

PATH OF THE DEATHLESS (BOOK 2 COMPLETED)

6 (I) Abyss

There isn't a word to describe the darkness when you descend the first time. It clings to you like tar. It touches you and grips you and it won't let go. It's a darkness you can practically feel. And then there are the things it hides—the nightmares that lurk...

I went down in search of my daughter's remains. She fell during the war, and the Abyss saw fit to use that against me. That's another thing about the darkness. It will reach into you and nurse itself on your terror. And it will use its power to make those terrors true.

But yet... I miss the Abyss. In a strange way, I miss it. It was horrifying. But at times it was also beautiful. You just have to go deep enough. If you go deep enough, you'll see the wonder beyond the terror, and you...

You will see what the moon wanted to hide from us.

-Into the Dark, A Maddened Slayer's Account of the Abyss

6 (I)

Abyss

“Hey!” Shiv shouted, waving at a flying Aero Mage hovering just above the Abyss. Him falling past surprised the mage—and then a bolt of red from below crashed against the poor caster, sending him tumbling through the air.

Shiv groaned and glared behind him at the rapidly approaching darkness.
“Stop fighting for a second! I’m trying to stop falling!”

As usual, no one cared what Shiv wanted.

The top side of the Abyss resembled one of those “glorious war murals” that some artisans liked to paint. The kind that showed thousands of Republic Pathbearers mustering themselves to stand against the nightmarish tides of the Necrotechs.

The Deathless always thought the scenes were exaggerated. Until now. Now, he realized the scope and scale of the battle were more than he could have imagined.

Aerial-build automata drifted in heavy air cavalry formations, protecting the circles of magi. Some casters were layering sealing spells over parts of the abyss, coating entire sections of the chasm with stacked barriers, while others bombarded the unseen enemy lurking in the darkness between the gaps of their wards with cataclysmic spells. Shiv had never seen siege-level magic in his life, but today, he got a front row seat—and the brightness of the blasts seared permanent blind spots into his eyes.

Walls of wind slammed against Shiv, jerking his already shattered limbs about. The agony left Shiv empty of thoughts—and soon even consciousness. He blacked out for a moment, and when he woke again, he found himself falling just past the highest parts of the old city ruins. Inside the hollowed buildings, he glimpsed teams of dark, armored figures moving up.

Broken Moon... We're about to have another war. And Shiv was falling right into enemy territory. A loud snapping noise sounded, and Shiv followed the commotion to see a large spell pattern breaking apart. It was like streams of carefully woven light were snapping, and as the spell collapsed, a magical barrier blockading part of the abyss shattered.

The spell was originally shaped like a burning shield bearing the Arrow Family emblem, and it came apart as if a plate striking the ground. As it shattered, Shiv felt the magic wash through him—a sensation that was similar to the vitality he drained from people, but not entirely. Then came a colossal shape that burst out from the failing shield.

The airborne magi rushed to patch over their broken defenses in the area, but it was too late.

A loud, bone-rattling laugh echoed through the world.

Something resembling a titanic, skeletal serpent with ebony bones and a few hundred arms along its length rose into the air. Its length was terrifying. It just kept rising and rising from the dark, taller than most of the collapsed buildings. Perched upon its exposed ribs were hundreds of monsters, each spreading their wings, screaming their bloodlust despite their bodies recoiling when struck by the first rays of light.

“I RETURN, HERETICS! I RETURN FROM THE DEPTHS TO DELIVER PROPHECY AND OMEN! I RETURN TO FINISH WHERE I WAS INTERRUPTED SOME TWENTY YEARS BEFORE! HEAR ME, OH HEATHENS OF THE FALSE PATHS! SURRENDER YOURSELVES TO MINE GLORY AND RETURN TO THE DEEP AND THE DARK WITH ME! A

GLORIOUS SHATTERING AWAITS! I WILL GRANT YOU JUST THIS ONE—”

Though Shiv was still listening to the gargantuan serpent’s sermon, the Blackedge magi corps were done with their spellcraft. Massive balls of fire formed above their circles. Each one was larger than the residential clusters back in town, and Shiv felt a flood of mana drench the world. All around the chasm leading into the Abyss, a few hundred dawns ignited while the eclipse continued above. As one, the magi unleashed their spells as a single organism, and Shiv found himself shaken by the awesome display.

Roland Arrow fought in a war like this? His parents too? How did they even survive? And the enemy—the serpent was beyond anything Shiv could imagine—he never saw anything of its like in the bestiary he “borrowed” from the town library. Despite being a Pathbearer now, he realized there was so very much he didn’t know, and so far he had to climb.

Which was an annoying realization to have when one was still falling.

“Hey!” he shouted, waving at some of the air cavalry. They didn’t notice him—too focused were they on spreading their formations wider to curve around the magi.

The massive fireballs blasted forth, streaking toward the great serpent from all directions.

But the beast only sighed mournfully. ***“NEVER DO YOU LEARN! ALWAYS DO YOU SEEK DEATH AND TORMENT! I WILL BESEECH THE FORGIVING DARK TO GRANT YOU MERCY, AND TO LET YOU BE REBORN IN FLESH SUITABLE FOR THE LONG NIGHT TO COME.”***

The fireballs converged. Shiv expected a massive blast—and winced as he felt the temperature grow to unbearable levels. His skin was starting to blister, and he was about on level with the serpent as he fell toward the gap the titanic beast made in the magi’s wards.

Yet, before Shiv could drop any further—or perish from the flames—the great skeletal serpent extended each of its countless arms and summoned a collection of pale scepters into their palms. The monster traced a few hundred varied gestures into the world and wove spells at a pace Shiv couldn’t perceive. A second after, something like a deafening gong sounded from within the serpent, and a pulsing wave washed over the world.

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Everything went still.

Shiv froze. The fireballs halted—most of them barely a finger’s distance away from exploding against the serpent. But the monster remained active, unburdened by this strange stasis. **“OH, GREAT ONE BELOW, OH NEWBORN OF THE EVERLASTING NIGHT, FORGIVE THEM! FOR THEY DO NOT KNOW. FORGIVE THEM FOR THEIR MISFORTUNE, FOR BEING BORN SO FAR ABOVE YOUR CRADLE! LET THEM LEARN OF YOUR GLORY AND GREATNESS, AND BE UNBURDENED BY THE CAGE THEY WORSHIP AS UNHOLY LIFE. SO I, VICAR SULLAIN, BESEECH! SO I PRAY!”**

Each of the serpent’s many hands came clasped together in some form of prayer, and to Shiv’s disbelief, he noticed the monsters holding in place on its ribs mirroring the act with great dignity.

What is this... His mind reeled. He was pretty sure he saw some lesser vampires there. Lesser vampires weren’t intelligent. How were they performing an act of unholy worship now?

Then, the great beast followed one impossible spell with another. Reaching out its many hands, the serpent traced fiery threads out from the fireballs, pulling patterns of mana free from each of the radiant spheres as if a cat undoing a ball of twine.

Shiv struggled to move, struggled to react, but witnessed everything. He could feel a dense layer of magic smother his body, like the weight of a mountain pinning him in place, but his mind was still his own. A flash of movement in the distance drew his attention—atop a distant set of ruins, he saw a flock of birds take flight. Were they unaffected by this spell? Or did it simply not reach them?

Shiv's mind raced as he struggled to comprehend a number of things, but by the time he regarded the serpent again, his stomach plunged into cold terror. The monster wasn't just pulling the mana patterns apart; it was weaving them back together, and adding new lengths to the existing magic. The serpent—which called itself *Vicar Sullain*—sang sorrowful notes as it converted the fireballs meant to smite it for its own use.

Colorful bands of red and white were mixed into the fiery lengths of mana. New symbols flashed upon the serpent's many palms, and they poured their mana into the strange weave they were compositing. Each of the fireballs shrank and dimmed, their power siphoned away into a new spell shaped by the vicar's hands.

“THEY YEARN FOR LIFE! THEY CLING TO IT! SO LET THEM WITNESS LIFE UNFETTERED ONCE MORE BEFORE THE END! LET THEM KNOW A FINAL BEAUTY. FOR THIS IS ALL I CAN OFFER!”

A coiling nest of voluminous colors and patterns revolved around and around itself, until everything blurred, and it burst apart. A tidal wave of magic washed through the world. Shiv witnessed the vegetation surrounding the ruins erupt explosively. A literal forest rose up between the cracks of the broken pavement and ruined buildings, swallowing more of the old city. Then came a flood of life from the serpent's hands—an outpouring of colorful birds that rushed outward over the world in a few thousand different flocks.

The serpent's magical skill—no *skills*—must be well beyond Adept to achieve that. Shiv didn't even know this was possible; to convert the mana of fire to life was... It was something Shiv wanted to achieve someday.

He *would* achieve this someday. Enemy or not, the serpent became a goal in Shiv's mind—a vision of power and authority beside the shadow of Roland Arrow.

Suddenly, the stasis holding Shiv broke, and he fell again. Above, the magi immediately began weaving new spells in haste—their lack of hesitation hinting that they were aware of the vicar's actions as well.

“ALAS, LIFE BEGETS DEATH INEVITABLE. AND SO... I BID YOU DIE.”

And with a final gesture, as Shiv fell through the gap the serpent made, the vicar commanded the birds it created to soar forth among the defenders of Blackedge—and suddenly each of them sparked.

Life magic reverted to fire, and a chain of explosions consumed the skies above, casting Shiv, who was falling behind the serpent, in shadow. Republic Pathbearers fell from the sky like falling embers, the screams of those who still could mingling with the whistling air. Driven to desperation by what he witnessed, Shiv cried out for the vicar to heed him—trying to distract the great beast for a moment and allow the forces of his town to regroup. To his surprise, the serpent actually heard him. It turned to regard him—then deflected a lance of lightning into a nearby building without looking.

Shiv dropped through the gap into the darkness, and the vicar studied him for a moment, but then turned away as they rose further into the air, commanding its forces to go forth and spread its word of the forgiving dark.

Shiv's heartbeat quickened. His limbs were numb from agony now, but he was still falling, and he had no idea how to stop. Above, more seals were shattered, and Shiv found himself horrified to see additional skeletal serpents—ones of smaller size compared to the vicar—carrying more of the Necrotech Legions up toward the town.

One after another, the wards that Blackedge laid in place burst into fragments, clearing the path through the chasm for all those below.

“Dammit!” Shiv said. His mind raced. He considered—

Something struck the back of his head from behind. His consciousness winked out for a moment. He came to with a gasp and a groan. The wind was still whistling past him. There was a deep stinging pain in the back of his skull, and a feeling of wetness running down his neck. As he blinked, he found himself unable to see anything anywhere. Shiv prayed that the blow had blinded him, because the alternative was that he was now too deep in the Abyss to even see the chasm.

How long had he been out? He moved his arms and let out a choked gasp of pain. Right. Those were still broken. Very broken. He needed... What if he died? What if he found a way to kill himself? He remembered how he glided from place to place as a Revenant. Maybe he could try to fly back up as a ghost. Shiv remembered his chef's knife was still bound to his right hand, so he could try flopping it at his head. The arm bounced about, so it wasn't a guarantee he could stab himself while falling, but it was the best shot he had.

But before he did, another concern formed in his mind: He needed life force to exist as a Revenant. Without vitality, he got cold fast and faded. And if he

faded completely... Well, Shiv didn't want to find out if he had a second form after Revenant, should he die as a ghost.

"Taint me," Shiv muttered. No good options. And taint the damn raven too. The bastard didn't have the dignity to kill him—just threw him off the top of Blackedge like he was a rock. *Who does that?* Shiv was going to look forward to draining the rest of the raven's vitality when he found him next. And Shiv *would* find the raven-helmed stranger again. This wasn't done. Not by a—

A sudden *stop* interrupted Shiv's thoughts. For a moment, he was unsure what had happened, but he distinctly heard the sound a sack of splattering meat might make when striking the ground at high speeds. True to Shiv's frustration, the cold began seeping into him, and he was dead again. He finally struck something deep in the Abyss.

Perfect, Shiv muttered. *Now, what do I do?* He tried to look up as a ghost, but saw nothing. Apparently, being a ghost didn't give him some kind of dark-seeing skill. That would be too convenient.

Then, Shiv stopped thinking for a moment as some notifications filled his perception.

Physicality > 27

The growth was ridiculous. That was a massive jump for his Physicality and Toughness. Shiv didn't think he'd ever heard of anyone growing that much in a single day. Despite his predicament and his recent death, he found himself getting giddy. Finally, it seemed like the years of power and growth denied to him were being returned by life wholesale. Shiv knew that likely wasn't actually accurate, but imagining that he was collecting a debt from the world gave him comfort in these trying times.

Now. He needed to find a place to go—a source of light or something. Some vitality first. He couldn't risk disintegrating as a ghost. He needed to resurrect and climb the Abyss. The town—he didn't care that much about Blackedge as a whole, but there was no way he was leaving Georges and the rest of Swan-Eating Toad to fend off an invasion on their own.

6 (II)

Abyss

Shiv started moving. He felt himself gliding through the world, and on a whim, he jumped. Instead of suddenly learning to fly, he just went up and down. So. He was a ghost that moved like a person. Well, that was disappointing. Maybe if he advanced his Revenant Skill more, he could get the rest of the fun ghost abilities like flying around, possessing things, telekinesis, and the like.

As he continued moving, he came to a rough and sudden halt before bouncing off something. He moved again and found himself stopped by some kind of obstacle. Shiv felt at the structure, but could only feel a vague barrier of some kind. No texture. No detail. Why could he see but not actually feel? *Makes no sense...* It also annoyed him to realize that intangibility was probably another thing that wasn't included among his ghostly powers.

I am the weakest ghost in existence, Shiv thought. Well, he wasn't technically a ghost, was he? He was a Revenant. Ghosts were monsters the Necrotechs used to attack the Republic. Shiv was... something else. Something that was entirely unique, if his Revenant Skill and Path were to be trusted. So, by technicality, that made him the strongest Deathless Revenant in existence.

Things were pretty hopeful for Shiv with this framing. He changed directions, ignoring the barrier for now as anxiety—and a building coldness—washed through him. He really needed vitality soon, but he still couldn't see—

Then, something else emerged in the darkness. It appeared as a flicker at first, like a bonfire in the ruins seen from afar. As Shiv grew colder, it grew brighter, and he rushed toward it as fast as he could. Several times, he bounced off obstacles. He found himself running along the blockades to chart a path to the single source of light. As he drew closer to nonexistence, the flame he sought burned brighter, and other fires flashed into being around him, materializing as if constellations amidst the Abyssal dark.

There was something heartening about that. There were still living things here. Things he could drain and use to resurrect himself. As he passed what appeared to be a corner, he found himself but a few meters away from the warmth he was seeking, and was surprised by seeing a literal brightness alongside a magical one.

The vitality he sought seemed connected to a tree that had a single branch of some sort. At the end of the branch dangled an orb of light. Shiv didn't know

what kind of organism he was looking at, nor did he have the time to consider if it would perish from his draining. It was his only hope to stop himself from a final death, and he was going to drain every bit of vitality he could.

Shiv drove his hands into the tree and drew in vitality as fast as he could. Immediately, he felt a heat rush through his body, and he found himself shuddering in relief. That was pretty close. He moved faster than he remembered, come to recall. Maybe his Revenant's movement was tied to how fast he could move normally with his Physicality. That was something to discover in better circumstances, when he had the conditions for experimentation.

For now, he continued sapping vitality, and shadows calcified around him. To his surprise, the glow of the light revealed something else: his chef's knife was still in his hand—bound to his spirit as it was in life. Shiv chuckled in disbelief. Despite falling down here, his fortune was proving to be pretty good so far. When he was done draining the tree, maybe he could cut away the branch and use the orb as some kind of makeshift torch to find out where he was.

A final trickle of heat rushed into him. The mold of shadows around his body broke apart. Shiv took in a deep breath. He found the air in the Abyss quite crisp. Almost as fresh as the air on Blackedge. That was unexpected. "This place is full of surprises," he muttered. "Well. Let's see about that torch, then."

As he reached up to slice at the branch, he examined his knife and smiled again. "Thanks, Georges. Hang in there."

[Halspur's Perfect-Edged Chef's Knife]

Condition: Sharpened

Not even "fine." Sharpened. The missing pieces along the blade were gone, and it gave off a polished gleam, serving as a mirror beneath the glow. Shiv

looked at himself, and despite the circumstances, found himself grinning. To his surprise, his once pitch-black eyes were now lit up by irises of shining white. That had to have happened when he gained his Path... Or rather, when he lost his Curse.

As he finally reached up to cut the branch, though, the tree itself *moved*. A low grumble sounded from below Shiv, and suddenly, the branch slid out of his reach as what he assumed to be a tree lifted its head off the ground, showing a wide, hideous face that dwarfed Shiv's body. The creature had a single cyclopean eye and a wide maw of jagged, needle-like fangs. Shiv thought it looked like one of those anglerfish he saw in the Blackedge aquarium, and he remembered what Georges told him about how they hunted.

The Abyssal angler beast stared at Shiv, clicking its mouth. He stared back, mind blank.

Then, Shiv responded as he always did when surprised by a lesser vampire: He stabbed it before it could gut him. The Deathless rammed his chef's knife through the center of the angler beast's eye. The monster roared in pain, twisting and shaking. Shiv was dragged off his feet and flung from side to side like a doll. To his surprise, he managed to keep a death grip on his blade, still lodged in the monster's eye. The speed at which he was shaken from left to right should have ripped his arm out of its socket, but aside from a few jolts of pain, he endured, and his muscles held.

He was stronger than he ever remembered being. Maybe finally strong enough to fight a monster like this head-on.

"Come on, then," Shiv spat as blood spilled out from the creature's bleeding eyeball. "Time to find out if you slice like an anglerfish too!"

The monster responded to Shiv's threat with a roar of its own. Not wasting any more time, he twisted his body and planted both his feet on top of its upper lip. This way, it couldn't eat—

The angler beast roared and charged. Shiv barely had time to react before he felt his back collide hard with a jutting length of stone. This was where Shiv's Toughness failed him again. Something in his spine broke apart. He suddenly lost feeling in his body, and he toppled off the top of the angler beast like a puppet with its strings cut. His blade slipped out of its eye wound as he tumbled onto the cold, hard ground, and it took a few steps back, letting out howls of pain.

Shiv tried to stand. He couldn't. He was paralyzed. Well. In his defense, he didn't know there was a wall there. That, and he didn't expect to be fighting for his life so soon. Things to improve on.

As the angler beast finished its tantrum, it stood over Shiv, the center of its eye still bleeding. The Deathless could practically see the hate on the creature's face. It was an ugly face, and when it opened its mouth, Shiv let out a sigh, realizing his fate.

"I hope I give you the shits."

It bit down on him as he did his best not to scream. That proved easier than he expected because its first bite failed to break skin and burst both his lungs instead. It took five big chomps for Shiv to finally start bleeding, and another ten for him to die. All in all, he died pretty impressed with his own Toughness, albeit in great and intense agony.

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The resulting skill levels definitely increased how good he felt about himself.

Toughness > 31

Physicality > 29

Reflexes > 21

Another massive jump for several skills. This was ridiculous. This was *awesome*. Shiv loved dying. Why had he gone his entire life without dying? He should have died years ago! If he knew dying was going to do this to him, he would have spent every single day jumping off the side of Blackedge and finding things to kill him. He was shooting into Initiate-Tier for several Skills now. Those skills usually took weeks if not months to grow, according to what he heard from Tran.

Even a prodigy like Adam Arrow wouldn't be growing this fast. Shiv's *He Who Rises From Ash Eternal Feat* was something else. Of course, it might have been exactly this way... His Curse was gone, and his parents' ritual...

He put that out of his mind as he drained the angler beast. He had a rematch to win. *Let's see you eat me again, fish-face*. As the monster chomped on Shiv's remains, it suddenly wailed with pain and whipped its head about in confusion, unsure what was sapping its vitality. Meanwhile, Shiv realized that his knife was in his hand again. Strange. He didn't remember it leaving the monster's mouth. Maybe it respawned with him. It would be helpful to learn about the nuances of bound items when he had the chance.

Soon, the shadows broke around him as he resurrected again. Shiv drove his knife into the dense scales of the creature's back. The good thing: it went in. The bad thing: the knife cracked. Its quality went back down to being damaged. Sharp but brittle—for cooking but not combat. *No problem—it'll get better*.

Before the beast could respond, Shiv drove a heavy left hook into its rear, and to his surprise, the blow moved it slightly. It didn't seem to hurt much, but he hit it with enough force to send it stumbling back a few steps. Shiv couldn't help but laugh. This was all he ever wanted in his life. Here in the Abyss, his dreams were coming true.

"Hey. We're not done yet." Shiv quickly reached down as the monster struggled to turn. He picked up pebbles and tossed them to his right and left. They hit walls relatively quickly. He hid a wince. This was a big monster to be fighting in a narrow little cave. But he'd make it work, no matter how many deaths it took. He spun his knife and smacked his lips. "You seem to be mistaken about who's supposed to be eating who."

The angler beast turned, let out a loud shout, and then did two things Shiv didn't expect.

The first was spitting Shiv's mangled remains back out at him—mangled remains Shiv barely dodged. This was the first *existentially* disgusting attack Shiv ever encountered.

The second attack—the one that Shiv didn't dodge—was a beam of magic projected from its dangling stalk. All Shiv saw was the orb flaring alight—and then he was a Revenant again. Shiv looked down at his body falling over, a clean hole smoking at the center of his face.

Well, that's bullshit. How was I supposed to know it could do that? Despite Shiv's gripes, he knew this was the way of the world. The only reason he performed so well against the lesser vampires was because he knew their habits, their nests, and how to kill them. He was prepared. Right now, he was running blind and lacked the strength to keep surviving. And so he died. Over and over.

But dying was good for him.

Toughness > 33

Reflexes > 24

No Physicality this time. This death wasn't because I was weak. I was just slow. And the beam was—well, it cut through me like I was nothing. It probably could melt a hole through the cuirass he was wearing earlier. He quickly got behind the monster again as it lapped up his new corpse and started munching again. *Damned... angler fish...* He was going to eat this thing in revenge. No one ate Shiv without him eating them back.

The angler beast let out a pitched cry mid-chew as Shiv drained its vitality. Despite all the gains he got in his common skills, his Legendary and Unique Skills hadn't grown nearly as fast. They had to do with his functionality while being dead, so he probably had to level them normally. But that was fine. Shiv knew he was going to be dying a lot in the near future, so he was going to get all the practice in the world.

As he resurrected again, he immediately climbed up the beast's back and hacked at the stalk. His knife cut through and broke some more, reaching the Severely Damaged condition, and a jet of glowing blood painted the ceiling and walls. The node at the edge of the stalk fired one more time, cleaving deep into the surrounding walls as the angler fish bucked and raged. It launched itself up against the ceiling, like the lesser vampire did to Shiv some time back. The Deathless cursed and prepared for his back to break again.

To his surprise, the stones gave before his bones did. It still hurt a lot, but it was like getting a bat slammed into him rather than having his body get folded in half by a giant monster. This was a fight he could win.

As Shiv landed on top of the angler beast, he kicked and punched and kned the top of its head. It let out shrieks of annoyance and frustration more than pain. Shiv needed more strength to hurt it that way. So he made do with the damage he had already inflicted—he drove his fist into the wound he left in its eye and began to claw and pull. Now, the angler beast was making the screams he wanted as it charged about, slamming from wall to wall, shaking the cavern they were fighting in.

Between the vitality siphoned and the creature's bleeding wounds, Shiv could feel it slowing down. Of course, he didn't feel that good either as it slammed from wall to wall, but this time, he thought he had the bastard on the ropes. He just needed to—

The angler fish let out a shout, and then it *rolled*. It was rotund enough that it shifted over like a ball, and despite not actually injuring Shiv as it turned over on top of him, grinding him against the ground, it was still heavy enough to smother him. Shiv cursed and kicked and struggled. To his surprise, as pressed with his arms and legs, he felt the creature budge slightly. Then his strength gave out, and it crashed down. It didn't try to eat him then. It just left him pinned there, holding him in place as he struggled to breathe—and then perished from the lack of air a few minutes later.

Physicality > 31

I hate you, Shiv seethed at the angler beast as he rose as a Revenant. I hate you so felling much.

The beast didn't much look good anymore either. It was bleeding all across its body, and its own breathing was ragged and pained. It got off Shiv's body while he started draining it, and it let out a pitiful cry just as it tried to take a bite from his newest corpse.

No! No! Stop! Stop eating me! The angler beast couldn't hear him, but to his surprise, it let out another cry of pain as one of its teeth snapped while trying to chew him. *Yes! Yes! Keep going, you dumb abyss fish! Chew me harder!*

As Shiv resurrected behind the fish again, he booted it in the back with all his might and sent it rolling over again. It let out a cry of surprise and tumbled, its bleeding eye leaving a glowing trail. He picked up pieces from its broken tooth for temporary use as his actual knife mended itself. Before the beast could recover, Shiv drove his shoulder into its face and sent it bouncing into a wall. As it staggered back, he targeted the brutal wounds he left on its eye with his knife and kept going. He went so far as to halfway climb into the wound as he practically sank into the gore. The angler beast weakly tried to bite him, but he kneed its bottom teeth and broke a few more. It wailed. He stabbed and thrust and cut, until a notification appeared in his vision, and the monster finally went still.

Knife Proficiency > 18

Shiv staggered away from the unmoving angler beast, his chef's outfit drenched in blood. A flood of euphoria and exhaustion washed through him as he threw up his arms. All his life he wanted the power to be his own person, to walk his own Path and face monsters. Here he was, doing just that. Shiv started doing a merry jig. He wasn't good at dancing, but it didn't matter. This was fantastic. This was more than fantastic. He beat an abyssal monster with little more than an Adept-Tier kitchen knife, his bare hands, and a good few deaths.

"First two didn't count," Shiv said. And they didn't. He wasn't ready. Frankly, he probably didn't die nearly as much as he should have against this thing. Now, where was that stalk? He needed a source of light before he got to harvesting—

Shiv went still. The node of light lingered a few meters away, and it cast a glow on a horde of spectators that came to watch Shiv fight. And to drain the blood from his corpses. Twenty or more lesser vampires were glaring at him.

Some were fighting over his remains—lapping at the blood, unable to pull his bodies apart. Most stared at him and the dead angler beast behind him.

The Deathless stared back, and a feral smile spread across his face as he advanced on the lesser vampires, kitchen knife in one hand, tooth in the other. “Well. Come on, then. But I think this is going to suck for you more than it’s going to suck for me.”