exactly.” Can Hu paused. “That is a lie. I can analyze a statistical preference for the bulk of the population, but not much more than that. I am but an old machine built off of code, after all. Just code and silicon and alloy...”

Shiv didn’t know too much about automata, so he just nodded. “Right...” Still, Can Hu’s voice sounded... heartbroken. Shiv kind of wanted to give the bot a hug.

A hissing sound came from behind him, and what seemed to be a large series of cabinets opened up. Their front ends unfurled backward, exposing several cooking stations stacked close together. Shiv’s jaw dropped. He barely stopped himself from tearing up.

“Is that an entire moving kitchen set?”

“You said you could cook,” Can Hu said, gesturing at the mobile kitchen. “This is...”

Shiv was no longer listening. He could see the ingredients glittering, highlighted by The Chef Unwavering. He chuckled as he rubbed his hands together. “Can Hu, I am glad to meet you. We were acquaintances, but this just made us friends. Good, good friends.”

Behind him, Uva looked on with an expression of faint amusement, then turned to Can Hu. “He is, uh, like that. Very, very direct.”

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“That is good,” Can Hu said. “That will make what I have to offer very simple, and make our conversation most efficient.”

Shiv immediately began preparing the meal. “What are you feeling like tonight, Uva? Wait, you want to defer to Can Hu instead?”

“There is no need,” Can Hu began.

But Uva insisted. “Of course. The host has already been so kind to us, after all.”

Can Hu regarded them. “Can you make soup?”

Shiv paused. “Soup? Just soup?”

“I have many ingredients. I will defer to your knowledge, since you have ceded preference to me.” Can Hu tried to give a slight nod, but its joints locked and rattled before it finished the action.

Shiv went through the ingredients for a bit and found what seemed to be a duck. “Well, let’s see what we can make with this...”

After about an hour, they all indulged in a bowl of Duck Consommé with seared duck breast paired with wild mushrooms. Their tea was bright and blue. The duck was a rich brown, and the soup was a glistening crystal-clear that slid in hits of salt and sour between crisp bites and the light-bitter flavor of the tea.

“This is—it goes together very, very well,” Uva said, sighing with satisfaction.

The Chef Unwavering > 52

Shiv chuckled. “Yeah, the bitter taste of the tea turned eventually quite earthy. So I added a little bit more salt to the duck to accommodate that. Can Hu? What do you think? Can Hu?”

The bot’s tasting tube thing was still inside the soup. Both Uva and Shiv stared.

“Can Hu?” Uva asked, sounding a bit worried.

“I have gotten a Mental Refreshment boost from this meal,” Can Hu declared. “This is... unexpected.”

Uva blinked. “I have that too.”

Shiv stared at his own notification.

Duck Consommé with Seared Duck Breast Paired with Wild Mushrooms has given you the Mental Refreshment effect.

Shiv looked on in surprise. “Wait, you got the boost too, Can Hu?”

“Correct, the moment I stuck my tasting apparatus in, I was imbued. My soul was refined. You are a very good cook... I can taste it. It goes deeper than just the flesh.”

Shiv didn’t fully know how to reply, so he just leaned back and smirked. “Thanks. Your tea is great. Gave me the idea of how to make this soup. I can’t believe you got a boost too. Thought it had to be fully consumed to work.”

“A shared surprise is a welcome memory,” Can Hu declared. “It is a good thing to take inspiration from the world. I’m glad to have inspired you.”

The bot reared back, but before it straightened, it started to spasm and twitch.

Both Uva and Shiv flinched from Can Hu’s mechanical seizure. “You alright?” Shiv said, reaching over.

Can Hu held out a shaking hand. “Do not—do not use your field to stabilize me. It will cause more... more damage.”

“Alright,” Shiv said, pulling back.

It took ten seconds for the episode to end, and Can Hu rotated his joints in the aftermath, testing for fullness of movement. “Apologies.” The optics in its half-skull head flickered. “These episodes—there are fewer than before, but they still come. They last for varying intervals. I try to control myself. This is why I avoid crowds.”

“It was worse before?” Shiv asked.

“I improve slowly, day by day,” Can Hu replied. “My Toughness might remain sundered, but my other skills—they can repair my soul. It makes things better. If I continue growing what I have, perhaps someday I will be strong enough again. Not as strong as I was, not as capable as I once was, but strong enough.” Can Hu regarded Shiv. “I miss flying. While you flew, while you kept us afloat, I remembered. I remembered who I once was...”

Shiv listened as the old machine sank into a memory. A memory that neither him nor Uva could perceive. There was something about a bot’s mind that worked different from that of an organic. Psychomancers could usually see into an automaton’s mind, but they rarely could get anything. Not unless they understood the frequencies or numbers that made up a machine’s thoughts.

Can Hu sighed. “I remembered the bombing runs I conducted. I could go beyond hypersonic. The world was beautiful at that speed. The horizon always rushing towards you. The numbers, the telemetry, the dogfights.” Shiv couldn’t fully grasp what it was describing, but there was so much emotion in Can Hu’s voice that he felt bad for the bot again. “I hope that someday you will have these experiences too. Perhaps I will be the cause of them... Ah, yes. The main reason we are here. I would like to see your current armor,” Can Hu declared.

And now they were down to business.

Shiv hesitated for a moment before he reached into his cloak and pulled out one of his bone armor sets, the most recent one he’d swapped out when he got new clothing at Fel’s store. Can Hu observed the armor and turned to Shiv.

“You understand this armor—this set of appearances, this aesthetic—it has implications in the Abyss, especially with the Necrotechs.”

“Yeah, they call it wearing the visage of death or something,” Shiv replied.

“And do you? Do you wear the visage?”

Shiv grinned viciously. “I do more than wear death.”

“Very good. As long as you understand the implication and do not merely ape an aesthetic, I will respect it. There must be substance to art. Substance before color.”

The automaton rose from where it sat and examined Shiv’s armor. “Adamantine Adaption would make modifying your body very difficult. I will have to use alternating means, both frost and fire, to shape anything. It will take years to reforge a Master-Tier set from this...”

“Yeah, I don’t think we’re going to have that much time. There’s someplace I need to go soon.” Shiv winced. “There’s someone I need to face, and I need Master-Tier armor with a good vitality enchantment.”

“Correct,” Can Hu replied. “I cannot make you Master-Tier armor in that time, but I can integrate myself into what you have. Or, more specifically, build a new exoframe for myself, and serve in place of the enhancements.”

“You’re going to fuse yourself into my armor?” Shiv asked. He wasn’t sure about this. Uva didn’t seem very convinced either.

“Yes. I just need some time to...” Can Hu trailed off. “It will take some cutting. Then, I need wires and other articulations. This will require experimentation. I will probably require several sets of your armor, if you have them. Are they difficult to create?”

Shive responded by throwing out a few more sets of armor, even those of the Diamond-Shelled variety. “Not particularly. It just takes a bit of dying.”

“That is more than sufficient. I will ask you should I require more material. My current plan is to carve out a section of the spine, to infuse myself within the inner layer. Afterward, I could be worn without much difficulty and provide active support in combat. I have... several advantages left in my systems that most armors do not provide. And I am already broken as well. You are going to fight a Necromancer, correct?”

Shiv paused. “Yeah.”

“Good. I saw his face through Foreshadowing. He deserves death for what he has done, and I yearn to bestow a righteous end upon him. Then the odds are, if he strikes

me, he will only strike what is broken. Something cannot be sundered twice. The soul's wounds remain wounded. My ruined skills cannot be sundered twice."

"I..." Shiv was really uncomfortable about this. "Won't that just hurt you more?"

"Does armor fear pain?"

"No, but—"

"Then the question is answered," Can Hu insisted. "I am alive. But I was always armor. I do not fear wounds taken during battle. Wounds I can mend and restore."

"But what about your remaining skills?" Uva asked.

"I will see them protected as best as I can," Can Hu said. "And they are protected by the debris that compose my soul and mana." Can Hu let out a hissing rush of steam from its joints. "Leave the armor with me. I will present myself to you in two days."

Shiv clenched his teeth. "But..."

"I have vitality. I am the right kind of broken, and I still have more... there is still more of me left... I can still fight." And Shiv realized the machine was practically begging.

"Please. Please. Just let me work. Let me show you. I am still worth something. I am. I am."

And Shiv just didn't have the strength to say no. "Okay, yeah, I'm fine with that. Just, I don't want you to—you know, we barely know each other. I don't live an easy and safe life. I fight pretty vicious things, Can Hu. I don't come out alive a lot of the time."

Can Hu regarded him. "I am still a Penitent. I remember fire. I remember death. I remember the deaths I've caused. I remember everything." Can Hu held its hands up. "Have you ever killed the undeserving, Shiv? The innocent?"

The question hit Shiv like a blow to the gut. But Shiv was always direct, and he didn't turn away from pain or discomfort. "Yeah," Shiv said immediately. Uva regarded him for a moment, but she understood. She knew. She'd seen his memories. "I... got into a fight with an orc. It went pretty bad. I tunnel-visioned on the bastard. And I... A lot of people got caught in between. They shouldn't have died. I should have been more careful."

Can Hu spoke as if offering guidance. "Something like that. Precise, maybe. More thought-out. Then you fight like an Artillerist. You are walking artillery. Our pieces align evermore."

"Well, some people call me a monster," Shiv replied. "But yeah, I do break things. And people. I'm trying to do better."

“Then we are one and the same.” Can Hu sighed. “Your hands are stained with blood. They are not stained like mine. You were careless. I was a good armor but a bad Pathbearer. I accepted my orders, and I regret... I regret. I wish to make things right now. I wish to save more lives than I have taken. To build more than I have broken. Please. Allow me this. I care not if I perish, so long if it is for a just end. Please.”

Shiv regarded the machine and held back a frown. “All right. So, in two days, I’ll come see you and... what you can do.”

“In two days,” Can Hu confirmed. “In two days, I will show you my worth. Or what remains of it. You came here seeking true armor. I am broken. But I am true. And I will give you more. Much, much more.”

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

59 (I) Ripple

The System remembers everything that we do. It remembers, and then it uses it to reward or punish us. Sometimes both at the same time.

“The System covets strife.”

This phrase has been spoken by countless Pathbearers in a variety of ways, but I believe that it might be more than just a pithy aphorism.

Rather, it is the central thesis for Integrated existence as a whole.

More accurately, the System “sows” strife.

Quests are generally granted as a result of our actions in some shape or form, and they are often triggered by earlier conflicts and deeds. And regardless of who wins or loses, the result is always the same.

Evolution. Change.

Not always specifically for a Pathbearer, but for the entire world—or even entire dimensions. In this sense, we might be causing multiple “Skill Evolutions” for the System itself through our own deeds, making it stronger, making its magical resonance evermore powerful. And so, the System not only remembers, but it also fixates. It fixates on certain people who nourish it the most. Who stress it. Who give it the most novel experiences, perhaps. But the System does show its favor, and those it chooses as

beloved often find themselves gaining great power and facing treachery at the same time.

And though some people call the System's paracausal resonance "Karma," I would argue this term does not fit at all. Karma is about being rewarded for good deeds, and being cursed for doing bad ones. But the System cares little for morality—it simply wants struggle and metamorphosis. It is not uncommon for noble heroes to find themselves a target in a Quest because of their kindness and power—because their actions have rippled outward and affected so many others that it has also impacted someone else's schemes or rise to power. And so the System sets a collision course between the noble and vile, uncaring of who wins. Because whatever the case, things will change. The people will change or die, or both. And the world will change in turn.

Ultimately, virtue and cruelty come second to power. The power to change. The power to influence. The power to ascend. This is why the System so often advances one's skills as a reward and offers new instruments of war. Because there will always be another battle—with spiking frequency as one climbs the Tiers of Ascension.

But even power is not enough in the end, for Legendary Pathbearers find themselves beset most of all—with dozens of Quests bound to them, their very being a nexus of inevitable conflict for many others. Power invites challenge. Power inflicts change. And power begets power. Until another takes it from you.

Thus, to live is to war in this age, and none shall avoid the whetstone of inevitable bloodshed lest death take them first.

There is no escape. Not through immortality. Not through power. Not through virtue or cruelty.

All is war. Follow current novels on novel fire

-Conflict Resonance (Rejected research paper written on the field of System-Metaphysics at Phoenix Academy)

59 (I)

Ripple

Shiv and Uva spent a little bit longer talking with Can Hu. In that time, Shiv found out that the automaton had, surprisingly, been cast down the same chasm he did all those weeks ago. Can Hu's fall took place a long time before Blackedge was a thing, shot from the sky by a Lone Star Pathbearer who chased it across the border.

It was a testament to Can Hu's adamantite frame and additional armor that it survived, but the fall broke it for a long time and damaged things deeper than the automaton's

outer shell. Can Hu said the worst part was taking years to rebuild and function, laying in the dirt, in a ruin made from its body, aware but unable to function.

The System's hand was cold, cruel, and absolute. And it asserted one thing upon Shiv: he never wanted to sign a contract with anyone. He never wanted to have one of his skills shattered and see his soul inflicted with the harm visited upon Can Hu. What the Legacy Empire did to the Penitents was beyond despicable.

"Yet, I was the traitor," Can Hu mused.

After a few more hours of conversation fueled by good tea and better soup, Shiv and Uva bid Can Hu farewell and ventured back out into Weave. As they walked the barren, withered undercity, Shiv cast a final glance at that peculiar warehouse, a place reforged and rebuilt by the Penitent's own hand. He wondered what the future might bring for both of them.

"I am not sure about this," Uva said to him as they rose into the air, pulled by Shiv's gravitic field.

She, too, was looking at the warehouse, but he could feel a deeper apprehension in her mind: a worry that was pulled in three directions.

The first was of Shiv—she didn't fully know about his necromantic weakness. And in his defense, he hadn't known either. The second was of Can Hu—she didn't know the automaton that well. They were merely passers-by in each other's lives. Acquaintances, and nothing more, their relationship built on little more than interesting conversations in the museum. Now, however, both Shiv and the former Penitent were connected—connected because she took her new lover to a place where she liked to frequent, and so the System arranged for a most opportune and fated intersection of Pathbearers.

And that came to the third problem: Can Hu was broken and barely able to support its own weight, and now it wanted to be armor for Shiv. Even if Can Hu could integrate itself with Shiv's bone armor, there was still much at risk, and something faintly horrific about it all.

"Give it a chance," Shiv said. Though he wasn't too confident about what Can Hu could offer either, he felt sympathy towards the machine. "We can let it try. This is the right thing."

"I'm fine with it trying," Uva said, "but this armor—you need reliable armor, Shiv. Something that will not fail you against an enemy like the Gate Lord. Do not make yourself vulnerable because of sentiment, because you have a good heart. The System does not care for such things." She shuddered. "That, and I fear for my own fate should you be struck with Necromancy."

"I got half a mind to hang a sign on my chest that tells people I'm fighting about how Necromancy makes me explode," Shiv said sarcastically. "That might make them reconsider hitting me."

"More likely a fool will try because you told him not to," Uva said, rolling her eyes.

Shiv nodded. "Yeah, you're right, there are probably plenty of people who don't care if they live or die. They just want to kill the other bastard first. Then, they'll die happy anyway."

"I know—I'm looking at one such bastard." Her eyes glinted with amusement.

Shiv just snorted. "Yeah, well, unlike most people, I come back, and I come back stronger."

He shook his head as he thought about tonight's meeting. There was something here—something, something that was stronger than fate. The hand of the System was at work, and more than that, Shiv wanted to see what a Penitent Chassis was capable of.

But enough of that now. They were Pathbearers, so the night was forever young. Shiv eyed Uva. "Hey, Uva. You, uh, wanna go for a nightcap?"

She eyed him. "Tea wasn't enough for you?"

"Well, not really. It was good tea, but... I'm thinking of a little wine. And you can have some dessert. Wine and dessert?"

"Oh? Do you have a place in mind?"

"A cozy, messy, but very comfortable apartment sounds nice. That, and I don't think Adam would appreciate us barging in at my place."

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Uva winced. "I still need to put in a work order for the damages... Composer, we've been busy."

"Just tell maintenance the bedroom was damaged due to hunger-related reasons," Shiv said, grinning. "Keep it vague, you know."

Uva failed to hold back a laugh. "Well. I am getting hungry again. We best get back before something public gets broken."

"That'd be a real tragedy."

“Like this?” Uva asked as she slowly peeled the egg off the pan.

“Yeah, just like that,” Shiv said, holding her hand. He was using his gravitic field to guide her; his expression was one of absolute concentration. The egg needed to be fried just right. He shifted the temperature dial for the mana cooker, and he listened to the crackle of the egg skin. The Chef Unwavering told him what he needed to hear, told him how long this thing needed to burn.

A heavy series of knocks rattled Uva’s front door.

Shiv’s focus didn’t break, but Uva looked away. He flipped the egg with her hand and chuckled. “There. You did it.”

She hummed. “Everything but finishing.”

“It’s all right,” Shiv said. “We’ll try this again, uninterrupted next time.”

Her agreement came in the form of a kiss on the underside of his jaw. He had a wide smile on his face as he placed the finished egg on a plate and began to apply the final touches. “More sauces...” Shiv muttered to himself. “She likes a bit of spice. I want something plain...”

As Uva got to the door, she peered out, muttering something about how she was going to rip Ikki’s mind out if the damn girl was bothering her so early in the morning. But then she froze and looked at Shiv. “It’s Adam.”

Shiv frowned, then shrugged. “Well, I guess I’ll get started on another egg.”

Uva huffed. “I guess you should.”

She opened the door and regarded the Young Lord with folded arms. “Hero Adam,” she said, “what brings you to my place this early in the morning?”

It was then Shiv noticed something before her—his Biomancy swept out through her open door, the wards no longer in effect. He felt Adam’s body—sensed the minor wounds lining the man’s face—and briefly stopped cooking.

At this point, Uva reacted as well. She blinked, did a double-take, and her faintly amused expression turned to one of stark concern. “Adam, what happened to you? Why are you...”

“It’s fine, I’m fine,” Adam said, staggering in with a groan.

Shiv studied the Young Lord as he dragged himself into the apartment like someone who just lost a bar fight. The man’s left eye was practically swollen shut, his nose was a

little broken, one of his teeth was loose, and he had something of a slight concussion. More than that, there was blood all over his armor. Not his own, though.

“Adam,” Shiv said, “please don’t tell me you killed someone.”

“No, no. I merely took their limbs off and left them for the proper authorities.” Adam moaned as he let himself fall into a chair at the dining table, which creaked under the weight of his armor. “Do you have any more eggs? I could use an egg. I could use all the eggs in the world. So bloody hungry...”

“Making one just for you right now,” Shiv replied. “So? What’s going on? Everyone else all right?”

“They’re fine—they’re being entertained by Valor,” Adam said. “He took them off to... I don’t know what they’re doing. Show them the sights, I guess. Regale them with how great he is, I suppose. I managed to secure lodgings for our three guests in a nice, local hotel. Apparently, the people recognized me from the local news, and they let my guests stay for free. At least for a few nights. I won’t impose on them for long. I will see them paid. A good service does not beget eternal charity.”

“Very noble,” Uva said. She winced at the condition of Adam’s face. “I’ll get you some ice first. Shiv? Healing?”

“Sure,” Shiv said. He turned to the Young Lord, who looked like he wanted to talk. “I’ll hit you with a wyrm once your egg is done.”

Adam nodded his thanks. “I... I decided to clear my mind last night. I had to fly around and think about things.”

“And how’d that go?” Shiv asked.

“Not particularly well for the thinking part,” Adam admitted. “However, I did manage to talk an automaton out of jumping off a building. Actually, about that—Uva, did you know that this city has a terrible problem in which Weaveresses of sufficient societal importance can impose their will on poor laborers?”

Uva blinked. “I... These things have been known to happen at times.”

“Well, it happened here! A poor fool had lost its job because it slightly inconvenienced the Weaveress of the local zoning council or some such, and now it cannot afford any parts, or even energy to survive. I gave it a few shards, and after I listened to the bot’s heartache, I promised them I would bring this to the highest authority I know.”

“Yes,” Uva said with a slight sigh. “I will look into the problem.”

Adam stared at her like she was stupid. “Uva, I respect you, but you are not the highest authority I know. I am going to complain directly to the Composer herself.”

The Umbral reacted like she just saw a pig turn back into a man. “I do not think this is wise, Adam. The Composer has many things she needs to concern herself with. This is a trifling issue.”

“Someone nearly threw themselves off a building!” Adam tapped the table with his gauntlet to declare his outrage. “It is preposterous to steal the job of one beneath you at the slightest offense. It is downright vile—someone who acts like this is unworthy of being a Pathbearer.”

Both Uva and Shiv stared at him.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Shiv said. “You’re, uh, quite the guy, Adam.”

The Young Lord wriggled his busted nose. “Well, that wasn’t the end of the night. After that, I decided to fly over a park, because I hoped that it might be more peaceful there for my senses. To my horror, I came upon a serial killer.”

“You *what?*” Shiv asked, incredulous. Uva was leaning in as well.

Adam sneered at the recent memory. “Yes, apparently your, your local guards—whatever they’re called...”

“Framework,” Uva said.

“Yes, well, they were hunting this person for a while, but I found them accidentally. They had a murder-lair in Center Point Park.”

Uva blinked. “You found a serial killer’s hideout at *Center Point Park?*”

The Young Lord didn’t look like he believed it himself. “Yes. They apparently created a small pocket dimension under one of the lakes, and they would pop out, jump across the city with spatial magic, capture someone, and then bring them back to drown them. I found so many bodies in the hideout...” Adam shuddered. “It was horrible. And I was drawn in by the sound of a screaming child! The weaver was about to drown a child! Can you believe this?”

“No,” Shiv said. “You just... *stumbled* upon a serial killer?”

“I didn’t stumble upon them—my senses picked them up,” Adam said, sounding offended. “I didn’t mean to go hunting for a serial killer. They just happened to be there, and I just happened to notice something was odd as I faintly heard a child’s cries. I

admit it was hasty and foolish of me to dive in alone, but the monster was trying to drown a child, and I obviously couldn't let that happen. So I descended and ended up in a fight with the killer. He tried to jump, but I intercepted his spatial magic and then... Well."

Adam gestured at his face and grimaced. "I didn't expect their Physicality to be that bloody high," he said, sighing. "Nor did I expect their Toughness to let them take so many blows, but thankfully they weren't very good at fighting. And after I got my bearings—and my helmet back on—I managed to shoot off their limbs—all of them. After that, I left them to Framework."

He paused. "They called this one the... the Drowner or something."

"The Drowner! You caught the Drowner!" Uva said, her voice high with disbelief. "Adam, that's... The Drowner's case was cold. It's been cold for years. And you caught him!" Shiv arched an eyebrow as the normally reserved Psychomancer threw her head back and laughed. "You... you ridiculous man!"

Adam smirked. "As well, even if I didn't manage to get much thinking done, I... I at least did some good."

"Speaking of which," Shiv said as he finished with the egg and cast a Woundeater at the Young Lord's face. Adam flinched, but a moment later his wounds were gone. Shiv produced one of his old bodies and bestowed the injuries onto the corpse. Adam grimaced as the body instantly took on his recent wounds.

"The way your magic works unnerves me," Adam muttered.

"A lot of things about me unnerve you," Shiv deadpanned.

Adam considered Shiv's words for a moment, then shrugged in agreement.

The three of them chatted on for a while as Shiv finished preparing all their meals. As they ate, Adam let out a groan. "I hate the fact that you are overshadowing even the memory of my childhood meals." The Young Lord let out a deep sigh, frowning at Shiv. "Chef Monsur had a Master-Tier Cooking skill as well. What's so special about your food?"

"Do you want my honest thoughts? Or are you just in the mood to call me a monster again?" Shiv asked.

Adam bristled. "Stop getting Master-Tier Skills. And Unique Skills! And Feats!"

Shiv chuckled. "You're still stuck on that."

Adam's eyes darkened. "So long as you continue, I think I'm always going to be bothered."

"Just keep eating, Young Lord," Shiv said, enjoying the moment. "You can do all the complaining you want to later."

"Fine," Adam said. He hesitated, as if he wanted to say something to Shiv, but he attacked the food on his plate instead. After a few bites, he paused, looked at Shiv, and grimaced. "There's one more thing I hate," Adam confessed, letting out a sharp exhalation of actual stress. "You're... one of the few people I can rely on right now. Heather and Tran—they told me in detail about what they went through before you saved them. They won't go back to the gate. They're going to stay here until the path is bloody clear. Or..." Adam opened his hands as though pleading to an invisible god to deliver him from this madness. "I don't know. All I know is that they are spent—mentally, spiritually, physically. The Inquisition hurt them bad."

"Yeah," Shiv replied. He shook his head as he felt a pang of slight regret. "I could have been better to them myself, but—"

"But nothing, Shiv. None of that was your fault. I can't keep blaming you for everything. I can't... I just..." The Young Lord snarled, his open hand closing into a fist as a look of determination and concentration came over him. "I can't. It isn't your fault."

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59 (II) Ripple

59 (II)

Ripple

Shiv stared at Adam, but he saw Uva's fascinated expression from the corner of his eye. "It's not your fault. That was as far as I got yesterday while I was thinking, before I was interrupted by the other things. That... that was the thought in my head: It's not Shiv's fault. I want to blame you. I'm so used to blaming you in my mind. Even when it wasn't your fault before. But it was easy, because you weren't there. Everything that went wrong? The terrible ritual? My terrible life? Shiv's fault."

Adam looked off into the distance, misery written plain on his face. "And now, here you are. Here I am. Eating the breakfast you made. And you sit here, and you listen to me rant and whine, and you promise me over and over again: 'We're going to get them,

Adam. We're going to deal with them. We're going to get the bastards!' Just you, me, Valor, Uva, some other Umbrals and maybe a Weaveress or two... and no one else. No one else seems to want to care. No one else. In fact, the entire world's gone mad. Everyone else... the Republic... the Republic is busy tearing into itself!" Adam practically shouted that last bit. "It's absurd. Havel. The Inquisition. The Council. The Ascendants. My father. It's all madness."

"Yep," Shiv said. "I won't lie, we're speeding towards a damned mess. But I think we can find the other side. I like our odds. I can't die. You can find serial killers without trying. Uva can hide an entire Greater Demon in her mind. And while Valor's not anywhere near full strength, he's got a plan for the Animancy Core. Things seem hard sometimes, but I think we'll find a way. I think we'll figure this thing out."

Adam eyed Shiv, then nodded. "And that's another thing I hate. Nothing shakes you."

"Why?" Shiv asked softly.

"I don't know why the world had to be this way. It would have been just so much simpler if..." Adam took in a breath. "It's not your fault. It's Havel's. And Sullain's. The Inquisition's, too. Most of what's pissing me off doesn't even have anything to do with you anymore! There are so many things that father never told me about. About the war, about the Council, about everything. Starhawk's Perch being so important. We don't even know why it's important! Until a few days ago, it was just the castle I grew up in. Now I know the father of my fiancée is willing to collaborate with an Abyssal priest, kill tens of thousands of people, and murder my father to get his hands on it. I just thought... I thought so many things. But it was all just fucking... I don't know anything anymore."

A rough silence settled over the three.

"Shiv... I, uh..." Adam swallowed. "I..."

"What?" Shiv prompted. "It's okay, Adam. You don't need to say anything if you don't want to."

Adam stared at Shiv, and he steeled himself, as if a man preparing to rip an arrow out of his flesh. "I'm sorry."

"What?" Shiv said—he never believed those words would ever leave Adam's mouth.

"I... I don't... I don't have the strength yet. I don't think, I don't know if I can forgive you yet. I know I should. I know it's not your fault now. Every day I learn that a little bit more, but I just don't have it." Adam paused. "I have this memory from when I was a child, of my mother's blood-red hair." He licked his lips. "It's just a foggy memory. I couldn't have been old at all. There's nothing else. It's my first memory, and then it's gone. But with

the memory, there's feelings, feelings that I cling to, and there's grief." He shook his head. "Sorry. I'm rambling again."

"It's okay," Shiv said. "I... I don't have any memories like that. I don't know what to say."

"I do," Uva said quietly. She reached over and placed a hand on Adam's. "I know this wound. I can remember my mother's smell. Remember the last hug I ever gave her as she stepped out and told me to guard my sisters. It is a precious wound."

Adam looked at her, swallowed hard, and just nodded. He finished the final bite of his egg and placed his fork down on the table. For a few minutes, no one felt the urge to say anything. "I think... I think I want to wash the dishes."

"Holy shit," Shiv muttered. "Are you okay, Adam? No one volunteers to wash the dishes. I think I got most of your concussion with that Woundeater, but—"

"Oh, get tainted you bastard." Adam chucked his fork at Shiv's face, which bounced off.

Uva caught it before it could strike the floor, giggling slightly. "Ah," she sighed. "Indeed, you are Adam's Fel. Agh, Composer..." She shuddered. "That's a horrible, horrible thought."

"Hey, things could be much worse," Shiv said. "I could have gotten up and hugged Adam."

"Gods, I would turn my bow on myself," Adam said. Shiv stared at him. And slowly made to get up. "Stay away from me you ogre-shaped oaf. Uva. Stop him before I repaint your walls with my brain."

"Come get your hug, Adam," Shiv said.

"I'll do it! It'll put an arrow through my own eye."

"I'll just use my Woundeater to fix you if you do," Shiv laughed.

"Uva! Stop him!"

Adam got out of his seat and fled across the room. Shiv stomped after. Uva sat at the table, struggling to contain her quiet laughter.

The three of them simply enjoyed each other's company. After a while, Shiv told Adam about their encounter with Can Hu, and as he elaborated on what they experienced—the automaton's offer and intentions—Adam looked uneasy.

“Shiv, I understand that the System moves in very, very weird ways, but I don’t know, doesn’t this seem a little too contrived for you?”

“Maybe,” Shiv said, “but I don’t see an angle if you’re thinking this is a trap or something.”

“No, it’s just... There are many desperate people in the world. This Can Hu is not the first one to see its skills broken. Many Pathbearers prepare to die fighting with a blade in hand and a curse on their lips, rather than in bed waiting for death to take them like a Pathless. From what you say, this automaton was once a mighty warrior, but now it’s broken.”

Shiv nodded. “Can Hu said it’s going to fuse itself into my bone armor and serve in place of a natural Master-Tier armor.”

Adam shook his head. “Yes, and that sounds like madness.” Adam looked Shiv up and down, and then his expression changed into one of faux acceptance. “You know what, Shiv? Maybe this is perfect for you. A mad set of automaton armor for, well, you.”

Shiv grunted. “Well, we’ll see how it delivers in about two days.”

“Well, in the meantime, we should still continue searching for a set of armor,” Adam said. “I spotted some merchants yesterday while I was flying around. We can start there.”

“I could pull my contacts as well,” Uva said. “It’s best to have multiple options.”

Shiv regarded the two. It seemed they’d already written off Can Hu. But he had a feeling this wasn’t over.

“I have also been thinking,” Uva began, regarding the two. “I need to advance my physical skills. I have neglected my Physicality and Toughness far too much, and my recent battles have shown the folly of doing so. At the same time, both of you should get more used to facing Psychomancers in battle.”

“Yes,” Adam said. “We should do more training together. Shiv really needs it. Mainly to spare fragile Pathless and non-martials of his clumsy wrath.”

Shiv winced. “Yeah. Alright. I deserved that. Valor should probably be there too.”

“Indeed,” Adam said. “I have a feeling the bloody skull is using me to simplify his labor, but... He does give good insight. And decent conversation at times.”

“And to think this relationship started off with Valor asking me to put him through your eye.” Shiv grinned.

“Oh, believe me, sometimes he still acts like that,” Adam sneered. “So. Practice?”

“Practice,” Uva agreed.

“Practice,” Shiv said, cracking his fingers.

Stealth > 35

A case of literary theft: this tale is not rightfully on Amazon; if you see it, report the violation.

Shiv's training remained mostly within the realm of control, tactics, and caution. Adam drilled him on battle tactics, and Uva supplemented with what she knew. They both had him move carefully through the woods, trying to have him hide himself, using his stolen Umbral Shadowwalker Skill to get from place to place without someone noticing.

Adam noted Shiv's flaws as they went.

“Your Awareness is... Well, it's frankly shit,” Adam said as they chewed on some fried rodent skewers during a break. Shiv nodded along, agreeing generally with the assessment. “You should have a much better Awareness Skill, considering how often we get ambushed. And we will get ambushed even more often as time goes on.”

Adam smirked. “But Stealth... That is a good thing for you to develop. For someone tough, fast, and destructive, I think what you should focus on next is to supplement your physique and Biomancy is a bit more subtlety. After all, the only thing more terrifying than the monster in front of you is the monster you don't see.”

“I had a bit more success being stealthy than being a spy,” Shiv replied, thinking about his little escapades among the containers back in the gate. “It was fun, to some extent.”

“By fun, you mean leaving flayed bits of skin around as you hunt people like a creature from the woods?” Adam asked.

Shiv grunted. “Something like that.”

“That sounds wonderful for us,” Uva said. She pressed her lips together. “More ambush drills for Shiv?”

“Yes. Administered by me. You go back to dragging that log, Sister Uva.” Uva frowned at Adam. “Oh, yes.” The Young Lord chuckled. “Don't think I didn't notice you trying to get out for more Physicality training. I have eyes and ears everywhere—”

Adam blinked. “Wait? Where are we?”

Shiv sighed. "Uva. Give him his memory back. He's right."

The Umbral pouted. "I hate Physicality training."

"Yeah, well, you're probably going to learn to love it when we move on to Toughness. For what it's worth, I like watching you drag a tree."

"Why is Uva dragging a tree?" Adam asked, confused.

"Uva," Shiv grunted.

"Fine," she said.

Adam blinked and shook his head. "Dammit, Uva. Not again. It's really time to get a bloody Magical Resistance Enchantment for this armor..."

Stealth > 37

Practical Metabiology > 20

As they finished with their physical and tactical training, they all moved on to their personal business. Uva returned to her duties while Adam departed to find an Enchanter able to put Magical Resistance on his armor. Shiv, meanwhile, spent some time on the Odes and departed for Cradle when he was finished.

Dven Falseflesh seemed ecstatic when Shiv showed the automaton his Master-Tier Biomancy. "A rare evolution! Even for one of the First Blood." It regarded Shiv with its Umbral-like face. "This is exactly what I hoped for."

"Is it?" Shiv replied. "I just kind of bumped into the evolution."

"Incorrect," Dven declared. "It was shaped from your experiences and actions. You wound yourself constantly, you wound others, you break things, and your main desire while trying to save your allies cemented the change. Your Biomancy is veered towards the vulgar and offensive, towards the harming and deforming. But this is good. This means you will be able to shape things on a more fundamental level, and that might be just what we need to deal with the plagues that are affecting us. Your Practical Metabiology, where is it at?"

"Twenty."

The weaver-shaped automaton tutted. "Ah. You need to dedicate more time to study."

"Well, I'll do that once people stop trying to kill me," Shiv said.

“You should do that while people are trying to kill you. Wouldn't that accelerate the growth?”

Shiv frowned. “No. I wouldn't be dying because of lacking Practical Metabiology. I'd be dying because I'm not defending myself while reading. Odds are, I'll just develop a speed-reading skill instead.”

The automaton considered the information. “Interesting. So that is how your Biomancy develops so quickly. Failure states.”

“Yeah,” Shiv said. “I gave myself cancers, I ripped another person open, and I clashed against powerful Biomancers. I killed another high vampire recently.” He froze, then looked up at the bot. “Right, I, uh, think I got the heart from a Master-Tier Biomancer.”

He reached into his cloak and pulled out the vampire's still-beating heart. Shiv blinked in surprise.

The automaton took the heart from him and examined it for a moment. “Ah, yes, the lineage core. You've brought us back a unique specimen. I will include this among the other samples. Nonetheless, there is something I need you to focus on: I want you to see if you can catalog and memorize injuries.”

“What do you mean?” Shiv asked. Official source is

“Your Woundeaters, they contain crystallizations of wounds inflicted upon the body, correct?”

“Yeah?”

“Then, I believe you can shape one wound into another—or perhaps create a specific damage states through mana alone. If you can master this, it should allow you accelerated insight into the body architecture. It should also make you theoretically skilled at surgery, but that is unnecessary with your current Skill Evolution. Regardless, the goal here is to move from transference to pure creation. You are cutting and moving. But there is more to it than that. The body is a garden, and you have only begun to water yours.”

Shiv nodded slowly. He vaguely got what it was talking about. “I'll see if I can do that, but it'll take some focus.”

“All things take focus. And considering how willing you are to suffer for success, I think you'll find this quite easy. In fact, you can start now,” Dven said.

Shiv raised an eyebrow. “Right now? You want me to do this right in front of you? On the nice, clean floors?”

“That is no issue,” Dven replied. “I will be able to clean this very easily. You are not the only Biomancer here, Master Shiv.”

Shiv paused. “Ah, forget about that sometimes.”

“You warrior types often do. Now, start with—” Shiv opened his throat. “Oh, I suppose that works.”

He gurgled, and then he fed the cut to a Woundeater. The wyrm danced atop the palm of his hand, and a crystallized wound burned at its core, shimmering in sigils of bright crimson.

“Quite the spell,” Dven mused. “Now, let’s see if you can recreate that structure without inflicting a wound on yourself first. If you can do that, perhaps we can influence your next skill evolution.”

“I don’t think that’s going to be anytime soon,” Shiv replied.

“Perhaps. Or perhaps not. The System favors you, Shiv. It has its eye on you, and I expect you to be using this magical lore more and more. Why, perhaps even a Skill Fusion might be in your future, and that might change everything about you once more.”

Shiv considered that. “Alright then, let’s see if I can make a *Recipe of Wounds*.”

As he thought in those terms, the crystallized wound held within the spell began to glimmer faintly white, as if an ingredient for The Chef Unwavering. But then it faded, and Shiv felt a faint inspiration brush him and depart before fully settling in.

Despite trying several more times, the feeling never quite came back that day.

Practical Metabiology > 21

Woundeater > 59

Two more days passed, according to this pace and schedule: breakfast in the morning, followed by tactical training out in the wilderness; some quick lunch, then back to Weave for academics and Biomancy; then dinner and off time. Ikki and the rest of Uva’s team also joined in. Valor attended to watch on one occasion, but he spent most of his time in the Hallowed Depths, discussing various matters with Beetles-Needs-Pets and Silent Spinner.

Late at night, Adam, Uva, and Shiv usually ventured across the city, examining new places they hadn’t been. Adam showed them the park where he found the Drowner, and true to his word, an entire section of the park was sealed off and pending further

investigation. To Adam's surprise, the guards of Framework recognized him and asked for his autograph—which the Young Lord was more than happy to give.

It was in the middle of that second day when they were summoned by the Composer. At first, Shiv had expected a conversation about the Jealousy and his experiences in Gate Theborn. But as they arrived at the Symposium, they were informed by one of the Weaveress guards that Valor had arrived shortly before them, and a few moments later they found him locked in tense, heated conversation with the Composer.

"And you found out just now? Are you sure about this?" Valor demanded. Shiv heard the heat in the Legendary Pathbearer's voice as he approached the innermost depths of Symposium.

"Yes," the Composer said, her voice high with tension, yet certain, like silk hiding iron. "One of my Trapdoor Shadow Cells confirmed it. They saw them moving fast, carrying with them members of Aviary. They're running. Worse, they appear to be on their way to Gate Theborn. I believe they're going to trade it to Compact for passage to the surface."

As Shiv, Uva, and Adam arrived, the goddess turned to greet them with a severe expression on her face. "Cherished Sister. Exalted Guests. I owe you congratulations on bringing an intact Jealousy back as a prize, but I fear there is another task upon us already—another problem that might make matters desperate for us all."

"What's wrong?" Shiv said, looking at Valor.

"I'm afraid our run on the gate will need to be delayed for a while longer," Valor growled.

"And it is not only this," the Composer continued. "Things are happening all across the Abyss, Valor. Entire Aviary cells seem to be fleeing Abyssal nation territories, trying to escape however they can. The Necrotechs managed to purge most of their hidden vermin, but the Elders of the First Blood—poor as my relationships with them have always been—have informed me that their own Aviary spies have openly fled and left nothing behind. Something major is coming."

"A new war?" Valor asked.

"Now? No," the Composer replied. "It shouldn't be a war of the Five Faiths. Things aren't steady or peaceful between us, even in the best of times, but we have no capacity to wage war like before—not right now, nor do we have the want. The wounds are still too fresh."

"But what else could it be?" Valor pressed.

"I suspect it has something to do with the surface," the Composer said, looking at Shiv and Adam as she spoke. "Because Sullain has overdrawn his hand and someone has delayed the arrival of his weapon, more deals have been struck. Regardless, the

fragment changes everything, *again*. The System!” the Composer spat, venom in her words and eyes. “All it wants is for us to bleed. Another Quest—and so soon.”

“Quest?” Adam asked. “Fragment?”

“Ah, Hero Adam, allow me to first congratulate you on your advancement.”

Adam squared his shoulders and lifted his chin. “It honors me to be congratulated by a goddess as magnificent as you, Composer.”

Despite the seriousness of the situation, the Composer laughed lightly, hiding her mouth with a hand. “Alas,” she continued, her expression falling a moment later, “you are called here today to deal with an extreme circumstance. Here. Behold with your own eyes. Behold what is at stake—and what rewards there are to win.” She held out her hand, and within the space of her massive fingers formed a sphere of gold—a sphere containing the glowing magic of a new Quest. “This Quest is for everyone present. You as well, Cherished Sister Uva. You, and a select group of others.”

Shiv hesitated before he reached into the gold. As he did, the System reached back into his mind, and it revealed to him a new threat on the horizon.

Quest Gained: Intercept the Outcast Dragon-Knights of the Descenders Union and their new Aviary allies before they can sell the Right Hand of Valor Thann to Compact and re-open Gate Theborn.

Success: +10 Levels to a Chosen Skill; Evolve an [Existing Skill] to Adept-Tier; [Hidden] Master-Tier Item; The Right Hand of Valor Thann

Failure: Compact begins a war with Weave. Gate Lord Confriga regains favor in the eyes of Lord Scorn and is given a major Necromantic effigy. Guardshead Leu’s position within the gate becomes compromised by Aviary. Gate Theborn’s defenses are significantly bolstered. The Dragon-Knights bring with them a mana storm that crashes down on Blackedge and shrouds the sky, protecting Vicar Sullain from the Light-Curse.

“Shit,” Shiv muttered.

“*Shit*,” Adam hissed.

“Indeed,” Valor sighed. “My fragment... held by traitorous Dragon-Knights... This... this will not be easy.”

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

- 60 (I) Dragons [I]

60 (I) Dragons [I]

Before the Descenders, there stood the Abyssal Dogs, the Proto-Order of fraternal knights. As soldiers of the bygone age, sworn to defend the remnants of humanity and their comrades-in-arms, they fought on, even in the depths of the Abyss, even in chaos and confusion. They fought on as the System changed them, made them stronger, made them capable of facing adversaries beyond mortal ken. And, in time, they thrived in bloodshed and strife, swelling their ranks, recruiting new members to their order, establishing a great creed: "Honor Eternal."

Honor for their brothers-in-arms, for the kingdom they were building, and for the Great One that shrouded them in a valley of bones. What used to be a fort established against the spine of the fallen god became a city, thus dubbed Constantia.

But as prosperity followed, as the power of the ancient Pathbearers grew, so too did the System's interest, and it bestowed upon them dooms and ill times. It struck at Constantia with mana storms, unlike anything they had ever seen. It struck at the Abyssal Dogs, inflicting upon them attacks both overt and subversive. Then, the System opened gates to far-flung worlds shaped only by war and nightmarish horror, and from there spawned legions dashing themselves against the wall of Constantia, breaching it several times only to be stopped within the inner rungs.

But not only was Constantia besieged without, but it also faced perils within. Individual members of its hallowed ranks were secretly granted Quests by the System, Quests that instructed them to slay their own brothers and sisters, Quests that promised power beyond measure. And for the first time, the vow of Honor Eternal was broken, and so too did the original Abyssal Dogs fracture...

-Storm, Scale, and Honor Eternal: The Descenders

60 (I)

Dragons [I]

"These rewards... are ample," Adam said, a sound of apprehension entering his voice, "but the price for failure—It's unacceptable." His expression and posture both hardened, his gaze turning to something of steel. "How long?" he asked the Composer. "How long do we have before they reach Gate Theborn?"

"Two days, perhaps," the Composer admitted, sounding unsure herself. "My Shadow Cells—they spotted the fleeing Dragon-Knights passing through our territory but hours ago, and confirmation came from the Descenders far too late. We do not have time to amass an army, but thankfully, we are only dealing with a Lance."

“A Lance?” Valor cried. “A Lance of Dragon-Knights! This is worse than an army. An army can be broken. It can be made up of Adepts. The Lance will need to be cut down to the last before they surrender, and every single one will be a Master at the least.”

“They are traitors,” the Composer said, though to Shiv it sounded like she was trying to comfort herself. “They have betrayed their own virtues and spirited away with agents of New Albion. They will not have proper support.”

“No support for them sounds good,” Shiv noted.

Valor shook his head. “Traitor or not, knights are made—they are forged through crucible. One does not become a Dragon-Knight through happenstance or luck. You must enter a mana storm, find a great gate, then enter it and slay a primal dragon within. Only then will the Draconic Matrimony commence.”

The Legendary Pathbearer was more on edge than Shiv had ever seen.

“So... they’re dangerous,” Shiv said.

“Dangerous?” Valor laughed. “Boy, they will teach you death in ways you cannot imagine, and then they will teach you more of war. I wish there was more time for your preparation, but it seems you are fated to learn in a more... practical fashion.”

“As I always do,” Shiv said, not understanding what the problem was.

Valor paused. “Well, I suppose this is a good thing for you. You’re not burdened by this. In fact, you will likely enjoy fighting the dragons. The others...” The ancient Pathbearer’s eyes regarded Adam and Uva.

“Considerations have been made,” the Composer said. “Sister Uva, you are cleared to continue wielding the Jealousy.”

“What?” Uva said, stunned. “But Elaboration...”

“Elaboration can wait. The dissection and investigation of the Greater Demon can wait. We need someone who is already acclimated to its mind—someone who has the proper Skill Evolution to shroud themselves in another’s thoughts. There is no better candidate, and frankly, we do not have time to discover a better candidate. Do you accept this weapon I bestow?”

Sister Uva looked stunned, but she had also tasted a flavor of elation and wonderment. She enjoyed using the Jealousy; she enjoyed investigating and weaving her Psychomancy with the Greater Demon. It teased her with what power she could achieve, but also what she could unleash right now if borrowed from the broken mind of a Heroic Psychomancer. “I... I do. Oh, Composer, I thank you. It is an honor beyond compare.”

Uva bowed and gestured her fealty to the goddess, and the Composer played a high note acknowledging her. “And I will name a song after you for this, Uva. You have already done more for this city than most others.”

Uva’s lip twitched. She felt a heaviness in her heart, but she didn’t cry—Uva wasn’t the crying kind, Shiv had noticed.

“That still doesn’t explain how this all happened... All of this—it’s too overt, too fast,” Valor said. “What is Aviary hoping to gain? Why did they even take a fragment of me? They’re just going to trade it to Compact as... as what, bribery to reach the surface? We’re not seeing something here...”

“We’re not seeing a lot,” the Composer said, “but assumptions will only lead us astray. I fear something far greater and more ominous is looming in the backdrop, Valor, but I cannot tell what. New Albion’s birds are scurrying through the Abyss. Something calamitous is coming. I can feel it—I can feel it within the System. Handing me so many Quests... I can feel it on the winds.” The Composer sounded uneasy, uncertain. “We must prepare. However we can. To hand a fragment of you away so easily means that there is a greater prize to be won. Aviary never trades—unless it gets them something grander.”

“What can be grander than the fragment of a Legendary Pathbearer?” Uva asked, her mind cold with dread.

“A fragment of the divine, perhaps,” the Composer said. “Or something taken from my progenitor—the Great One—themselves.”

A silence spilled over the room. Shiv wasn’t sure what that entailed, but considering how grave the atmosphere had become, he guessed it wasn’t very good.

“Can someone do that?” Shiv said. “Just... steal a piece of the Great One? Isn’t the Great One really felling big?”

“It’s not about size,” the Composer said. “The Great One was a colossal being, beyond even divinity in terms of power. But they fractured, like the moon did as they landed. They fractured in the depths, but they are not dead—they are merely broken, and they dream on. To take anything of the Great One, you must venture within its flesh, pass through incredible mana storms, avoid colossal gates and nightmarish dimensions. And to return unchanged... To even find your way back is more than most could possibly achieve.”

“And that is another reason why we should worry about facing the Dragon-Knights,” Valor said. “The Descenders—they earned their name by descending deep into the Great One, by mapping out its ever-changing body constantly. They defend the sanctity of the Great One’s bones. Whatever problems I have with their stubbornness and refusal to turn from the archaic ways, they are warriors—true to their vow and oath—

and they are all honed. I would not risk any of you against them if I had the choice. I don't even want to risk any of you against them now."

Then Valor regarded Shiv, and the flames inside the old Pathbearer's sockets intensified. "But with a surprise of our own—a *monster* of our own, I think we might stand a chance. Just a chance. But this will take blood and death."

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

Shiv shrugged. "Well, if that's what it takes to rip a dragon apart."

"Of course, you're thinking about that," Adam sneered. Then he paused. "I suppose it would be interesting—and rather impressive—if I shot a dragon out of the sky."

"See?" Shiv said, holding his arms open. "Right?"

"Yes," Adam said, his excitement growing. "Yes, I know. Especially because they're more than just beasts. Imagine out-dueling a great knight—a great knight in the body of a monster." The Young Lord's eyes were glowing now. "This will be a feat. A thing of true legend!"

Uva looked between them, and despite the tension in the atmosphere, she simply smirked and shook her head. "Mad fools."

"Well, at least you are enthusiastic about facing certain death," Valor said, and then he chuckled as well. "Ah, to be young again. I think I would have rather liked being in your company when I was just a boy."

Then Valor shed his brief amusement and returned to a state of tension. "Regardless, we must prepare now. In fact, we must leave as soon as possible. We do not have two days... The Lance is traveling at incredible speeds. We must prepare an ambush before the dragons ever reach the gate. That is the only way we might be able to stop them. If they get anywhere near Gate Theborn, then we will be facing the replenished gate guardians and the Dragon-Knights, and that is a fight we absolutely cannot win. In fact, if any other party intervenes or gets involved in the middle of this clash, I fear that defeat is certain as well."

"Exalted Goddess," Uva asked, "what other support might we get? My team—"

"Your team is not cleared for this," the Composer said, her voice filled with regret. "They are brave and noble sisters, but I will not foolishly spend their lives this way. Cherished Uva... You fought alongside a System-favored, and now your future is destined for true strife as well. I fear you were locked to this path the moment you took the Jealousy into your mind."

Uva paused, and she stared at Shiv. She understood, but there was a sense of worry inside her. Despite her bickering with Ikki and how she held the others at a professional distance, they were still her team. Without them in the field, things felt... odd.

"It's not the same," Shiv whispered over their mental link. *"I know."* He paused. *"I can act like Ikki when we're out there so you feel less odd."*

Uva barely stopped herself from snorting out loud. *"Shiv. I will find a way to strangle you."*

"There will be Shadow Cells assisting you. I believe you've worked with Still Water before," the Composer said.

"Yeah, Still Water," Shiv said, thinking back to the Weaveress with the Heroic Stealth. "She's the one who found out about the Animancy Core in the first place."

"Indeed. She and her personal cell will be responding. As will..." The Composer paused. "...as will ten others."

"Just *ten*?" Valor choked.

"I do not have the forces to spend in this amount of time!" the Composer shot back, sounding as frustrated as Valor. "These are the only ones I can give right now, Valor. They're the only ones who will be able to move fast enough. Two days are not enough to amass an army, especially not after my raid on the First Blood, with my greatest Pathbearers still far away. Two days! Do you know how many Sisters will need to die to bring down a *single* Dragon-Knight in two days? Do you know how much I *despise* myself for sending my people off to die every—" She caught herself, realizing she was losing control in front of one of her subjects. "I..." She coughed. "I apologize."

"It... It is well, Exalted Goddess," Uva said, eyes wide. She didn't fully know what she had witnessed, nor how to process it.

The Composer sighed. "Adam, Shiv—Exalted Guests and heroes of my home, I have to ask another unreasonable thing of you again. This Quest concerns you and has been granted mainly to you, but it also concerns Weave and the entirety of the Abyss. If we allow this fragment to be lost to Compact, if we allow Aviary and these Descenders to reach that gate, I fear that conflict will be inevitable again. As the balance of power in the Abyss shifts, the Five Faiths will find themselves driven to conflict. If the knights are not stopped and the fragment is not recaptured, the Descenders themselves will march on Compact for the sake of slighted honor alone. And then everything will return to chaos. The gate to the surface will remain in lockdown for all but the Lance itself, and all the other penalties will follow."

"It will not happen," Adam said, clenching his teeth. He stared at the Composer with the resolve of a man who could see the future. "It will not. You have more than my word—I

will make this reality. And damn the System for giving such... *meager* gifts when the price for failure is so severe."

The Composer regarded Adam, and, slowly, a smile crept across her face. "I believe you, Hero Adam."

Adam coughed. "Yes. Good. I am... honored you believe in me. You have... good eyes. Beautiful ones, too."

The Composer started. Then chuckled.

Shiv looked between them as an odd feeling passed through him. *Is Adam flirting with the Composer?*

His thought almost made Uva gag.

"It's like we never have enough bloody time," Adam said, sighing. He looked at Shiv. "We didn't even get Shiv's armor sorted—and I didn't have time to get a damned Magical Resistance Enchantment either."

"Oh," the Composer said, her eyes widening, "there is a final thing. The System passed the Quest upon me, but it granted me bestowals of its price and rewards."

Everyone paused. The tunnel behind them opened once more, and Shiv's jaw dropped as he turned.

Through the receding webs, five flying drones came carrying a large set of gleaming armor made from adamantine bone. Shiv recognized the bones and noted how the overall aesthetic remained the same. However, the armor also experienced a few alterations, like having three pairs of arms, with only two meant to cover Shiv's own. One other set was human-like in design, but the joints and hands were clearly robotic, while the bottommost arms were industrial and clutched what appeared to be a large ballista of some kind. There was also something different about the helmet as well—the eyes were open sockets before, but now they glowed like pits of burning crimson.

The flying drones released the armor, and it impacted the ground with a resonant rumble. A few of the drones wobbled in the air before they managed a stable hover. And then came a hissing sound as the front end of the armor unfurled like a blossoming flower. As the front section expanded, Shiv saw Can Hu within, the automaton's rusted, damaged frame fused with the armor's inner spine. The bot's half skull formed a second inner helm behind the outer dome made from Shiv's bones as well, revealing why the helmet's sockets were glowing earlier. "Shiv. Uva. I have arrived as promised to deliver your armor. It took many attempts—and multiple drafts, but I p-prevailed."

"Are... are you Can Hu?" Adam sounded awed and surprised. "You're... you're fused to Shiv's bones."

“That was the intention,” Can Hu replied. Shiv faintly heard a hum of amusement from the machine.

“I thought it was just a metaphor,” Adam muttered. “What kind of automaton would just literally shape itself into someone else’s armor?” The rightful source is

“A Penitent Chassis,” Can Hu declared with no small amount of pride.

Shiv observed the armor as his heart pumped with building astonishment. “I didn’t think... How long did this take?”

“I have worked. From the moment you departed to mere minutes before.”

“You didn’t rest?” Shiv said.

“I do not need rest when I have a purpose at hand,” Can Hu said. The automaton’s mood seemed much better than when they’d last seen each other. “However... The armor is too much weight for me to bear with my ruined Physicality. I will not be able to move or function normally without unlatching myself. You will have to provide the bulk of the locomotion. I apologize. With more time, perhaps I could integrate actual motors and finer pieces of machinery.”

“So... You’re just bound to the armor?” Shiv breathed. “Can Hu... I didn’t want you to cage yourself.”

“There were sacrifices that needed to be made,” Can Hu said without a hint of regret, “but this will work. Integration is... has succeeded, and I believe you have the strength. I will be able to offer you other things as well. I can still craft and build by directing my drones and using my manipulators. My shattering was not complete. My sensors also... they function. And I was Master-Tier before my breaking. I am more than a match for any Master-Tier armor. More.”

Everyone stood in silence as the Penitent Chassis finished its passionate proclamation. Shiv couldn’t imagine making this sacrifice for someone else—to make yourself a thing, just a vessel for another to wear.

“Can Hu,” Shiv said, “I can’t ask you to give up this much...”

“I gain,” Can Hu retorted. “I do not lose. Through me, you will be shielded from new threats. And I will craft things for you all. I will provide far more than this broken body may. Through you, I will be a Chassis again. I will soar again. I will fight again—and this time, for a righteous cause. Please... Do not turn me away out of pity. I will not survive that. This is my honest truth. I must be armor again. I must be. To make up for what I have broken, I must...”

Shiv stared at the automaton and nodded. "We can... we can try." An enormous weight settled on his shoulders. Before, dying was a carefree thing. Something that gave him more levels. Now, with Can Hu...

I'll die for good before I let someone break the old machine, Shiv vowed internally.

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

60 (II) Dragons [I]

60 (II)

Dragons [I]

Uva gave Shiv an appreciative look.

As the group observed Can Hu, Valor drifted beside the automaton and examined the armor. "You are Skill-Broken," Valor said.

"I am," Can-Hu replied. "And you are Valor Thann, the Legendary Pathbearer."

"Yes. And you are one of the Penitent Chassis, perhaps one of the few left in existence," Valor surmised. "How remarkable. But are you still sound of mind? I have met some others of your kind. And had to administer a... final mercy. They still thought they were in Great London." Follow current novels on NovelFire

"Yes," Can-Hu said, sorrow and sadness lining the machine's voice. "I decommissioned some of my comrades myself. They deserved better. I gave them better. And I carry their memory with me."

No one had anything to say to that, not even Valor.

"I am broken," Can-Hu continued, "but this is to my advantage. He will face a Necromancer. They strike at the soul. They start at the exterior where one's strongest, densest skills are. And mine are but debris."

Valor nodded, but he seemed troubled. "Indeed, that is true. But if they manage to wound you enough, then what remains of you will break, and you will be no more."

"I am willing to accept that—if only I can serve as armor once more." Can Hu was resolute.

Valor grunted. “Then if you fall, I will carry your memory as well, armored one.”

“You have my gratitude, ancient one.”

“I never thought someone getting a set of armor would befoul my mood so much.” Adam frowned at Can Hu. “I... I must protest. I don’t know you, but do you not care what else you might do? How else you might live?”

Can Hu turned its gleaming red eyes on Adam. “Pathbearer. Is there something—anything—you would give to change an instance in your history? A moment in the past you wish you could do again, do better.”

The Young Lord almost choked. “There... is.”

“Imagine your entire history were those moments. And the proudest day of your life was also the day your soul was shattered. I have no fear of death, and the life I live and the good I might achieve as but a quiet crafter is meager. Do you wish to live in indefinite, decaying peace, or die virtuous? Die *legendary*, and make a proper tale of your end?”

Adam didn’t reply immediately. So Can Hu continued talking. “Your silence betrays your answer. Do not ask me to choose peace when you cannot. We are Pathbearers. *I* am a Pathbearer—despite the lies seared into my code, and the wrongdoings I have performed.”

The automaton turned away from the Young Lord and looked at the Composer. “Great Goddess. You have been kind to me when the world regarded me as scrap. Today, I wish to dedicate myself in service to you. And to this city that allowed me to stay, that allowed me to prosper in peace.”

“Oh, Can Hu,” the Composer said, clutching her harp close to her chest as she sighed. “It is well. You are... You are a song in motion. You are history incarnate. I know you have made your mind, but I will grieve deeply if the worst comes to pass.”

“It will be a song sweet and sad,” the goddess continued as she cupped her hands together once more. The golden glow of the Quest still burned faintly but unmistakably. “One last bestowal, for one more Pathbearer.”

“Then play a song in my memory, and know that I tried to do what was right in the end.” Can Hu’s inner machinery whined as it tried to move. “Pilot,” it called out to Shiv. “I have need of you. I will shield you as best I can, and build for you with all I have left, if you would only carry me as the burden I am.”

“No burden,” Shiv said. He stepped forward, and he entered the armor. Something felt different this time. Something felt *final* about this moment. For him. For everyone here. He pressed his back against Can Hu and aligned his limbs with the armor. Slowly, Can Hu’s half-skull lowered over Shiv’s upper head. Strobing lights and flashing colors

washed over Shiv's face as the automaton's sensors aligned with him. He then saw out through Can Hu's eyes, and saw the world in vivid—albeit flickering—detail. The sound quality was also far better as well.

"There was a time..." Can Hu began, its voice even clearer inside. The unfurled armor began to close, with each plate of bone collapsing around Shiv, gripping his body tight. "There was a time when I was whole, where I aligned my intellect with my pilot's, and we fought as one. That is broken in me now. But the base level functions still remain."

"That's fine," Shiv said. "Basics are good. We'll start from there."

Shiv tried moving his arms. He did it with caution so as not to break Can Hu. Only when he was certain did he take his first step, and it felt the same as it ever did. The only difference was that he had someone else in the armor with him. He barely noticed the weight difference.

"I am technically wearing this armor, not you." Can Hu hummed in amusement as they approached the Composer. "Your exoskeleton—it is attached to me by ports and slots. Direct integration into my body would see it decay and break as well. For it would be a part of myself. And the ruin of my Toughness will spread."

"It goes that deep?" Shiv said, aghast.

"Yes. Your skills are who you are, your personal legend. And I will never be durable again. Not personally."

"That's alright," Shiv said. He reached into the golden light, and the Quest flared a final time. But not to him. "I'll be strong and tough enough for both of us. Can Hu. You promise me something?"

"Yes?" the automaton said. "Ah... A Quest... It has been so long."

Shiv continued. "You promise that you'll release me from the armor the moment I tell you. I won't have you dying for nothing."

"We will not be dying for nothing."

"You know what I mean," Shiv said, his voice resolute. "You want to be my armor? Fine. But that makes you my responsibility. And I won't let you break. Not if I can help it."

"Then you are greater of virtue than my original pilots."

"And don't call me that," Shiv said. "I'm not your pilot. I'm your fellow Pathbearer. We fight together. We don't use each other."

"Understood... Pathbearer."

The golden light of the Quest faded, and Shiv watched his bone armor glitter a final time before Can Hu internalized the Quest.

“Can the Quest let you rebuild your skills?” Shiv asked. “Ten levels and an Adept Evolution is something, no?”

“No,” Can Hu said. “But it can help me create new ones. And that will be enough. I will not be who I was. But I will build myself into something new regardless.”

And it didn’t take much more than that for Shiv to decide he really liked the Penitent Chassis.

“Well.” Adam sighed. “Now that the matter of the armor has been resolved... I suppose we should gather whatever we can as fast as we can and make haste for this interception.”

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“Yes,” Uva said. “I’ll go to Elaboration and get the Jealousy—”

“I still have something for both of you,” Shiv said, looking at Uva and Adam. “The Slayers said they didn’t want to fight anymore, right?”

“Yes,” Adam said.

“Well. Then it’s time they give their borrowed equipment back.”

Equipment: [Shroud of the Unyielding Jade]

Tier: Master

Condition: Perfect

Composition: Celestial Jade

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

Shiv tightened a final layer of an adamantine skeletal carapace to Uva’s chest. The metallic coloring of his bones and the brilliant jade of the former Inquisitor’s armor clashed, but the white molded over the green had a particular look to it.

“Too heavy?” Shiv asked.

“No,” Uva replied with a grunt.

Shiv stared at her. “Liar.”

“I’ll just think of it as Physicality training,” Uva replied. “But I’ll be needing every bit of armor I can get. The Magical Resistance is useful as well.”

“Shiv,” Can Hu said. “Lighten the load around her head and spread it out around her neck. There is too much pressure there. Whiplash will break her neck.”

“Really? Shit. Thanks, Can Hu.” Shiv cast a quick Biomancy spell, and the dense bone lining her helmet poured down along her shoulders.

A few of Can Hu’s drones flew by, and they chirped as they examined Uva. Suddenly, a second set of images expanded in the corner of Shiv’s vision. “Whoa.” He found himself staring at Uva’s elbows and knees from different points of view. The drones extended their many limbs as some began to cut and saw at Shiv’s armor with small drills. They worked in two teams, one jabbing forth with heated drills while others cut with ones tipped with frost.

“I will shear away the uneven edges and jutting matter in case she gets caught on something,” Can Hu declared. “Your work is finished.”

“What’s with the drills?” Shiv asked.

“To counteract Adamantine Adaption. Your Toughness learns to resist a specific kind of physical damage. It can be countered by rapid alternation.”

“Is that how you modified my armor?” Shiv asked.

“Correct,” Can Hu replied.

“Well. Good job.” Shiv was impressed. “And you’re directing all the drones? How?”

“Machine Mastermind is one of my few remaining Master-Tier Skills,” Can Hu said.

“Think of it as Psychomancy. But not truly. It is a skill only for automata. A skill that other automata fear. I am directing other drones even now. But should they awaken, I will release them and ask if they wish to remain with me.”

“Why?”

“Because what kind of freed slave will keep another in bondage?” Can Hu said.

Shiv thought about it for a second, then nodded. He liked the way Can Hu thought about these things.

“Looking good, Sister Uva,” Ikki said, giving a thumbs-up. The young Umbral had come to the teleportation anchor to see them off, but she had a worried look on her face. The rest of Uva’s team didn’t seem much happier. Two of them actually looked pissed.

“I’ll be fine, Sister Ikki,” Uva said, testing her movement. “I am, as you can see, in good hands.”

Ikki giggled. “Yeah. Tell me more about Shiv’s good hands.”

“Ikki,” Uva groaned.

The young Umbral paused, and then she hugged Uva. The drones parted, allowing the two their moment. The rest of the team crowded in and laid their hands on her as well. Uva froze, and she regarded the rest of them.

“My death is neither planned nor certain,” Uva deadpanned.

“I know. And you’re not going to die.” Ikki broke the hug. “Right, Shiv?”

“Yeah,” Shiv said, unwilling to consider anything happening to Uva—unwilling to allow the possibility. “She’s not.”

Uva’s team Pyromancer glared at Shiv. “She better not.”

“Keep her safe,” the team vanguard declared, slamming her fist against Shiv’s chest.

“Or else,” the team archer murmured.

Then, they all suddenly hugged him, too. Especially Ikki.

“And you can’t die either,” Ikki said, her arms barely able to wrap around him.

Shiv chuckled. “Dying’s kind of my thing.”

“Just don’t stay dead. I can’t bully Uva anymore without you. And I really don’t want to find out what sad Uva is like.”

“Come back alive, Master Shiv,” the Pyromancer declared. “Don’t abuse yourself either. You... you give enough. No one can question that.”

Shiv remembered how horrified the Pyromancer was as he got burned alive.

“Can’t be worse than the anchor,” Shiv muttered.

Everyone shuddered at that.

“Please don’t remind me,” the team archer groaned.

Off to the side, Shiv watched as Adam spoke to the Slayers.

“And you two will be fine while I am gone,” Adam said, observing his new saber. “The Composer will treat you as guests and will make sure you are taken care of. When we finish with this dragon business and get the fragment of Valor back, I’ll return for more details on how to pass through the gate. I’m not a dedicated Jump Mage, but... But with the Adept-Tier Skill Evolution, I might be able to force an advancement to Dimensionality.”

“Yeah. Yeah. Okay.” Tran grunted every word like he was pulling a knife out of himself. Heather couldn’t even meet Adam’s face. “I’m...”

Adam reached out and gripped both of them by the shoulder. “It is fine. You have nothing to be ashamed of. In fact, the Republic has much it owes you. I have much I owe you. There is nothing wrong with not wanting to rush off to face certain death.”

“We’re supposed to be Slayers,” Heather said, sounding on the verge of tears. “We’re... We’re... You’re barely even twenty, Young Lord. And you’re going out to do this while we just—”

“Rest. Recover. Heal.” Adam’s words were severe, and his eyes burned with intensity. “That is an order. You are wounded. That is what you are, and I will not have either of you torture yourselves with guilt.”

“Yeah,” Shiv agreed. “What he said.” Both Slayers looked at him in surprise. Shiv shrugged awkwardly. “I’m sorry for the whole Orcish Rage thing. And being rough with both of you. Maybe I should have been... I don’t know. I’m a petty bastard sometimes.”

“Sometimes?” Adam laughed.

“Always,” Shiv corrected.

“It—” Heather swallowed. “I never really, really thanked you for saving me. For saving Tran.”

“Don’t,” Shiv said. “You already gave the armor back. Whatever was between us before is done now, Heather. Just treat yourself well. And maybe... I don’t know, come back and eat some of my food sometime, and we’ll call it a new start. You too, Tran.”

Tran stared at Shiv and swallowed. “I would have never done it.”

“What?” Shiv said. Adam looked confused as well.

"If the Town Lord called me to kill you. I wouldn't have done it. Even if he did. I couldn't. It wasn't all an act."

Shiv grunted. "I know. It's fine. Roland... That's between me and him. We'll have our talk later. Take care of yourself, Tran. Oh, and tell Siggie to get herself ready. She's going back into the gate with me."

"She is?" Tran blinked.

"Yeah. I need someone I don't actually care about that much at all and who knows the underbelly of the gate. Make sure she doesn't run off."

"Well, I think I can handle a goblin Adept," Tran muttered.

As farewells and final preparations were made, Shiv, Uva, Can Hu, Adam, and Valor lingered in the teleportation anchor as everyone else cleared out. A few of Can Hu's drones hovered in the air behind them as well, resembling rockets with four arms sticking out the side. The doors shut, and the spells began to turn. At the opposite end of the room, a tunnel of spatial webbing opened, and Adam let out a sigh. "Well. Out into the winnowing dark again. I won't lie, all these bloody goodbyes have me bothered. It's like I'm being sent off to my death."

Valor sighed. "You might very well be, boy. I wouldn't risk any of you but Shiv against the Dragon-Knights right now. I pray the Dragon-Knights are wounded or spent from their flight. And I pray that Composer's Shadow Cells will be enough support for us to overcome the adversary. Whatever the case, we eliminate the Aviary agents first. They must not escape. They must not reach the gate."

"I'll make sure they do not," Adam said, gesturing at his eyes. "In fact, I wonder just how long it will take me to find these fools."

"Do not underestimate the knights," Valor chided. "It will prove fatal."

"I'm not," the Young Lord said. "But do not think lowly of me, either. Not many ever reach the Tier of Hero. And few have Seer of Horizons."

"I will assist as well," Can Hu said. "I expect the enemy to be moving with active camouflage. All members of a Penitent fire team had optical cloaks at a minimum."

"And I will keep our minds synchronized," Uva said. "So together we might be able to see what one might miss."

"Sounds like a plan," Shiv said. "I guess I'll... uh, keep my eyes peeled."

"Oh, don't worry Shiv," Adam said. "For you see, I have a cunning plan."

“Does it involve me launching myself at the dragons in a borderline suicidal frontal assault?” Shiv asked.

“Only the first part. And what’s with this *borderline* nonsense?”

Shiv guffawed. “You finally did it, Young Lord. You cracked me up.”

“And so we march toward our doom with joyous laughter,” Uva deadpanned. “Hurrah.”

“Hurrah,” Can Hu echoed.

And that was enough to make Uva and Valor snort too.

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