

## Path of the Deathless (Book 2 Completed)

### 61 (I) Dragons [II]

*This struggle lasted years. But the knights endured. The city endured. Until things changed once more.*

*By calamity were the Abyssal Dogs broken, and so too, through desperation, was a new order reforged. Centuries thereafter, the System unleashed its greatest horrors upon Constantia, using the body of the Great One themselves to power a mana storm unmatched. Gates opened within the storm, and Constantia was cut off from the surface by these new dimensional pathways. Then, from within came monsters feared across all dimensions: The primal dragons.*

*They shattered Constant Point, tearing in, slaughtering the inhabitants on a scale never before experienced by any of the surviving chivalric orders. Driven to the point of near-extinction, they reunited. Within the last bastion of the city, the surviving knights brokered truces. They exchanged contracts of eternal loyalty and forgave old grievances, and thus the order was reforged as separate fraternities, separate cultures, separate knightly traditions, but one order all the same. And that order gave a single command.*

*“Descend! Descend and retake the city! Descend and drive the dragons back!”*

*The battle to retake Constantia took years. Years and millions of valiant knights. At first, it took a thousand knights to bring down even one dragon. Until, finally, a breakthrough occurred. An ascension unlike any other, performed by Semper Paragon Ellington Bueford, First of all Dragon-Knights.*

*In a desperate battle to secure the lower city, he faced an enemy alone, all his comrades slain, his own body broken and spent. A dragon. The dragon was hale, and the dragon was raging, and the mana storm pouring down on it infused it with such power that it could shatter mountains. But against all odds, and by miracle or skill, Bueford prevailed. Prevailed at the cost of his own life... or so it should have been. As man and dragon lay dying, their blood pooling into one, the System rewarded Bueford for prevailing in the greatest of Quests.*

*A great change happened. The mana storm collapsed on both man and dragon, and from both was something new born into existence...*

*When Semper Paragon Bueford rose once more, he was reborn as kindred to dragons, but he retained his mind and virtue. And the System bestowed upon him a new blade as a reward. One fit for claiming the heads of primals...*

*After that, as other knights prevailed against their own dragons, the slaughter began to turn the other way...*

*-Storm, Scale, and Honor Eternal: The Descenders*

61 (I)

Dragons [II]

"You know the worst thing about war and fighting?" Adam said. "It's the waiting. It's the part before, where you feel it in the air, you feel it coming, but it's not there yet. And so you're just waiting for the hit to come. That's what Captain Irons always liked to say—before every mock battle; same speech, every time. Today I think I finally understand the man, and I don't bloody like it at all."

Shiv, Uva, Adam, and Valor were flying low, hidden from any aerial observers by the foliage. They glided through a dense, interwoven canopy of branching trees, if they could even be called trees. The patch of wilderness they were in didn't have any of those large mushrooms. What it did have were colossal briars, the brambles sprawling out across the land and leaving everything swallowed by absolute darkness. Even then, the strange light reaching down from the far-away ceiling of this region of the Abyss was dim, leaving the world shrouded in the colors of dusk.

Without his cloak, Shiv doubted he would be able to see anything, and without Adam or Uva being synchronized to his mind, nearsighted was all he would be. *It's good to have allies*, Shiv thought. For all he could do alone, he was very much a blunt instrument when it came to utility.

Adam's eyes burned with unattuned mana, tendrils of wisp-thin power leaking out from his irises, both glowing sky-blue and dawn-bright. He was searching even as they flew, hunting for the rogue Descenders and the Aviary agents they were ferrying. Can Hu was helping as well. It dispatched a few of its drones through the air and took considerably less caution than the rest of the group. The drones were replaceable, and frankly, if they were noticed, they might even lure out some unseen threats.

Right now, though, there was nothing. All quiet before the clash.

Shiv, meanwhile, felt rather relaxed. He didn't know if it was all the fighting that had conditioned him, if he was already used to death, or if it was just how he was. But tension, nervousness—that wasn't so bad for him. Not right now, at least. Instead, he felt a building thrill. He'd never fought a dragon before. However, he did come face-to-face with one, moments before entering Weave: Sir Marikos. The dragon had

obliterated him and a good portion of the landscape with a single Pyromancy spell. It was an awesome display of destruction, and also how Shiv unlocked Diamond Shell and Foreshadowing.

Shiv wondered how well he would fare against that dragon now. *Guess I'll have a better estimate soon.*

"Shadow Cells are reporting no signs," Uva said, releasing her brooch. Shiv held on to her. The speeds they were going were still manageable. But he could go faster now. Her armor could endure it. It was just going to be extremely uncomfortable due to her lacking Physicality.

"Alright. Well, while we're searching, we might as well come up with something of a general plan," Adam said. "I think we want to hit them quick, with—"

"No," Valor cut in. "No disrespect to you, young Hero. But you listen to me this time. This is not training. This is not practice. This is something more. This is too much risk."

Adam wanted to protest, but the Young Lord choked back anything he had to say with a rush of discipline.

Shiv grunted in surprise. "Did you just control yourself? Holy shit, Adam, you're turning into a real boy."

"Oh, shut up," Adam muttered. "Valor, continue. Before I regret being mature."

"I appreciate your sacrifice," Valor said, a faint hint of grandfatherly amusement there. Then it was gone, and the grandfather was replaced by a Legendary assassin. "The first thing you need to know about the Dragon-Knights is that you cannot break their morale. They will not respond to psychological tricks."

"What about Dread Aura?" Shiv asked.

"That..." Valor paused. "Not unless it is at Heroic-Tier."

Shiv grunted. He kind of figured that was the case. "Suppose cowards didn't go into mana storms looking for dragons to kill."

"Indeed," Valor said, "and that is the other thing. They are all skilled warriors, each one capable in both a magical art and a weapon skill. You can expect their Physicality and Toughness to be considerable. But dragons have a great strength and a great weakness. They are mana-hungry."

"What do you mean, mana-hungry?" Adam asked.

The flames in Valor's sockets flickered. "Primal dragons live in mana storms or within gates, feeding off their cores. This is for a simple reason: primal dragons are not capable of generating their own mana. Primal dragons do not have the intellect or nearly the self-control to shape a lore. And so they consume unattuned mana to feed their own attuned existences. Their nature is not fully understood, even by the Descenders. Without enough mana, they will starve. However, things are different when a Dragon-Knight is born. When the Ritual of Dragon Matrimony is completed, one binds their very being with a dragon. Then, a new being emerges. A new being that is capable of generating mana while also remaining extremely mana-absorbent. But this also means that even their normal skills can experience the effects of *mana strain* if they are forced to overuse them, as it becomes their source of unattuned mana."

"So what does this absorption entail? Spells don't work on them?" Adam asked.

"Magic has a diminished effect. It will still hurt them and affect them. But it will not deal nearly as much damage as it does to anyone else. And worse, it will overload all of their skills."

"What do you mean, overload?" Adam said.

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"I mean that if you hit a Master-Tier dragon with any kind of strong-enough spell, they will take fewer injuries, and it will feel like you are fighting a Hero instead of a Master."

"Oh, Broken Moon," Adam groaned. "How did the rest of you poor fools survive these bastards?"

Valor laughed. "All the Faiths have their own means and advantages, and the Descenders are far outnumbered by all the others. There are also Heroes and Legends beyond mere Dragon-Knights. That is the fortune of the other Faiths. This will not be your fortune, however, as you will be facing these dragons with equal or lower numbers, and I cannot support you as a Legendary Pathbearer at the height of their power would."

"Nice," Shiv said.

Both Uva and Adam stared at Shiv.

"What?" Shiv said.

"Your willingness to fight anything is really quite disturbing sometimes, dear brute," Uva mused in his arms.

Shiv shrugged, causing her to bob up and down slightly. "It's a Pathbearer's life for me."

Valor cleared his throat. "Continuing on, the group will be composed of multiple dragon varieties. Not all dragons are the same. They are bound to a certain idea or concept, like a shadow, or flame, or the sky. This sometimes makes their natural magics quite odd—"

"Natural magic?" Adam asked. Shiv was happy that it was the Young Lord doing all the repeating and asking for clarification for once. Read complete version only at [novel\[fire\]](#)

"Yes. I told you before, they cannot generate their own lore, but they are shaped by calamity. And it is best to understand the dragon as something that has hatched from a natural disaster, and they will always be able to call on the power of that disaster."

Adam closed his eyes. "Of course they can. This just gets better and better."

"And we're not done yet," Valor said, his tone severe. "This Lance is most likely also very used to fighting as a team. If we are lucky, they are a mixed group, different turncoats fleeing together by circumstance. A Lance is usually composed of eight to twelve dragon knights, and most often, it is supported by thousands of squires and other personnel."

"Good thing they don't have that," Uva said.

"Yes," Valor said. "One of the few saving graces in this mess: They are running alone. They do have Aviary agents, but they are comparatively far less of a threat."

Uva let out a breath. "By the Composer. Weeks ago, if you told me that, I would have despaired." She paused. "I'm still despairing. But at least I have a Jealousy I can use."

Adam's head snapped to attention. Shiv balled his fists. "What?" Shiv asked. "What's wrong?"

"Dimensionals," Adam said. "Wind dimensionals. They're flying above us, we should—"

A flash of translucent magic erupted out of Uva and shot into the air. For a few moments, whorls of shadowy mana seeped out with her Psychomancy as the silhouette of Jealousy shivered like a halo behind her head. It receded back into her mind a moment later. "They've been dealt with," Uva said. "We keep going."

Adam and Shiv stared. "Well. That's... terrifyingly effective," the Young Lord breathed.

"A Jealousy makes for a good weapon," Uva noted. "Anyway, Great Valor? You were busy demoralizing us."

Valor continued doing just that. "In the more likely scenario, the Lance has likely fought for more years beside each other than you have even known the Young Lord, Shiv, and there will be more of them than us. They will be more experienced than you, and each

of them will likely have more skills than you. And greater skills as well. But they can be bested. They are not invincible, and they make mistakes as well. I have killed many a Dragon-Knight. They die hard, slow deaths, but they die all the same.”

The skull turned its burning glare on Shiv. “And then there is you. You are something we have that they do not. One who dares to die, one that grows strong from dying. But more importantly, we are capable of strategies that the dragons might not be prepared for. Shiv, you will engage them first. No Stealth. Be vulgar. Use your Momentum Core and smash deep into their ranks. Try to get to the Aviary agents. Sell your first life as dearly as possible and draw them to you. Endure. Make it last.”

“Got it,” Shiv said. “See if I can avoid the selling my life part, especially with Can Hu in here with me. If it comes to it, I’ll split off from it beforehand.”

“I will support you,” Can Hu said. “Any and all efforts. Your bone is rated at Master. It will take substantial effort to crack it. Do not worry, Pathbearer. My death will not come so easy.”

“Adam. Once you find the Lance, try to locate the agent or knight who holds my fragment. If I manage to reclaim the fragment, I believe the Quest will conclude—for what else will they use to bribe Compact? The resulting completion should give you all a boost of levels—and that might be all the difference between life and death.”

“And stop the gate from getting more defended,” Shiv said.

“Sister Uva,” Valor said. “You will be most necessary among all. Your Jealousy will let everyone stay connected—so you cannot allow yourself to be pinned or drawn into a melee by the enemy. Strike the vulnerable dragons and break their minds. I expect at least one Psychomancer among them, but not a Heroic one. Use the Greater Demon’s might to your advantage, but use its Stealth as well. Do not linger—and if you find yourself pursued, break contact through whatever means you can.”

“Understood, Legend.”

“There is another thing: Both you and Adam need to remain within a kilometer of Shiv at most.”

“What? That’s practically close range,” Adam said, confused. “Why? This sounds like suicide.”

“No, what will be suicide is if you keep your distance and remain alone. Because the knights will have Diviners with them—at least one. And they will have a Jump Mage as well. Multiple Jump Mages for a Lance, under normal circumstances. They will immediately blink over to where you are. And I would not pit you against a single knight in close combat, let alone two. Three means certain death. Thus, you need Shiv or a Trapdoor Weaveress to respond and stall them while you reposition yourself.”

“Right,” Adam said, letting out a breath. “Let the Omenborn take the hits.”

“That’s the spirit,” Shiv said.

“The Lance will try to set up a defensive posture when attacked. Expect massive, wide-sweeping spells cast by multiple magi in concert—Shiv, interrupt them if you can. Adam, call out what you see. A firestorm can spread beyond control and burn away all cover.”

Valor trailed off at this point and sighed. “I wish I had more time to prepare you. I was content to let you all train, to let you develop tighter bonds first. I thought it would be enough for the gate... but this is more than that. The System is forcing you to grow faster than...” Valor paused. “It did the same thing to me. When I was a boy. One conflict after another, one Quest after another, so much death and struggle. If you survive this, you will be on your path to being truly favored, and you will have to survive the next threat on the horizon. You will start embarking on a path to higher power, power that few Pathbearers will ever see in their life, let alone in weeks or months. But there were those who walked alongside me when I was young. Only one still remains aside from myself. Be ready to die, all of you, and be ready to lose each other, if that is what’s to come.”

“No,” Shiv growled. “I won’t let that happen.”

Valor regarded him and huffed. “Shiv. You will need to learn this lesson at some point. You would have learned it in the teleportation anchor weeks ago, had you not performed that admirable act of sacrifice. You cannot protect everyone, and the System demands strife. With strife comes death. Hold on to these moments and memories. In the end, that might be all you have.”

“And my morale is almost entirely eradicated,” Adam moaned. “*Thank you*, Valor. I will take your tactical advice into consideration and pretend I didn’t hear the rest.”

“So, Adam, what was your cunning plan?” Shiv asked.

“Well, it was mainly about you launching yourself into them with Momentum Core, causing chaos, me firing at them from far away, calling out orders, and then, as we kill all the easy threats, we would have you wreak havoc in the middle of the dragons while the rest of us and the Weaveresses hit them from the outside and trap them in a pincer. I would rely on your cockroach-like nature as we whittle them down.”

“And it would have been a good plan for most enemies,” Valor said. “Alas, the knights are dynamic, and they do not hold and defend. They turn and attack. A final thing to note: They are very hierarchical. *If* you kill the captain of this Lance, and that is a major if, then perhaps their cohesion will collapse. But it will not stop them from being dangerous.”



"I'll see if I can find the captain, then," Adam replied. Just then, his eyes widened. "I see something... I see.... I havethem!"

The Young Lord laughed. His eyes flared once, and Uva fed what Adam was seeing directly into Shiv's mind. For a moment, even while observing the distant horizon through Adam's senses, Shiv didn't know what was happening.

The air was clear, aside from what seemed to be a few glowing spore-like creatures that twirled through the twilight sky, their forms thin but bulbous at the end, twirling feathers pulling them aloft. The ground below was alight with gleaming rivers that mingled among bioluminescent trees. These were unlike the sprawling forest of brambles Shiv and the others were currently passing through, instead appearing like large, dome-shaped flowers that almost seemed to fuse together, their petals mingling together, making them seem like blades of grass flanking the forking streams.

"There," Adam said, focusing intently on a specific spot in the air. Finally, Shiv saw it: a shimmer in the air, nothing more than that, even to Adam's incredible vision. But the shimmer moved, and the surrounding light bent unnaturally around it. It curved like there was something hidden, a bit like a Trapdoor Operative's invisibility cape when it wasn't fully covering them.

"They're cloaked," Shiv said.

"Optical camouflage," Can Hu agreed. "Every proper fighting force uses it. To remain unnoticed is the first and outermost means of self-preservation."

"How far away are they?" Shiv asked, clenching his fist. His gravitic field shivered around him as his battle thrill climbed.

"Approximately 20 kilometers. We should reach them relatively fast and hit them at an angle if we accelerate. I'll find us an interception point. Shiv, start filling your Momentum Core. You're going straight out, like Valor said. Hammer your way into them and make a mess. And drag out your death as best you can."

"Always intend to," Shiv said.

"And... good luck," Adam spat quickly.

Uva said nothing at first, but she sent him a few memories. A feeling of focus and calm. He replied with a memory of his own: strength and fearlessness. More than anything, there was trust there. They had fought, bled, and survived many things together in this short time. And that shaped a bond harder than most could fathom.

"Go," Uva said quietly. "Show them who's the greater monster."

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## 61 (II) Dragons [II]

61 (II)

Dragons (II)

*“Still Water in position.”*

*“Grey Zone in position.”*

*“Liquid Serpent: My crossbows are loaded. Six shots. Six arms. More than enough to kill a Dragon-Knight.”*

*“Liquid, just say you’re in position next time,”* Still Water grumbled.

*“Ah, but where’s the fun in that?”* Liquid replied with a sneering laugh.

*“Shiv here, in position.”* The Deathless stood atop a towering mushroom cap, staring in the direction Adam had indicated. He couldn’t really see the Lance with his own eyes, but with his mind connected to everyone else’s, he could still track the enemy. When Adam gave him the signal, he would find out just how hard a Dragon-Knight really was.

“Do you feel ready, Shiv?” Can Hu asked.

Shiv shrugged. “Sure. I don’t really think about that.”

“You don’t?” The Penitent sounded curious. “What do you think of?”

“Mostly... I don’t know... Cooking?”

“Cooking?” the automaton said, absolutely stunned. “You think of *cooking* before a fight?”

“Yeah, you know, I’m wondering what I can make with dragon flesh. I... You know. For the buffs.”

“I... that is... interesting.”

“Uh, I guess,” Shiv replied. “Listen, Can Hu, I don’t really fixate on the whole dying-danger-what-if-they’re-stronger-than-me crap. I like to think about how fights go

beforehand. I like to prepare for them as best as I can. When the time comes, I just give myself to the violence. I go after the enemy however I can, whenever I can, whatever way I can. And until one of us drops, that's the fight."

"You are very determined. But I feel this method of thinking is somewhat simplistic."

"Probably," Shiv said. "That's why I need to get in more fights, learn more. Probably need more training too, but hey. In the absence of having ample time, this is what we got."

"I have some experience," Can Hu replied. "Dragons—most primal dragons are reluctant predators despite being beasts of massive scale. Mana storms are their main source of food, and so they cling to their territory. As such, the best method against them is to hit them with a tungsten-tipped two-stage mini-nuclear munition launched out from a railcannon by someone with a Master-Tier Gun Proficiency Skill."

"Sounds... impressive," Shiv said. "Not sure what most of that meant, though."

"I will explain to you the full spectrum of old world weapons in time. If we survive."

"Alright," Shiv said. "I think I'm gonna focus on breaking their necks if I can for now."

"That will be difficult. Dragons have rather flexible necks. Their shoulders and chests, however, can suffer joint damage when exposed to sufficient strain."

"Huh. I'll keep that in mind. Anything else?"

"Control their bodies if you can. Their center mass affects their flight."

"See, that's great, Can Hu. I think we're already working well together."

"You may update this assessment once we are engaged in active combat."

A whistling gust of wind rushed over Shiv. The air sang in shrill notes, and below the slightly glowing leaves, the surrounding vegetation waved. Somewhere in the vast darkness, the Shadow Cells were waiting. High above, Uva lingered with the Jealousy fully unleashed, with Adam not too far away. Everything was calm. Just for this moment.

The Abyss felt like a place of perpetual night, but also of a gentle peace at times. It wasn't nearly the pit of nightmares the Republic portrayed it as. Sure, it was dangerous, but Shiv kind of liked looking into the dark. There was a meditative quality to it.

Can Hu hummed a murmur of satisfaction. "This is my favorite time, a final moment of calm before the fight. I wonder if it's the System allowing one to savor a final sip of peace, a final inhale of air."

“Or maybe the first,” Shiv said. “I don’t remember breathing very much before a fight, but I remember every heartbeat, every blow exchanged during.”

“Ah. I should be more like you in that sense. I suffer the past. You enjoy the present.”

“Nah,” Shiv replied. “I prefer you the way you are so far. I need people with perspective. Don’t think the world would survive a bunch of bastards like me just breaking shit.”

“*Shiv*,” Uva said, her voice echoing through the impenetrable darkness above. “*Get ready.*”

The wind suddenly stopped, and with it, the peace perished.

Adam’s call came a second thereafter. “*Shiv! Now! They’re approaching! Discharge now!*”

“A pity,” Can Hu said. “I didn’t quite manage to finish composing a poem. I wanted to make this moment... poignant.”

Shiv laughed as he slammed a fist into himself and drank one final sip of momentum. The world lurched to a near-halt. “You can finish the poem after we get out of this.”

“You are so certain there is an after,” Can Hu replied.

“Yeah, I am, and I’ll show you why I believe that.”

Shiv discharged his Momentum Core.

The top of the mushroom cap ceased to be. A pocket of destruction opened up within the fungal forest, and Shiv accelerated himself further using his gravitic field. The sound barrier shattered against him.

He felt Can Hu shuddering, but the automaton reassured him mid-flight: “No damage, just adjusting to the pressures.” And to his surprise, Can Hu laughed. “Flying again. Flying fast... I am... I am a chassis once more. Thank you...”

Shiv cut across the sky, moving faster than he ever had before, and faster still as he pulled ever harder on his gravitic field. Gravitic Wrestler was a wonderful skill when paired with Momentum Core. It was—

A shape tore out from an empty patch of space. The mirage hiding the rogue Lance vanished as *twelve* dragons of the same humanoid stature as Sir Marikos exploded into action. The first among them shot towards Shiv. It wasn’t nearly as big as the Jealousy—perhaps thirty to forty meters tall—but it was still a massive being next to an ordinary human.

It also closed on him faster than he closed on it.

Shiv's eyes widened in surprise.

The dragon had higher Reflexes—not substantially higher, but higher nonetheless. He could see the weaponry it bore: a massive polehammer coated with a raging whirlwind. The dragon itself had long-flowing wind chimes connected to its pale-white armor, and its scales were the color of a stormy sky.

*“Engaging,”* Shiv declared.

“Intercepting!” the dragon bellowed at the same time.

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Then, they collided, and a cataclysm followed.

The dragon brought down its hammer. The force of a descending hurricane crashed against Shiv, only for him to catch it with his Gravitic Wrestler and wrench it aside. It took considerable effort, but he managed to divert the dragon's blow. And just then, with that act alone, another one of his skills went into Adept-Tier.

### **Skill Evolution: Parry (Initiate) > Frictionless Vector (Adept)**

#### **Frictionless Vector > 51**

Suddenly, Shiv felt the dragon's blow jerk violently off course—as if the world lost all friction. The dragon twisted off to the side, but rather than being pulled along by the violent tug of its hammer, it released the weapon and spun in the air, lashing out with a bladed tail almost the length of its entire body to strike at Shiv. He caught the tail too—only for him to be impacted by a colossal blast of magical force from behind before he could do anything.

Shiv was knocked back momentarily before he drained momentum from the hit and stabilized himself with his gravitic field. He struck the spell with his Magebreaker, and a flash of brilliant multicolored mana broke.

A few hundred meters away, the other dragons were impacted by spells and attacks from all sides, drowning them in a maelstrom of chaos. But before they were swallowed, Shiv saw the dragon that had hit him with the spell—saw their radiant spear and how the knight held up a finger and summoned a protective dome around the rest of the Lance in the last moment.

“Dynamancer,” Can Hu said. It then revealed another benefit he possessed that most Master-Tier armors didn't. Can Hu highlighted the new enemy and designated them, marking them based on their presumed role in the Lance.

Then, a flash of lightning called Shiv back to the blue-scaled dragon. It soared through the air, its wings like massive slabs of sapphire shrouded by raging wind. It summoned its hammer back to its hand with a crash of lightning and swung fast—almost faster than Shiv could react.

He barely managed to stop the hammer this time; the blow shook him, making him groan as his Gravitic Wrestler strained under the dragon's might. His Adamantine Adaption triggered, and his bones withstood the impact without fracturing, albeit barely. The dragon groaned as it strained itself too, surprised that it was struggling against a foe so small.

"Master-Tier!" the dragon yelled. "Master-Tier! Ambush! Clear the zone!"

But though it resembled a monster with its draconic features, it was a knight. And knights fought with skill—and *allies*.

Instead of wrestling with Shiv, the dragon dismissed its hammer into a blast of lightning that blinded Shiv.

And that stopped him from seeing the other dragon, which scored a deep cut through his left rib. He barely stopped himself from being driven into the ground far below from the force of the strike with his gravitic field, but a stroke of pain tore through him as a blade so thin and fine it seemed to disappear at an angle slipped through his bone armor and bounced off his actual rib. Shiv roared in rage and pain as he clawed out blind—but caught nothing.

"Armor breached!" Can Hu yelled.

Shiv didn't see who or what hit him. All he knew was that something slashed fast and strong enough to split adamantine. Valor wasn't lying. These foes were of a different caliber altogether. And Shiv loved it.

"Come on," Shiv said, slamming his hands together. His gravitic field magnified the force of his blow, and the shockwave made the hammer-wielding storm dragon flinch. Before the dragon could recover, Shiv launched himself into its chest and dented the large beast's brigandine with a sky-shaking knee.

As they grappled against each other, the dragon struggled, and to Shiv's delight, he discovered his adversary's Physicality to be lacking. Shiv recalled Can Hu's advice and took control of the dragon's body. It pushed against him, but he drove a blow into its neck and twisted it off balance as it choked. Then, Shiv secured a lock around the dragon's left shoulder. He twisted the joint. A pop sounded. The dragon cried out, but it managed to stop him from breaking the limb entirely.

It wasn't *that* much weaker than him.

Just then, an arrow zipped by Shiv and hit something behind him. He heard a loud crash as a massive blade skidded off the projectile and barely missed his head. *Adam*, Shiv realized.

*“Shiv! Momentum Core! Get into the Lance! Never mind that one! Uva will get him!”* The Young Lord’s mind was *stressed*. He was firing as much as he could, but—Shiv caught a glance of the battlefield from Adam’s perspective, and he saw the full scope of the situation. The dragons were launching their own spells and skills back, and with every attack, entire kilometers of space vanished within tides of ruinous mana.

*“Right! Got it!”*

Shiv then *pulled* the dragon’s limb instead. He couldn’t break its limb in time, but he could *dislocate* it. A crack sounded through the air and the dragon howled in pain. Shiv slammed the hardest left hook he could muster across the dragon’s head and drank the momentum. His core filled. He prepared to—

“Incoming!” Can Hu warned.

Shiv reacted on instinct. He parried with his gravitic field, and his Momentum Core kept him ahead—only barely. A lightning-infused arrow slid off from his hand and tore a massive gouge through the rivers and plants behind him. It kept going for a few hundred meters, and by the end, more than a few trees were ablaze.

**Momentum Core > 80**

**Frictionless Vector > 52**

More attacks came. They crashed into Shiv, but he ignored them—choosing to slam his fists together. His core built. Time slowed. Shiv discharged into the hellstorm of suppressive spells keeping the dragons in place. His Biomancy reached out and crashed against three different bodies. He could feel them—their magical defenses weren’t as strong as the Jealousy, but there was a Biomancer with them. But where were the Aviary agents? And why were there only three—

A sudden pulse of pressure washed over Shiv from the right. Teleportation. He tried to turn—but he got hit by something faster than even he could perceive.

For the first time in his life, Shiv experienced what it was like to be on the receiving end of someone else’s Momentum Core—while he was mid-discharge, no less.

To call the hit *hard* didn’t do it justice. He felt one of his lungs pop and all of his ribs shatter. He tried holding himself in place with his gravitic field, but he wasn’t strong enough to stop himself. Not immediately. He crashed down through the earth, cleaving the land in twain, blasting through rivers and smashing through trees. He kept going,

twisting and turning, over and over—the world spinning around him—until finally he found his bearings and forced himself to stop with a final burst of his gravity field.

As he finally came to a stop, Shiv tried to rise, only to rip his outer helmet off as he threw up a small ocean of blood. The world spun. The idea of collapsing onto the nice, soft mud and just lying there for a while seemed great. But he could hear Can Hu calling for him. He could hear Uva and Adam screaming across the link.

*“DECOY! DECOY!”* Adam was howling—flying fast as he was being pursued. *“THE OPTICAL ILLUSION WAS A DECOY! THEY’RE ON ME! THEY’RE ON ME! I SEE—Aviary! I have eyes on them! Everyone—on me! On me! They—”* Adam’s thoughts cut off as an incredible spike of pain rushed through Uva’s psionic link, and then the Young Lord was screaming.

*“Adam! Hold on!”* Uva cried. Shiv could feel her shaping a spell. The shadowy sky above him shifted and danced as columns of fire came crashing down all across the wilderness. Then, the Trapdoor Operatives started crying out as well, declaring casualties and positions compromised.

Valor was there too. He was fighting. But the details were coming too fast... *“Steel yourselves! Hold together! Do not break!”*

There was so much detail coming from everywhere, but Shiv couldn’t focus. He realized why a second later. *Concussion*. Then, as he looked down, Shiv blinked in surprise. There was another wound he hadn’t noticed: his intestines were hanging out, and most of his chest was in ruins.

“Good hit,” he chuckled deliriously.

And he fed his Woundeater. A rush of crimson mana swept through his wounds, and a second later, Shiv rose to the clear sound of discord and most of his allies crying out for support.

“Shiv?” Can Hu asked. “Are you alright?”

“I will be once I break the felling bastard that just punted me. Where—” He turned and gawked at the massive trail of devastation he left. *“Holy shit.”* It was like a giant had dragged a plow across the world for kilometers, utterly ruining the land and leaving the ground fractured deep.

Can Hu gave him hard numbers to go with the visuals. “We were launched four kilometers away from where we began. Four kilometers in 33.25 seconds.”

“Damn,” Shiv grunted.

**Adamantine Adaption > 108**



## Gravitic Wrestler > 110

He pulled one of his old bodies out from his cloak and transferred his wounds, but just as he prepared to leave, a spatial bubble expanded before him, and a new dragon emerged.

This one's body shimmered like brilliant silver, and a rush of frost began to mist the very air. The Dragon-Knights also wore little more than a tight-fitting leather vest. And to Shiv's surprise, the knight didn't charge. It glided over the ground with the grace of a dancer as it flared its four frozen wings.

It was small for a dragon, maybe ten meters at full height. But it still towered over Shiv substantially. The weapon it bore didn't fit its towering form. It held a gleaming kukri knife, its hue the color of broken moonlight. The dragon angled its long, serpentine neck as it regarded him, its eyes the glow of snow beneath sunlight. "Hm. Still alive. Adamantine Adaption. Very rare skill for a human. Woundeater—vampire skill... Strange. Very unique build. Grappler too."

Shiv spat the last bit of blood from his mouth and snapped his helmet back on. "Yeah. And you're the one that hit me just now?"

"Yes," the dragon said. "You have Momentum Core too. Not your highest-leveled skill. It is mine, though." Her voice was quick and thin, like the hissing sound of a blade through air. "I am Sir Tarlow," she said. "My strongest skill is Momentum Core. I am a Master. And you are a unique adversary." She took on a fighting stance then, extending her blade high while bringing an open claw low. Behind, her wings spewed cold like none Shiv had ever felt before. "It will be an honor to claim your life in proper battle."

Shiv sneered at her through bloodied teeth. "Yeah. Let's see you start trying. And make it quick. I got a friend I need to save."

She hummed. "Good. This will be memorable." Read full story at [Nov3IFire.net](http://Nov3IFire.net)

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## 62 (I) Dragons [III]

*You know, there's a special kind of misery that every Master-Tier Pathbearer experiences. It's the kind of misery that comes when you live long enough and survive enough fights, because by the end, the System is going to put you against someone like you. Worse; eventually, it's going to find someone who has your number.*

*It was on the border of Lone Star that I found mine. Orcs... Don't let anyone tell you that they're stupid creatures. They make use of mercenaries as well, and just about anyone will work with them. They can be expected to keep their word sometimes, even. Especially if you're strong enough. Especially if you will offer them a good fight in the future. Orcs got a strange sense of rationality to them.*

*One such person is an elf by the name of Earth Moves. Real stupid name, maybe, but every Gate Raider knows who that one is. He started building fortresses for these orcs, and I was on the other side, trying to smash through so the boys and girls of Lone Star could finish the job with their artillery. Except, it wasn't that easy of a job for me. Because Earth Moves was a good godsdamn Geomancer. And more than being a felling good Geomancer, he was also a Master Dynamancer—which meant he could manipulate all the major forces that hold existence together as well.*

*With all that power, he built a massive city-sized, mobile, self-mending fortress. Everything I broke, he reassembled. And his protections were more than just metal or stone or something solid. It was the air. He created a magnetic hurricane, and started flinging out steel shards at people using the thunderstorm he called in.*

*I tried pushing in five times. He beat me like I was his unwanted stepchild every time—even with support. And did I fold over and give up just because someone was better than me at being a Pathbearer?*

*No. I called my wife and all the other Masters I knew to help me. Another thing about Earth Moves—he's good, but also a colossal asshole. He's on his own. You don't do well on your own.*

*There's another lesson that most Master Tiers get to learn at some point. It is another ugly lesson. You're going to run into someone better than you, but there are plenty of people better than me laying dead in the mud. I'm still here because I dealt with the problem, and I was never truly alone.*

*Through a diversion and a storm of our own, we grounded him, and I built an even larger fort around his and pinned Earth Moves and the orcs in place. He might be better at making fortresses, but when it came to just smashing against each other with raw expendable material, I had the advantage, and without the bastard being able to fly, we had time.*

*What followed next, though, that's another story. I'll tell you all about the miseries of sieges and close quarters combat some other day.*

*-Memoirs of a Master-Tier War Mage*

62 (I)

Dragons [III]

The kukri-wielding dragon's blade glinted in the dark like a crescent star.

Shiv, comparatively, clenched his fists and took on a fighting stance of his own. He reached into his cloak and gathered a few bone drills with his Biomancy.

*Time to test how fast this bastard is*, Shiv thought. The dragon made a gesture with her off-hand, just a slight curl of a finger, teasing him, telling him to come forth—and he did. Just not the way she expected.

He launched a bone drill. It tore through the air—and hit nothing. The dragon *dodged forward* into the drill and vanished from the world. A second later, she rematerialized a few meters away, her immense presence chilling his skin.

*Master-Tier Dodge*, Shiv realized. He launched himself off the ground, just in time for the dragon to leave a deep gouge where he had been. All he caught was the afterimage of the kukri, the cut turning into a beam of light that sliced through the ground for hundreds of meters when it missed him.

Shiv fired two more drills and charged the dragon. She dodged *through* him. She materialized behind him, and she taunted him—tapping the flat of her blade against his back before he could turn and blurring away when another drill came for her. For a brief moment, he felt the heat of her blade but also the state of her Magical Resistance. She wasn't nearly as durable as the Jealousy. But he still had to hit her.

And that wasn't going to be easy.

"She moves like she is weightless," Can Hu said. "She is testing us, learning our ways. Don't strike blindly. Drag her in close; trade a blow if you have to. I will see if I can distract her with a drone."

Just then, a solid tsunami of electrified metal twisted into the sky in the distance, arcing like massive fingers that upended a large section of the wilderness. Enormous chunks of land rose up behind the kukri-wielding dragon, and she shifted her stance.

While she held Shiv here, her fellow traitor knights were fighting the Shadow Cells and Shiv's team. He needed to finish this fight. Fast.

Her knife twisted. A huge flame column rose in the corner of Shiv's vision. The damned dragon then angled her blade, trying to reflect the light into his eyes. Shiv dashed left and circled her. She gave a scoffing laugh as she lowered the blade again, feinting.

He didn't react. Lesser vampires were feinting bastards too—he could tell when someone wasn't going to commit to the strike. There was something about the momentum being restrained.

"Ah, good instinct," the dragon breathed.

He launched three more bone drills—the first to provoke, the second two wild guesses at where she was going to emerge after the dodge. The first shot hit nothing, the second she caught, and the third she deflected with her blade. She slashed with her blade, and a beam of searing light splashed against Shiv. He parried that with a push of his Magebreaker. The gauntlet rang. Then the dragon was on him in a sudden blast of speed.

Her blade came fast, glinting as she struck in an unpredictable pattern. Shiv was used to being the slower party, the weaker party, the inferior fighter. He learned to keep himself alive through preparation and aggression. The dragon was on another level entirely. She scored three light cuts along his helmet and dodged into a reverse-grip stab that smashed into his back. Shiv grunted but shrugged the hits off by twisting himself around them with his gravity field. But then she tapped the blade and vanished in a flash of golden mana. Suddenly, Shiv felt her drive the same reverse-grip stab into his back, nicking his armor and launching him off balance. He turned just as she channeled another beam of light, the intense heat washing over him—blinding him.

“Incoming tail!” Can Hu shouted. “From below!”

That was the only reason Shiv wasn’t struck dead-on. He caught the limb—and felt frost rush up his arms. His Adamantine Adaption struggled to adapt to two conditions at once, and the knife’s searing beam cleaved deeper. Shiv shoved her tail aside, but then she teleported—and speared her blade into his chest. Again, Can Hu warned Shiv, and he caught the blade with his hands, trying to twist it away from her.

Only for her to vanish into splashes of golden fractals and repeat the same reserve-grip strike into his back—spiking him to the dirt as he snarled in frustration and confusion.

“Chronomancy,” Can Hu said. “She has inflicted a fixed point in time on us. I will watch your back.”

Shiv righted himself with his field. Then, the dragon began her dance. Her blade flowed perfectly, without losing momentum. Slashes and stabs kept coming from every angle, and she was never still, growing faster with each second. Every impact shattered the earth and turned the soil into mush. Just then, Can Hu’s drones sailed across the sky and fired a series of missiles. The Dragon-Knight slashed both the missiles and drones apart with a flashing beam from her blade and vanished into gold again.

Can Hu warned Shiv of her next strike. He reached to catch the dragon—but she dodged through him first. Rather than using her knife, she latched her tail around his leg and discharged her Momentum Core. The world lurched around Shiv. He cursed and tried to hold himself steady. It was hopeless. She drove him into the ground. It was like being dragged by an avalanche moving at the speed of lightning. He tore another chasm through the world. Shiv’s absurd Toughness and Adamantine Adaption kept him from taking severe damage, but the chaos made him unable to get his bearings. He

crashed against the earth three more times, and he only managed to tear chunks out of the ground with his gravitic field.

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And just as she started to slow, she triggered her Chronomancy again and drove her dagger into Shiv's back with the partial power of a Momentum Core behind it.

Shiv felt her pierce through the outer layer of his armor before he adapted. He shrugged her aside with his gravity field and tore his own throat open. A wyrm sailed out from his hand thereafter, and it struck her wrist.

For the first time, he heard her grunt in surprise as a blast of crimson mana consumed them both.

She teleported again—materializing three hundred meters away, just beyond the reach of his Biomancy.

Shiv sneered. His armor was nicked and battered. But it was still holding. He pulled replacement bits of bone and molded it over the damage, sealing the small rents that her blade and blows left.

"Not much finesse for someone so small," the dragon hummed. "Like I'm fighting a brute nested in the body of an insect."

"Enough of this shit," Shiv growled. He slammed his fists together, every blow building up his own Momentum Core. She might be faster, but he could still make this hard for her—make her be on the receiving end of a discharge for once.

But just then, he caught sight of a most spectacular scene—a literal storm of arrows descending from the sky. So many that they were practically raindrops. A flash of fire illuminated the darkness above, and it revealed a strange battle between two dragons and a small army. A small army of Adam's copies. The Young Lord was using Harkness's rapier. The clones blinked and vanished only as long as it took to fire a single shot. Whatever wounds they took, Adam would take as well, but this was perfect for stalling the dragons.

*"Everyone brace!" Adam cried, his mind drowning in stress. "Mind mana arrows! Focus on their minds! It stuns them! They only have one Psychom—ah!" Shiv felt a brutal blow strike Adam, but his Legendary armor kept him alive. "One! One! Psychomancer! I don't know where the fragment is yet! Shiv! Assistance! I need bloody backup!"*

"Your friend?" the kukri-wielding dragon said. Her stance was unbroken, her wings twitched behind her, and the ground turned to solid slabs of ice beneath her feet. "Would you like to go save him?"

Shiv replied by launching a salvo of bone drills at her. She casually parried most of them without ever taking her eyes off him. Her lower claw tapped the blade again.

“There!” Can Hu snarled. “The tell. She is going to strike your back again—expect the dodge.”

“Yeah.”

True to Can Hu’s predictions, the dragon vanished into gold and dodged through Shiv. Then, both the dragon and Shiv surprised each other. Instead of trying to grab or attack the dragon directly, he flung a massive net of skin decoys over her eyes, fastening a blindfold of adamantine-hard skin to steal her sight. And she *teleported*. A spatial bubble collapsed around them as they were squeezed across a vast distance of space.

Pressed together in that confined space, the tides of battle turned for the first time. Shiv ruptured all his organs and ground his bones to dust to fuel a new Woundeater. He crashed against the blinded dragon before she could respond. Two blasts washed over her, one physical, the other magical. She cried out and dodged, but there was no place for her to rematerialize. The pressure flung her back, and Shiv seized her right arm before hammering his gravitic field upward at her elbow.

The arm clicked. *Partial tendon tear*, Shiv instinctively knew. But the dragon had Master-Tier Toughness as well, and she unleashed a blast of frost out from her wings. Shiv felt a heavy coldness cling to him, but it was nothing before his Gravitic Wrestler. He shattered the ice block—only for her to dissolve into gold and drive her blade down against his back again.

Rage exploded through Shiv. He poured it into his Momentum Core through his Feat and caught the dragon’s arm before she could continue. “Stop!” He slammed his head into her chest, and she grunted. “Doing!” His Momentum Core was just about to fill. “That!” He discharged, squeezing her back in a tight lock just as he crashed into her. Two of her ribs dislocated. The dragon choked—but then she vanished into gold and stabbed him in the back again, knocking him off balance.

“Godsdammit!” Shiv snarled. He hated this dragon. He hated that knife. He wanted to *have* that knife. Shiv was going to take that knife from this dragon's felling corpse.

The teleportation bubble burst. He crashed hard into the ground and tried to grind himself to a halt with his gravity field. She crashed behind him with a loud gasp. As Shiv finally came to a halt, he turned to find the dragon gulping down a massive potion before tossing it aside. He sighed. “Great. Perfect. Of course she has a dragon-sized regeneration potion.”

They were in another section of the Umbral Wilderness now. Not far away, a dense thicket of colossal brambles was burning. Around half a dozen Weaveresses lay dead around an unmoving Dragon-Knight, its body pincushioned by hundreds of crossbow



bolts. Overhead, arrows continued to rain down as blasts of Psychomancy were followed by psionic wails. Shiv could hear the Jealousy and Uva hissing out in pain as a dragon drove a lance into her, breaking her spell and letting the dragon Psychomancer recover.

Magical arrows rained down from the sky, bombarding the land. Whatever semblance of order or a plan had existed at the start of this battle was dead. The dragons fought in groups of three, teleporting through the air and launching counter-charges against any and all attackers. Their defense was mobile, dynamic. Their flight patterns also intersected each other constantly, and that was only the core group.

There were also *assholes* like the kukri dragon, who seemed like some kind of independent warrior—or someone that constantly assisted all the other dragons whenever they needed it. This content belongs to

Valor had understated these bastards. Shiv and the others were absolutely not ready for this fight. But this was not a reasonable world. Didn't matter. Shiv would be a perfectly unreasonable man in return. And he was going to beat the damned bastards anyway.

Shiv's enemy shook out her wounded arm and popped her ribs back into place. Then, she resumed her stance, and her kukri shone brighter than ever. She left his skin decoys for now. A mark on the side of her head seemed to indicate that she was unable to remove them easily and ended up cutting herself.

"Clever choice," she breathed, tapping the knife to her face. "But how's the body? Saw some interesting Biomancy earlier. Are you healed?"

Shiv snorted. "Yeah, don't flatter yourself. That was nothing. You should have seen me when I fought a Jealousy."

"And you should have seen me when I killed my dragon and took its body," she sneered. "But are you the opposite? Are you a monster wearing a guise? Raw technique. Animalistic. Instinctual. Primal. Like a dragon pretending to be a man."

"Nah," Shiv said, looking up at the sky. "It's just how a chef fights."

The dragon paused. "A chef—"

She vanished into gold.

"Behind," Can Hu declared.

But Shiv was tired of this shit. He launched another spread of skin decoys and wrapped it around her blade. The dragon cried out in surprise as Shiv attached the end of his skin decoys to a full set of adamantine armor and staked it deep underground using his



gravitic field and Biomancy. She lurched as her blade hand was pulled into the soil—and Shiv clapped the sides of her head, like 811 did to him days before.

She snarled—and Shiv launched every skin decoy he had left down her throat and expanded them to *spread out*. The dragon choked. Shiv tried to grab her, but she teleported away.

### **Striking Proficiency > 31**

### **Frictionless Vector > 53**

He grunted and blasted into the air. “Can Hu, keep an eye open for her. I’m going for Adam and Uva.”

“Affirmative,” Can Hu said.

As Shiv approached the aerial battleground, he began to slam his fists together, charging up his Momentum Core. At the same time, he listened to the psionic chatter streaming through Uva’s mind.

*“Grey Zone here! We’ve taken too many casualties. We need to pull out! We’re combat-ineffective!”*

*“Liquid Serpent. I have traded an arm to kill a dragon. I think that means I can kill at least seven more...”*

*“Still Water. Target got pulled out by a Jump Mage. They’re back in the air. They’re all converging on the Jealousy. Sister Uva—you got more inbound!”*

Shiv snarled. He needed to get Adam out of the mess first. Then Uva. “*Shiv here! I’m on approach! Adam! Hold on!*”

*“I’ve been bloody holding on for the past—”* Adam’s thoughts broke off as the sky fractured with lightning. A dragon rose above all others, holding a crackling lance aloft. From the lance extended tendrils of magical lightning that spread across the battlefield, striking every dragon, every weapon, even Shiv. He felt a force pull at him, and Shiv cried out as he struggled to resist the pull. It was like he was prying himself out from the hand of a giant, but with an incredible effort, Shiv broke free.

### **Gravitic Wrestler > 111**

The same could not be said for each of Adam’s clones. Shiv watched in horror as every single clone was torn to the sky, drawn to the lance like it was a singularity before they vanished. But Adam’s real body remained.

“Magnetism!” Can Hu declared. “And the Dynamancer’s spell is not done. Shiv. Discharge your core now.”

Shiv slammed a final blow against himself and did just that. But he could already hear Adam screaming—not psionically, but *literally*, even from so far away. An echo of the Young Lord’s pain spilled across the telepathic link, and rage *exploded* inside Shiv. He offered all of it to his Momentum Core.

“LET GO OF MY ASSHOLE!” Shiv roared.

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## 62 (II) Dragons [III]

62 (II)

Dragons [III]

A tide of force rippled from his body as he accelerated faster than ever before. Six other Dragons-Knights were in the area. Only two managed a response to Shiv. The first was a rival Biomancer bearing a great shield. Shiv felt them shape a spell—only to be swatted from the air as a badly wounded Jealousy carrying a group of Weaveresses on its head exploded out from the darkness, smashing into a squad of dragons and swatting them from the sky. The other was the hammer-wielding wind dragon that had first intercepted Shiv.

It rushed him with a roar and brought its hammer down. This time, however, Shiv was *pissed*. He accelerated himself with Gravitic Wrestler, compounded the effect with his Biomancy, then poured all his anger into the former through Master of Rage. He struck the hammer with an explosive uppercut, ignoring how the impact fractured one of his collarbones and his shoulder. The dragon’s eyes widened as Shiv’s armored fist made contact with the weapon—and caused it to *shatter* with a cataclysmic detonation of mana. Lightning lashed at Shiv. Can Hu cried out—but ordered Shiv to keep going. And he did.

So fast, the lance-bearing Dragon-Knight didn’t see him coming.

### Momentum Core > 82

Shiv met the dragon Dynamancer with his elbow, and its emerald armor cracked and shattered. It was like a falling boulder impacting a plate. The knight went tumbling head

over tail, blood spraying from its mouth as it lost hold of its lance. All the rage drained out of Shiv right after, but then he saw Adam—*felt* Adam's condition with his Biomancy field, and cold terror rushed through him.

Every wound sustained by a clone would be inflicted on the original Adam, and the lightning had seared all of them at once before he'd had the chance to dismiss them. The man inside the armor was more like a smoking lump of flesh. Most of his organs were—his skin and bones were—his heart wasn't beating.

"No," Shiv growled. He launched himself toward Adam—a warning from Can Hu let him twist out of the way just in time for a javelin made from pure force to only cut Shiv's left leg to the bone instead of putting a hole through his torso. The Deathless didn't even notice the pain. He activated his Song of the Vigilant and barely dove under the next javelin before it could skewer him.

More spells and skills crashed against him. A massive arrow impacted his side and sent him twisting through the air, away from Adam.

*"Support!"* Shiv cried. *"I need support! Adam's hurt! I need—"*

*"Shiv! Psychomancy wave incoming! Get your Magebreaker ready!"* At Uva's cry, a mind spell flashed in the distance, and Shiv saw the Jealousy's body outlined in mystical light. Two dragons had their blades locked inside the Greater Demon. Shiv had no idea how Uva was sustaining her mind-binding spell with the Jealousy—how she could focus with so much mental noise, not to mention the attacks of the enemy Psychomancer. Maybe the Jealousy's power helped, but he remembered her facing Harkness, and knew this was all her.

She would drop dead before she ever let her spell break.

A rippling tide of Psychomancy exploded across the sky. The dragons attacking her clutched their heads and shrieked. A protective barrier was unleashed by another dragon—its scales glittering like shards of purest white. A pocket of safety expanded to shield the dragon Psychomancer and three other knights, but everyone else was caught in the psionic tide. The entire battlefield went silent for a moment, and Shiv took the opportunity to clear the last bit of distance between himself and Adam, immediately channeling a wyrm into the Young Lord. "You're not dead! You don't get to die, you shit! Come on!" Shiv cried. He couldn't allow this—he wouldn't accept this. Adam wasn't going to die. He fed his new rage into his Woundeater Skill, and the crimson mana radiating from the Young Lord's insides swelled. "Come on! You don't get to die on me, you piece of—"

The Woundeater *feasted*. It rushed through Adam's fried insides, consuming his melted skin and still-burning muscles. The Young Lord inhaled violently, and Shiv felt relief break inside him, just as they crashed on the ground.

“Behind! Intercepting!” Can Hu declared. Two drones crashed into the eyes of a dragon that was trying to chase them, and it tumbled with a roar of outrage before crashing hard against the ground. Shiv launched a dozen drills at the dragon before it could recover. They bounced off the beast’s armor but pierced through its scales. It cried out and teleported, causing the final three drills to miss.

They were momentarily safe. Shiv held Adam up. The adrenaline dump nearly made the Deathless want to drop dead. Shiv looked at Adam as he extracted his Woundeater, its body radiant with countless crystallized wounds. The Young Lord was hyperventilating, his eyes were wide with terror, and Shiv could feel that his courage was cracked.

For a few seconds, Adam had been as close to death as one could be.

“I—you...” Adam tried to swallow and coughed. His rapier was nowhere to be seen, but Tran’s stellarite sword was still in his hand.

“It’s okay,” Shiv kept him on his feet as he looked about. Overhead, Uva let out a cry of effort as a dense mass of shadows spread around the Jealousy. She was breaking away from the enemies—and in the corner of his vision, he saw another Dragon-Knight tumbling down from the sky. Blood sprayed from its open throat, and there was a Weaveress riding it all the way down. “I got you. You’re okay. You’re alive. You’re alive. Holy shit....”

“I was felling dead,” Adam choked. He gripped Shiv’s shoulder tightly. “I thought—”

“I know, I should have come—”

Adam clung to him, and this close, Shiv could feel the raw *fear* still coursing through Adam.

“Come on, Young Lord. You’re alright. I won’t let them kill you. I won’t.” Shiv winced as Adam shook. The Deathless applied his paltry Psychomancy and poured calmness into Adam’s mind. As much as he could. It worked to some level. Adam’s breath slowed, and he looked at Shiv. His face was still pale—but that was better than burned.

“Let—let go of my *asshole*?” Adam asked.

“What?” Shiv said.

“I heard you say that—w-when I was being... Do you have any idea how ridiculous that sounds?” Adam wheezed. He was still shaking. He started laughing, and it bordered on manic.

“Yeah, you must’ve misheard,” Shiv replied. He looked up at the sky as a flash of fire painted the forms of descending dragons. He counted two squads. Six. Too many for him. Definitely too many up close for Adam. They needed to move.

"I did not mishear," Adam said. "You... Think about what you're saying next time."

"Mock me later, we got enemies incoming." He was about to call out to Uva, but the Jealousy burst into existence above them. For a moment, Shiv expected that she was going to pick them up, but the Greater Demon crashed against the ground instead. Shiv's insides plunged once more. A Psychomancy spell broke inside the Jealousy's head as Uva was launched out from its field.

Shiv blasted across the ground and caught her in his arms. Her armor looked intact, but she was spasming violently. He snarled and pulled off her helmet as he cast another wyrm into her. It consumed the vessels ruptured inside her brain, as she stopped shaking immediately. Her sharp features were coated by streaks of blood leaking from her eyes, and she groaned as she clutched her head.

"It's okay," Shiv said. "I have you. You're—"

A massive shape slammed down atop the Jealousy, making the now mind-dead Greater Demon bounce slightly. It was the Dynamancer from before. The dragon wasn't holding its lance anymore. Instead, it pulled a long pike out from the Jealousy's body. A pike that vibrated in the same way Shiv's gauntlet did.

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"Shit," Shiv muttered.

There was always a consequence when a spell broke, and a bastard dragon driving an inertium pike into the Jealousy was probably more than enough to kill whatever Psychomancy was binding Uva to its mind.

The Dynamancer's armor was still broken, but the dragon itself was healed. The blood it had coughed still painted the front of its armor, but it glared down at him with the vitality of a warrior prepared to finish a downed foe.

"W-what..." Uva shot up, but Shiv held her close. "What—the Jealousy, I—" And then eight more dragons landed around them, including the kukri asshole, who teleported behind them.

Shiv helped Uva to her feet, and Adam staggered close behind him.

"Well," the Young Lord breathed. "Valor did say the tainted bastards would be good."

"They're alright," Shiv grunted.

"We have very different metrics for 'alright,'" Adam grumbled.

“Three,” the dragon Dynamancer said. Its voice was the sound of a collapsing mountain. “Killed three of my brothers and sisters. Three. Why? Who are you?”

Shiv felt the dragon Biomancer slam its power against his, and he grunted with discomfort. They were stronger. Not significantly, but the difference was there. “Can Hu,” Shiv said. “Got any ideas?”

The automaton crackled slightly as it responded. “A few. Most of them relate to finishing a poem before we are killed. One has me driving the final few drones into our midst and triggering their smoke bomb function and hoping we survive the chaos.”

“Sounds nice,” Shiv said. “Let’s go with the second one first.”

“Valor is also attempting something,” Can Hu said. It projected an image in the corner of Shiv’s vision, and he saw the skull hovering over a dead dragon with a few Weaveresses, casting some kind of complex Necromancy spell. Shiv cast those memories to his companions. *“We’re not beat yet.”*

*“Right,”* Adam said, his near-death still burdening his mind. *“Not beaten until we... we are truly dead.”*

One of the Dragon-Knights moved, but the Dynamancer held up a hand.

*“That’s the commander,”* Uva said. She began shaping a Psychomancy spell, pushing through a flood of agony to complete it. *“I can re-bind myself to the Jealousy. I just need a moment. An opening.”*

*“The dragon commander has an Inertium pike,”* Shiv replied. *“It’s how your spell got broken. But that also means he doesn’t have Magical Resistance. Adam? Any cunning plans?”*

*“I’m... I’m thinking...”* the Young Lord swallowed. *“I fear I dropped the rapier somewhere behind. I still have the new saber you gave me, though. That’s bound.”*

“Good,” Shiv said. *“Try to find the rapier—”*

*“I found the fragment!”* Adam declared. Shiv awkwardly sifted through the Young Lord’s senses to avoid burdening Uva. He saw what Adam was looking at—and found himself stunned. *“And... There are our Aviary agents. In the flesh. The very dead flesh.”*

Around the hip of a colossal, axe-wielding dragon swayed a string of unmoving bodies. Their faces were masked by representations of ravens, crows, and other birds. At the center of the dead agents was a limb shaped from black crystal, with mithril enamel lining its length and the dim, corrosive glow of Necromancy leaking from its palm.

*“Seems like the dragons are twice the traitors,”* Shiv thought with a chuckle.

*“Saves us from bloody fighting the agents too,” Adam sighed. “But that... is a big damned dragon. It’s practically the size of the Jealousy.”*

*“Bit smaller. I look forward to bullying it.”*

Adam scoffed weakly. He paused as he took in the other dragons. All of them bore skill and spell to bear, and the Young Lord grimaced. *“Shiv.”*

*“Yeah?”*

*“Thanks for not letting me die and... not being like the people who birthed you. I am... glad you are the way you are. I wish I was better than who I was. I wish I was stronger than my bitterness and hate—”*

*“Adam. Shut up. We’re not doing this shit now. You wanna have this emotional shit? Fine. We do it after we kill these dragons. Over food. If you die, you can’t eat.”*

The Young Lord stared at him and nodded. *“Well. I suppose it’s settled then. We have to win.”*

Uva laughed too—listening to their conversation. Then, her brows furrowed. *“I... might actually have a cunning plan.”*

“Three!” the dragon Dynamancer roared suddenly. The world shook from the sheer volume of his voice. Both Uva and Adam flinched. Shiv just sneered.

“Yeah. Were they Pathbearers?” Shiv asked.

“They were,” the Dynamancer replied, sounding confused.

“Then welcome to life.” Shiv scoffed. “Did the birds you guys betrayed and killed have this little outburst with you? After you betrayed the Descenders with them?”

“Lies!” the wind dragon shouted. “You—”

“Shut up, whelp,” Shiv laughed. The blue dragon fumed with anger, and the winds began to scream. “I want to talk to someone that doesn’t break their hammer hitting a target the size of their finger.” The source of this content is novel•fire

The wind dragon almost snapped. He stepped toward Shiv, but he was held in place by the Dynamancer.

The dragon commander growled at his subordinate knight. “Sir Michaels. Control yourself. Do not be goaded by this... *mercenary*.” He drew in a deep breath. “You are with Weave? Trying to take the fragment of Valor Thann for yourself, then? Is that it?”



“Three,” Shiv just replied. “At least three of you are dead. You give us that arm and that number will stay three.”

## **Dread Aura > 71**

## **Silver Tongue > 16**

The dragon didn’t respond with outrage or anger. Instead, he narrowed his eyes and observed Shiv. “You wear the visage. You are a Necrotech?”

“No. Just someone who’s got close relations with death.”

The Dragon-Knight commander grunted. “Then, let us dispense with the pointless chatter. You and your comrades have fought hard. You have slain some of our number, and Sir Tarlow has asked me to spare you specifically.”

Shiv paused and looked at the kukri-wielding dragon. She was eyeing him—was closer to him and his companions than all the other dragons. She was the biggest danger here. He had nothing to answer her speed right now if she wished to kill either Adam or Uva. That, and she could probably still manifest right behind him and drive the blade into his back.

“Just me?” Shiv asked.

“We cannot abide a Psychomancer. Or a *surfacer*.” The Dynamancer spat in the direction of Adam.

“Drone on approach,” Can Hu said. “Twenty seconds.”

Shiv let out a breath. This was going to be *ugly*.

*“Adam. Get a spatial arrow ready for you and Uva. You two clear out first and come back for the Jealousy afterward. I’ll try to distract them.”*

A burst of worry came from both of them, but Uva imposed her control on their collective emotions. Focus reigned. Everything else vanished into the background. “*My plan*,” Uva said, reminding Shiv, “*is simple. They’re vulnerable to a Psychomancer. They rely on speed and constant attacks, but Psychomancy stuns them badly. Kill the Psychomancer if you can, Shiv. The white dragon. We can still break them.*”

“*We will break them*,” he replied. “*Valor’s doing something too. We got more than a chance.*”

“Twelve seconds,” Can Hu declared.

*“I’ll try to shoot the damned arm off the back of that dragon. If we can finish the Quest, we can—I can get Dimensionality—I’ll be a partial Jump Mage. It’ll give us an advantage, and—”*

*“Get the rapier first,”* Shiv replied, trying to focus the Young Lord. *“Keep moving, Adam. I don’t want to scream about my asshole again.”*

*“You bastard! I knew you said it!”*

“Six seconds,” Can Hu whispered.

“No deal,” Shiv said, replying to the commander. He cracked his neck. “But I might let Tarlow live if you give me the arm.”

The dragon scoffed. “Ah. Unreasonable and arrogant even to the end. Shame. But good warriors die—”

The drone whistled as it dropped from the sky and detonated. Several dragons launched attacks upward, doing nothing to prevent the dense, black smoke from blanketing them.

Shiv blasted toward the Dynamancer. Adam forged a watery hand and held onto Uva as he fired a teleportation arrow. They vanished. Two dragons teleported after them. The other dragons closed in on Shiv. And a dagger was driven into Shiv’s back before he got anywhere close to the dragon commander. “For *fuck’s* sake!”

Then, they were on him, and beneath the falling blades of the Dragon-Knights, Shiv learned new flavors of pain.

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

## 63 (I) Endure

*I watched my brothers die as we tried to take the walls. I watched them fall... and the Necrotechs—those twisted, vile monsters... they took the bodies. They took them into the dark.*

*My brothers came back to me later. I saw them. They were without skin, without flesh, without anything that... but I still knew who they were. Even with the taint of Necromancy spilling from their eyes, they still called out to me, they still remembered*

*who they were. And they begged me to kill them. They **begged** me. They screamed! Even as the fucking Necrotechs made them fight me!*

*I can't—I killed them again, and they cried out for ma! I can't do this! I can't do this! I need to go home! I need to go home! The Inquisition needs to eradicate this place! Nothing could ever make this invasion worth it! Let the Ascendants pour down fire until there is nothing left in the Abyss! Nothing! Just get me out! I won't fight anymore! Get me out!*

*Why are we even here? What are we doing here? Why did they send us down into the dark? Why...*

-Interview with Yellowstone Republic Sergeant-Adept Audrey Connors (Later executed for dereliction of duty and heresy by the Inquisition)

63 (I)

Endure

*“You are a wretched thing. A revolting creature. A spawn of wrongness and taint. The Town Lord is a good man, but his goodness has turned to a flaw with you. He should have allowed us to burn you on the altar like the demon you were while still inside your own mother’s corpse. He should have... But he refused. And even now, he refuses to allow anyone else to correct his mistake.”*

*Shiv curled tighter into himself, trying not to whimper from the pain. Something inside him was broken. It hurt to move. So he stayed as still as he could. He stopped crying too. Crying only made them hit him harder. “I... just wanted food... Hungry.”*

*A boot slammed into his back and sent him bouncing down the last of the steps. The young Omenborn shrieked as pain exploded inside him. He cracked his head against the cobblestone at the bottom of the church, and he heard the War Priest’s boots pound closer. Something thick, warm, and wet hit his neck. It was too brief to be urine, so it had to be spit. The congregation was following the War Priest down.*

*Shiv turned. If they were going to kill him, he might as well get a good look at his murderers. The War Priest was a large, strong man with a long, black beard. He had glowing Prismatic robes over his armor, but his eyes were dark and hateful. And Shiv didn’t even know what he did wrong. He didn’t know why the matrons in the orphanage hated him, why the other children hated him, why absolutely everyone hated him.*

*“Look away from me, creature,” the War Priest snarled. “You are unworthy of gazing upon a servant of the Ascendants.”*

*But though a child, the Omenborn snarled in return. For what else did he have left? Crying and apologizing didn’t get them to stop. The world didn’t care if he was sorry.*

*The world didn't care if he felt bad. The world just wanted to hurt him. And for the first time in his life, Shiv spat back. He spat blood all over the man's boot.*

*"No," Shiv said. "I just wanted food. And you just wanted to hurt me."*

*The War Priest snarled and raised his boot over Shiv's head, intending to finish the bloody affair. Some of Shiv's bloody spit spilled back on his face.*

*"Stop!"*

*The War Priest froze. The Congregation broke into a clamor. An automaton guard marched forward from across the street, flanked by two humans. Shiv looked at them, and he realized more people were watching. But they didn't do anything. They were just going to watch as the War Priest killed him. The only person who cared was the guard. That guard... They'd beaten Shiv too. But just to get him to leave. Just a hit or two, nothing more.*

*"What are you doing, Master Halvus?" the automaton guard asked, his voice deep and baritone.*

*"I am going to finish this," the War Priest snarled. "I am going to finish the Omenspawn, and bring—"*

*"You are going to get yourself executed by the Town Lord," the guard corrected. "Publicly."*

*The War Priest's face twisted in disbelief and fury. "Why? Why does he protect this creature? For what reason?"*

*"Does the Town Lord need to explain himself to you?" the guard asked, sounding incensed. "Do you feel that you are owed an explanation by the hero of the Eclipse War?"*

*"I—but—"*

*"If you kill this child, the Town Lord will come see you personally," the guard finished. The automaton looked down at Shiv with its glowing, green eyes. Shiv stared back. There was nothing there. No kindness. Just duty. "It doesn't matter why he demands the boy's survival. It only matters that the boy survives. That is the edict placed on him by the Town Lord, and that is the way things will be."*

*The guard held up a golden arrow for all to see, and several of the congregation backed away. "A shot was fired. An order was delivered from Starhawk's Perch—Master Roland Arrow is watching. And he will not forgive disobedience."*

*And then a scroll was given to the War Priest. He snapped it open, and, with each word he read, his expression grew fouler and angrier.*

*Unable to help himself, Shiv laughed. A second ago, he thought the priest was powerful. No. The priest was just another rat in this city. Another coward. They were all cowards. All of them. They hurt him because they could get away with it. It was who they were. Whatever his parents did—that was an excuse.*

*Blackedge was a town of cowards, not heroes.*

*“I thought you served the Ascendants?” Shiv wheezed. “Is... is the Town Lord an Ascendant?”*

*“Silence,” the War Priest growled.*

*“Why—you’re not powerful anymore? Or were you never powerful? Just a coward?” Shiv hissed. “I thought you were all faithful. But you were just, just afraid. Afraid of me—for nothing.”*

***And the War Priest saw something inside you—something that made him flinch back. But he could not suffer the pain of his realization. And so he chose anger. And so chose to bring his boot down on you—not on your head, but on your arm.***

\*\*\*

Shiv snapped back to consciousness with a bellow of pain as his right arm fractured.

“Shiv!” Can Hu cried. The machine’s voice was thick with electrical interference and worry. “Get up! You need to get up *now!*”

Shiv groaned. “What? What’s happening?” And then, something hit him again—hit him hard. He went bouncing off the ground, twisting and turning, ripping chunks out of the land with every impact. Shiv grunted in pain, and with each hit, he remembered where he was.

The story has been taken without consent; if you see it on Amazon, report the incident.

Right. The dragons. The fight. He was in the middle of getting the shit kicked out of him. Apparently, it brought back old memories—especially unwelcome ones.

Shiv used the rage he felt from the strange, sudden memory of the War Priest and stilled himself with a gravitic field. He turned to face his attackers and took stock of his many wounds: a minor concussion, a fractured right arm, most of his ribs cracked, one of his lungs punctured, and his right leg partially dislocated from the knee down.

“Not too bad, all things considered,” Shiv muttered.

Then, seven dragons jumped him at once.

The Dynamancer brought a massive spike of gravity down on him, crashing against his own gravitic field. Shiv growled as he tried to push it back, only to receive a massive axe-strike to the chest.

Before he could be knocked back, the kukri-wielding dragon blinked in from the side and stabbed into his back again. His rearmost armor was practically stabbed clean through.

Can Hu let out a mechanical scream. Shiv needed to reinforce his armor before it completely came apart and the Penitent died in his stead. The source of this content is novelFire

He reactivated his Song of the Vigilant, ignoring how battered his soul felt, and he channeled a Woundeater out from his own body. It materialized in his hands, and he flung it outward, only for the dragon-knight Biomancer to intercept it.

A clash of crimson mana flared through the air, but the spell was caught and held in place. He and the Biomancer were nearly equals in terms of power, but he couldn't fight it and the other dragons at the same time. He let his wounds return with a groan—which became a snarl of pain as the wind-dragon slammed into him from behind, dragging him along the ground. He was flicked up in the air a moment later. He tried to recover, but then a javelin of pure cutting force came from nowhere and cleaved into his right hand. Shiv felt his pinky and ring finger shatter.

"Shiv, listen," Can Hu said. "You need to distract them. If you try to use your Momentum Core like you did before, it will only be intercepted. You need to stall the dragon with the blade before you can go for the Psychomancer."

"I know," Shiv said, realizing the automaton was talking about Sir Tarlow.

And as he thought of her, she immediately materialized, aiming a blow at his back. This time, he managed to parry her, sliding his body off course and causing her blow to glide through the air, like it was being dragged across a slick surface.

She teleported as she tried striking him again, but he knew this trick of hers as well. Once more, he parried her, and this time he flung her into another sword-wielding dragon with a tug of his field.

They crashed together, a brief opening that was interrupted as Shiv felt the Dynamancer grip him. Electric arcs splashed out from the Dynamancer's hands. Shiv felt his armor endure the lightning bolts, but the magic that followed—the magnetism and the gravity—was harder to resist. It crashed down on him. He used his Momentum Core to drain as much as he could. Time slowed, then the wind dragon slammed into him once more, briefly stunning him—



Long enough for the enemy Biomancer to slam their field into his own, and long enough for the massive dragon axe-wielder to drive its weapon into his chest.

Two cracks thundered through Shiv.

His mana held better than his body did as he felt all of his ribs fold inward, blood gushing down from his mouth. The world went dark again, and only Can Hu's call dragged Shiv back before he could plunge into unconsciousness.

He drained what he could from the axe-wielder's blow; that was enough—his Momentum Core filled. He launched himself blindly in the direction of the Psychomancer, sliding along the edge of their axe. It was a testament to his durability that he left a long scratch on the steel, but the axe was adamantium too, and it didn't break like the wind dragon's hammer did.

He shot through the air. As Can Hu called out a warning, Shiv twisted himself just slightly through the sky, pulling himself to the right using his gravitic field. The kukri dragon cut down and missed.

### **Skill Gained: Dodge (Common)**

#### **Dodge > 1**

As he approached the Psychomancer, he saw the pale-scaled Dragon-Knight chanting a spell. It formed over its head, and the dragon was on the verge of unleashing it—just then, however, a crossbow bolt hit the dragon in the left eye, and it cried out. The spell broke, and a surge of chaotic Psychomancy washed over everyone, but Shiv parried the magic with his gauntlet and took the opportunity to slam headfirst into its chest. The dense titanium armor the dragon wore folded inward, and he heard it give a feminine gasp as its chest crumpled inward.

But Shiv wasn't done. If he was going to die this time, he would take at least one of them with him. He seized the dragon by the throat and ripped. He tore. Her scales peeled and parted one after another as the creature shrieked and tried to throw him off. Shiv used his Biomancy to tear his own throat out and flung a wyrm into her. Suddenly, an entire section of her neck unlatched, splitting open vertically. Blood gushed down over him, but the dragon had absorbed some of the magic. When the full effects did not manifest, Shiv struck again. More of her throat opened up, and he caught something arterial. There was so much blood over him that he could barely see anymore.

And then the kukri dragon was on him again, tearing him off her ally and teleporting him away with her. It was a brief jump this time, and they arrived among the other dragons just in time for the axe-wielder to strike Shiv across the head. The blow chipped his helmet and left him stunned—only for a kukri to slam into his abdomen and leave his outer stomach dangling like a flap of meat.



He was spinning through the air, but only for a moment. The Dynamancer caught him with its magic, and just then, the Wind Dragon drove an ascending elbow into Shiv's chest. The dragon was going as fast as it could—but Shiv was still hardened, still adamantine, even with compromised armor. The dragon hit him, and it was the dragon's elbow that snapped. The wind dragon cried out in pain, and to Shiv's disbelief, the axe-bearing dragon let out a massive, barking laugh.

### **Adamantine Adaption > 110**

"Pussy!" the axe-bearing dragon cried. And then it knocked another dragon aside as it reared back its titanic, metallic fist. The axe-bearer eyed Shiv with his dark-red eyes and smiled. A jagged forest of bladed teeth gleamed in the dimness of the Abyss. "All right, you little hard bastard—let's see how you can deal with getting hit by a *proper* dragon."

Shiv spat blood. "Sure." Feeding his anger into his Gravitic Wrestler, he suddenly broke free from the Dynamancer's grasp and slammed into the axe-wielding Dragon's face. "But let's see you get hit by a proper man first!"

Shiv picked up the axe-wielding dragon, using all his strength to do so. He felt his anger drain dry. The feeling was calming—unnaturally so. His strength plummeted just in time for him to suplex the massive dragon head-first into the earth, upending tons of soil. Then Shiv brutally pulled the dragon's neck at an angle. A loud crackle sounded from the axe-bearer's collarbone—but that was as far as Shiv got before the kukri dragon smashed him out of the air again.

He twisted and bounced, gliding through the dirt, but before he could get up, something hit him so hard he nearly blacked out again. It dragged him on for a long while, and he felt the tip of the kukri dagger drive into his chest, splitting entirely through his exoskeleton as she unleashed her Momentum Core. Shiv gagged and vomited blood all over the inside of his helmet. Then, Sir Tarlow channeled a beam of pure starlight, boiling into him. Shiv tried to wrestle it aside, but he was completely spent of strength. They crashed explosively into the earth.

As her Momentum Core's discharge came to an end, Shiv lay there partially impaled, groaning and trying to free himself from the blade. The Dragon flicked him off her blade like he was a gnat, and Shiv bounced for several meters. As he looked down, most of his chest was a bloody, charred mess. His mutilated stomach turned again, and Shiv barely held back from retching again.

"There is nothing shameful about this," she said, stalking toward him. They'd traveled a good few kilometers again; at least the other dragons were far, far away.

Shiv blinked as he realized something. *Far away from the others... She just made a mistake. I think there's still a little fight left in me.*

"Can Hu..." Shiv groaned.

*"I am here," Can Hu said, though the automaton sounded hurt as well. "I am... only moderately damaged. Surprisingly. Your bones serve well as armor."*

Shiv sniffed. "Great. Good. I'm probably going to be dead soon. No sense in you getting destroyed with me. Just play dead in the mud, and I'll come back for you if I can."

*"I wouldn't be able to move even if I wanted to,"* Can Hu said.

Shiv remembered. "Ah, right. Your skills... Thanks for everything," Shiv said.

Can Hu responded with an uncomfortable beep. *"I don't think I did very much at all, Pathbearer."*

"Bullshit," Shiv snapped. "I don't think I would have caught half of her blows if you didn't call them out."

He unclasped himself from the armor and pulled some splintered bones off his face. He rose, staggering, and summoned a wyrm to drain away the last of his wounds. He winced as he did so. He wouldn't be able to use that for much longer.

"Ah," the kukri dragon said, looking at him appreciatively. "Finally. You are human after all, underneath. But perhaps even deeper, you are not. So much raw durability. Adamantine Adaption. This is not a skill your people are meant to get."

She spun the blade in her hand, switching her grip from reverse to standard. "So, would you like to see this through to the end?"

"Yeah," Shiv said, licking the blood from his lips. "I think I want to find out if I can finish you off first, or if it'll take you longer than for your friends to arrive to finish me off."

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

## 63 (II) Endure

63 (II)

Endure

Sir Tarlow nodded. "I was curious about that too. That is why I brought you here, after all. You have my interest piqued. I think... I will think back on this moment long, long after this day."

"I don't know if I will," Shiv replied. "You're a nasty fight now, but I have a feeling I got a lot worse to come."

She laughed. "I will miss the arrogance."

"No," Shiv replied. "Not if you're dead."

And then he charged towards her, tearing open a chasm across the ground. No more strategy. No more technique. Just a man trying to beat a monster to death with his bare godsdamn hands.

The dragon blinked, but even without Can Hu, Shiv knew what to expect. He knew what to expect when she dodged through him. He knew what to expect when she teleported twice. And he knew what to expect when she finally drove her blade against his chest. He knew he wouldn't be fast enough to catch her. And he knew he didn't have long to inflict harm before she teleported or simply blinked again.

So, he let her wound him, and he traded with her, launching his Woundeater into her chest as she cut a deep slice on his chest. He was blasted into the earth, but the dragon staggered back, stunned. He created another Woundeater from the injury he just got, and he launched it at her too. She almost managed to dodge that one. Almost, but spells moved pretty quickly, especially when you were in someone else's field. Another problem was that she couldn't sense his Biomancy field, so she was stuck trying to predict his Woundeater—and that wasn't reliable at all.

As a second crimson explosion expanded around her, he felt her Magical Resistance crack—approach the verge of breaking. This chapter is updated by NovelFire

And this time, Shiv tore himself completely apart, practically flaying his own flesh off his body as he launched himself towards her.

The dragon stumbled back, trying to recover. She teleported, and Shiv waited—waited for her to strike him. For a moment, he thought she was gone, that she had done the wise thing and fled back to return with her companions and finish him off together.

But then her blade came crashing into his back again, and he couldn't help but laugh, even as pain tore through his body.

"Just can't resist!" Shiv cried, and he launched the Woundeater past his shoulder into her. Her Magical Resistance detonated like a bomb. Shiv could feel the pressure washing off her body as what remained of her mystical armor came asunder. Wounds erupted all over Sir Tarlow. Her scales came free in several places, hanging from her body like tatters. He flayed himself entirely. She suffered only a partial effect, but it was enough. She looked partially *degloved*, and she howled with immense pain.

Sir Tarlow staggered away from him, holding the bouncing strips of her body in place as blood spewed out from her. She cried out, almost delirious from the pain. “How do you deal with it? You flay yourself to wound me... *How?*”

“I’ve kind of always lived this way,” he replied with a shrug as he staggered after her. “That’s just a simple thing of arithmetic. It might hurt me, but it will sure as shit kill you.”

She nodded and tried to compose herself. “Admirable. I’ll keep that in mind. It is a good lesson.”

And then she shot towards him, her wings unleashing a rain of massive icicles that crashed down on the surrounding area. He swatted them aside, barreling through them like a bear would charge through a snow castle. But before they crashed into each other again, before he could unleash his Biomancy on her again, she teleported away just as he ruptured two of his organs.

A second later, she teleported back—with another dragon in tow.

Shiv felt the newly arrived Dragon-Knight’s Biomancy field crash against his own. He immediately dropped his spell and shifted his focus to trying to fight off the dragon Biomancer’s attempts to stop his heart.

“Damn it!” Shiv cried. His organs ruptured again, but the Song of the Vigilant kept him focused. He wrestled against the other Biomancer, both of them pitting spells of raw intent against each other, their mana swirling, magical shapes dancing around their bodies.

The battleground changed once more. It seemed that Sir Tarlow wasn’t nearly as prideful as he assumed. Annoying. Tragic.

“So, you forced Sir Tarlow to finally seek some help,” the Biomancer dragon declared with a slight lisp. The big bastard was more than just a Biomancer, frankly. It held a tower shield almost as big as it were, and perhaps half the length of the Jealousy. In its other hand, it clutched what seemed to be something between a scepter and a banner, and a field of oppressive aura came pressing against Shiv, grinding at his mind, at his focus. He guessed it was some kind of Psychomancy-powered weapon, something to disrupt someone’s thoughts.

Shiv was glad he had the Song of the Vigilant. There was no way he could be casting without it.

Then Tarlow struck Shiv from behind again, and he went crashing head over foot. His back was flayed open, but he kept his focus and stopped the Biomancer from killing him. But even as he held the Dragon-Knight Biomancer at bay, he had to fight Tarlow with half his focus.

That didn't work out too good.

She carved him up, splitting him back and front. Her blade was an item of artistry in her hands—flowing between angles, her grip switching from reverse to standard, stabbing then slicing. It was only through Shiv's incredible durability—aided by Momentum Core and his gravitic field—that he lasted as long as he did. But by the end, his skin was barely clinging to him, and his muscles were in tatters, held close to his body more by his Biomancy and gravity fields than by connective tissues.

**Momentum Core > 84**

**Adamantine Adaption > 112**

**Gravitic Wrestler > 112**

**Woundeater > 61**

And to make matters worse, the other dragons were on approach in the distance—just moments away.

Shiv sighed. “Didn’t quite manage to kill you, did I, Sir Tarlow?” He looked at the dragon as they staggered back from each other, both exhausted.

She shrugged and seemed dissatisfied as well. “I had to call for help,” she admitted. “We are both losers this day.”

That got a laugh out of Shiv. “I wish you weren’t a traitor. I think we would have liked each other.”

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“I wish you weren’t a fool mercenary who tried to steal from us. I wish you had surrendered.” She drew her blade back and assumed a crouching stance. The dragon Biomancer retracted its field from Shiv to heal her. “You would have made a fine Dragon-Knight.”

And Shiv decided to make his last moments count. He charged Tarlow. At least, he tried to. The Biomancer suddenly commanded Shiv’s vessels to rupture, and he was forced to resist to survive.

Then the Dynamancer unleashed a spell from afar, and a massive blow descended on Shiv from above. Dynamancy, from what Can Hu briefly described, could control magnetism, could control gravity, could control force itself. One didn’t reach Dynamancy without gaining and fusing all the main elemental “Mancy” Skills, like Cryomancy, Pyromancy, Aeromancy, and Hydromancy, first.

The attack the Dynamancer struck Shiv with was one of the hardest blows he'd ever suffered. Something even harder than Tarlow's Momentum Core discharges. Shiv tried to bear its weight, but both his knees folded backwards. He felt his legs break, and Shiv cried out in agony as more of his body fractured. Adamantine Adaption stopped him from coming apart entirely, but his tendons were still plucked from his bones. Shiv's focus finally shattered, and his soul was too worn from the Composer's song to keep it up much longer. He dropped that as well, and then the banner's full oppressive power smashed into his mind, flooding his thoughts with noise.

Shiv tried to rise, and the Biomancer's shield crashed down on his body. He pushed against it, pushed against the dragon and the enormous weight of the shield with his gravitic field, only for the dragon that had called its companion a pussy earlier to casually lay its weapon on top of the shield as well. "Feisty little fucker, isn't he?" The axe wielder laughed.

Shiv spat blood on the shield. "Come find out, asshole. We're not done."

"Indeed," Sir Tarlow said with a sigh. "We will not likely see his like again for a while."

Shiv gave a ragged cry and tried to push himself free. "Shut up and just finish the job."

The axe wielder looked at Shiv and then nodded. "Aye, we won't see his like again. See you in the afterworld, stranger. Great One take you into their memory."

And the dragon raised his axe back up and dropped it on top of the shield. What was an instrument of defense became a guillotine. Shiv felt his spine fracture—and then harden. It still took the bastard almost a dozen swings to split Shiv down the middle. And only partially at that. As he felt the shield dig into his intestines, Shiv hissed and tried to push through the chaos and pain—tried to shape a final Woundeater to fight just a while longer.

But the Biomancer, taking advantage of Shiv's stunned and delirious state, reached into him and burst every blood vessel in his brain.

The last thoughts that passed through Shiv's mind that time were, *Ah, so that's what that feels like.*

Then Shiv was a Revenant, and he immediately moved towards the Psychomancer Dragon-Knight who just touched down behind the others.

**Momentum Core > 89**

**Adamantine Adaption > 117**

**Gravitic Wrestler > 115**

**Frictionless Vector > 55**

**Woundeater > 66**

**Dodge > 10**

**Striking Proficiency > 34**

**Knife Proficiency > 43**

“Well, that was a bloody hard affair,” the axe-wielder huffed, planting its greataxe into the earth. “Wouldn’t you say, Tarlow? How did a little insect like that give us so much trouble?”

Tarlow looked at Shiv, but she seemed troubled. She stared at his body, and then at her kukri. The edge still glimmered with gold. “Impossible. He’s dead. Why does the blade still remember cutting him...”

And the Biomancer noticed something else. “There’s still someone else here,” he cried. “There’s another field still active inside mine. The bloody Weaveresses are among us! Enemy Biomancer! Master-Tier!”

But while they were trying to figure things out, Shiv reached the pearl-scaled Psychomancer and dug into her with his Biomancy at the same time as he drained her monstrous vitality. In that moment, he tried something—doing what Dven had talked about; reconstructing a wound from Mana alone. He focused, trying to recall his most recent injuries, but that didn’t work, so he went for something very simple: a series of lacerations and cuts, the type he suffered most often.

As he focused, mana condensed in the air. A Woundeater manifested before him, shimmering with crystallized, crimson mana. He still wasn’t fully ready—he hadn’t grasped every fine detail—so he drove what he had into the pearl-bright dragon, washing over her in a gout of raw power. Then he tore into her Magical Resistance as best he could.

She lashed out with a blind spell meant to repel attackers, but his Magebreaker, as well as his tattered clothing—the ones Uva bought for him—were bound to him. They materialized slowly as he did, leaving him more than capable of dealing with a magical attack.

*“Equipped to one’s soul indeed,”* Shiv murmured in his own head.

As her Psychomancy spell exploded outward, he parried it with the Magebreaker and, using Frictionless Vector, launched it at several of the other dragons. It stunned the Biomancer just long enough for Shiv to shape another spell and crash it into the



Psychomancer again. She cried out—and he felt part of her magical barrier give. She had little to begin with, likely a flaw with her current armor.

He landed a third spell just as the Dynamancer, uncertain what was happening, summoned a massive influx of lightning. Whips of electricity spliced through the air, forking into the other dragons as they sought Shiv—but they found nothing, even as Shiv drained the Psychomancer's vitality and pulled forth a new set of armor out of his cloak in anticipation of his resurrection.

They weren't ready for his return—especially the pearlescent dragon. He shattered her Magical Resistance with one final blast of exhausted Biomancy, then switched tactics. With a final act, he flayed open his own back and dove under her flesh, diving into her wounds and ripping deeper into the parting flesh.

"A Weaveress is inside me!" the dragon cried. He felt her courage fracture. "She is crawling inside me!"

Shiv recalled every wound they'd inflicted on him, every hurt they'd caused, every injury they'd dealt—and he fed that rage into his Gravitic Wrestler. He began pulling in two directions. Outside, the Psychomancer lurched and shrieked with pain. The axe-bearer called out to her, screaming for the Biomancer to help her. Inside, Shiv felt the dragon's bones fracture, her organs rupture, her flesh tear down the middle. With an animalistic roar, Shiv pulled again—and his field flared hard with his rage. Suddenly, her scales ruptured open, and light from the outside flooded inward. He pulled again—tendons snapped and tissue split, breaking along their very strings. The dragon gurgled, and he saw the axe-bearer's desperate face as it charged to aid the pearlescent dragon.

"Hold on—" the axe-bearer cried.

And then Shiv pulled one final time.

The Psychomancer came apart from within in an ocean of blood and gore, but Shiv was already drenched—blood-red and soaked to his very skin—and he felt invigorated with her death.

Six dragons remained. *And when Uva gets back, there's gonna be even fewer.*

A ragged roar of absolute anguish sounded from the axe-bearing dragon. It rushed towards the place where the Psychomancer used to be and splashed down into the gore, pawing at the pieces of the other dragon, crying out for the Biomancer. Intuitively, Shiv realized that there was something deep and intimate between the two dragons—and he had just killed the Psychomancer.

*That's going to be a problem. One I'll deal with later.*

Shiv blasted forward, blood peeling from his body. He went for the Biomancer next, but the spell the Dynamancer had cast earlier found him.

A bolt of electricity crashed into his form, and the Dynamancer pointed. “There—I have him!” The dragon clenched a fist. It was like the world itself was tightening around Shiv. He fought with all his might, breaking free from the lightning, breaking free from the closing clutches of unseen force with a blow from his Magebreaker. Then, he twisted off to the side and shot toward the Biomancer.

As he accelerated toward his rival mage, he was spent magically. If the enemy launched a magical spell at him now, it would crack his field like an egg—and Shiv remembered how long he was out of commission after his fight with the Jealousy. He accelerated faster. Several other dragons moved to intercept him. The Biomancer shaped a glowing pillar of crimson in its hands—

Then a tide of *arrows* crashed down on the Biomancer, and countless more struck the other dragons. A downpour of magical projectiles followed—a colossal tide that speared down from the sky.

Above, hundreds of Adams fired and vanished, replaced by others as the original Adam cloned more of himself, his Heroic-Tier rapier giving off flashes of light.

*Good thing Harkness was just playing with us*, Shiv thought, shuddering. *That rapier is powerful.*

Whatever happened to the two dragons that chased after Adam and Uva, Shiv didn’t know. All he knew was that he was glad to see the Young Lord and that it was good to have friends.

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

## 64 (I) Veilpiercer

*As a Master-Tier War Mage, I tell you this: I’ve fought and killed just about everything—every kind of enemy; primal dragons, ogres, orcs, dimensionals, undead... You name it.*

*But there is one type of enemy I want nothing to do with, and that’s a Psychomancer.*

*I don’t care what your personality is like as a Psychomancer. I don’t care if you’re a good person, a bad person, or anything. I don’t care what you want to do with your*

*power—if you even use your power. I don't care. You stay away from me. You stay far away from me. Don't even look at me.*

*The first time I fought a Psychomancer, they turned my best friend at the time on me. They breached into his mind and he drove the dagger I loaned him into my back... Barely missed my spine. I killed him. I still remember his blood on my hands, and the Psychomancer... the yards planted that memory deep into me, hammered it in like a pike piercing the soil when they tried to break me for good.*

*It's still there. More vivid than any other memory I have. I can relive it if I just close my eyes.*

*The second time—well, I told you guys about fighting the Jealousy, but I didn't tell you about the massacre: how it got into our camp, how my wife... She screamed as it reached into her mind. I never heard her scream like that. I never want to hear her scream like that again. It made me feel every bit of pain, every trauma she went through, and it poured me into her as well. It was only because we had a Psycho of our own that we managed to recover.*

*I don't want anything to do with Psychomancers. It's not you—it's that power. There should be limits to the magics people can use. You can break someone, you can kill someone—but reaching into them, twisting them, changing them... how can that be right?*

*How can the System let that happen? Hah, right...*

*The System doesn't care...*

*-Memoirs of a Master-Tier War Mage*

64 (I)

Veilpiercer

### **5 Minutes Prior...**

Adam jumped with Uva in tow, using his arrow as a teleportation anchor. He wouldn't even call himself a partial Jump Mage, but if he infused a spell into his arrows and focused on that, he could serve at least in a limited capacity.

Unfortunately, the dragons pursuing him were *actual* Jump Mages, and they caught on before Uva or Adam arrived at their destination.

Getting intercepted by enemy Jump Mages mid-transit was an ugly experience. Adam suffered it a few times in the academy in several of his courses. It was like having a larger pressure bubble crash into yours, and then, depending on who the stronger Jump

Mage was, a bubble would burst, and the losing party would end up within the winner's teleportation route.

That was how he and Uva found themselves facing a single dragon in close-quarters combat. Their spatial tunnel collapsed as they were wrenched out of their teleportation pathway and into the route charted by one of the dragons.

"Not good!" Adam cursed as he flared his burning wings. "Not good at all!"

"Adam!" Uva cried, holding on to him hard. "Buy me some time! I'll try to break its mi—"

They plunged through the dragon's spatial tunnel, and Adam cried out as a massive, flaming blade crashed into him. His unbreakable armor kept him alive, but the blow still cracked several of his ribs. It also launched him into Uva, driving the air from her lungs. Thankfully, with all the additional adaptive adamantine plates Shiv had applied to her already impressive armor, she remained unharmed.

The Dragon-Knight lashed out with another sweeping blow. A blow that barely missed as Adam created a clone that promptly shot a mind-arrow into the dragon's face. A surge of fire swelled over the dragon, and the heat within the spatial tunnel became nigh unbearable. Adam responded by dousing himself and Uva in water before creating a dozen more hydro-limbs and unleashing a constant barrage of shots at the dragon. The water magic bolts peppered and broke against the fire dragon's body and splashed apart around its eyes. The shape of a Pyromancy spell formed in the beast's right hand—only for the spell to break as Uva harpooned the dragon's mind with a psionic chain.

Uva hid behind Adam, her form only slightly smaller than his. The dragon was a beast of considerable size, which made it hard to avoid in the narrow space of the distorted tunnel, but worse than that was the growing heat. The dragon's Pyromancy was further amplified by the great blade it wielded. It brought the weapon down against Adam faster than he could react, and he cried out as the blow rattled his entire body. Several of his bones fractured; his armor was Legendary and unbreakable, but he was far from invulnerable. At that moment, he envied Shiv more than ever.

The Umbral was launched off his body, but she twisted her spell, and the dragon howled. The flames briefly died as Adam recovered.

He focused his water arrows on the beast's eyes, trying to distract it. He plucked Spellstring, launching wave after wave of mind arrows, each crashing into its skull. The dragon shuddered and unleashed a wild blast of fire from its wings—but Adam countered by firing as many water arrows as he could. His own Hydromancy was no match for the beast's fire, but Adam compensated with quantity and the magic infused within the Heroic Spellstring. His constant stream of attacks made the oncoming wave of fire mana curve inward, sparing his and Uva's lives just long enough for them to reach their final destination.

**Deadeye > 93**

**Bowslinger > 90**

**Wings of the Starhawk > 94**

**Repulsion Shroud > 54**

**Portomancy > 39**

The spatial bubble burst. They materialized in a ruined wasteland. Adam and Uva crashed against the earth, the ground fracturing beneath them. They struck and rolled across glass instead of soil or mud or water. A few hundred meters away, the dragon shook off Uva's mind magic and ascended with trails of fire streaking from six flaming wings; it no longer wanted anything to do with close-quarters engagement. Instead, it rose into the air and held its blade high.

A channel of flame exploded from the dragon's broadsword, and the weapon turned into a colossal conflagration. The heat grew unbearable even from this far away, and just then, the other dragon Jump Mage emerged as well. This one bore twin axes, and it had fluid fins that also doubled as wings. The water dragon glided before the fire dragon, and they began to circle each other, their power magnifying. Their cycling bodies formed a strange symbol of harmony and cooperation.

"I am Sir Galrah," the burning dragon declared.

"I am Sir Merriman," the water dragon said.

"I am Pyromancer, first and foremost," the fire dragon proclaimed.

"I am Axedancer, first and foremost," the water dragon added.

"Master-Tier," they said in unison.

Adam and Uva blinked and stared at each other in a moment of surreal disbelief. "I didn't realize we were going to get a show before we died," Uva muttered.

Adam gawked. "Did they just do a felling *dance* for us?"

But just then, before either dragon could finish the two off, a third materialized—dropping high from the sky, its body shrouded in darkness. The two dragons stared in shock.

Adam just sighed. "Why bloody not? Another one. Sorry, Uva." IF YOU WANT TO READ MORE CHAPTERS, PLEASE VISIT [novel-fire.net](http://novel-fire.net)

"It's fine," she replied, strangely calm. "But I think we can kill at least one."

Adam laughed. "What a Shiv thing to say. Well. Let's try to slay all three, then."

"Is that Galron?" the water dragon exclaimed, her voice rising with joy. "We thought he was dead!"

"The Weaveress—you said she slit his throat!" the fire dragon cried.

"I did," the water dragon agreed. "But it must not have been fatal. Sir Galron! Come let us—"

But Adam noticed something bizarre. Sir Galron was still accelerating, going faster and faster. And he was *screaming*. He cried out, wailing with a voice beyond pain, beyond misery. "*No!* Run! Run, my sister! Run, my brother! Save yourself! Save—"

A case of theft: this story is not rightfully on Amazon; if you spot it, report the violation.

Before he could finish, he slammed into the other dragons. Adam, using his Seer of Horizons, realized what he was dealing with: the energies crackling around Sir Galron were not normal magical energies. They were corrosive. Viridescent.

*Necromancy.*

"Shit!" He flung himself over Uva before he could explain anything. She cried out as he bowled her down to the ground and hunched into a ball to shield her with his armor.

A thunderous blast followed, the new arrival driving all three dragons into the ground like a meteor and casting a wave of corrosive mana so intense that both the fire dragon and the water dragon cried out in absolute misery. Soil was thrown up for hundreds of meters, but Adam peered through the dust, and he saw the two enemies collapse. They remained alive, though burned and withered. Adam's armor endured the hit and the following shrapnel without difficulty, and he wondered, for perhaps the thousandth time in his life, where his father had found such a fine piece—through what gate, and how he succeeded.

He pushed those thoughts aside and fired arrows at the downed dragons from three arms. They attempted to respond, but as they tried to get up, their flesh *spilled* off their bones as their bodies suffered rapid and corrosive decay. They were slower, weaker, more fragile. The fight went from a desperate battle for Adam and Uva to an execution of two crippled Dragon-Knights.

Adam struck both of their minds with Psychomancy arrows, but it was Uva who finished the job. She unleashed a cone of mind magic—a roiling wave of howling trauma infused with pain and misery. It crashed over them, and both dragons howled as they dropped their weapons. One clawed out its eyes; the other bit off its tongue. They collapsed in

the dirt, twitching and howling as Uva poured more of her psionic might into them—until she cried out herself, collapsing to her knees and clutching her skull.

In the aftermath, the dragons made hoarse, wailing noises that made Adam shudder. But they were broken. And he and Uva were still alive. Somehow.

“Uva?” Adam said, gripping her shoulder.

“Just strain,” she managed. “Just strain.” She tried to get up, but momentarily blacked out as Adam caught her.

“That’s a lot more than just strain, Uva.”

“Just strain,” she repeated, making it back to her feet with a hiss of effort. “How did we—”

“I had it work better than I expected,” Valor mused, slowly descending from above. A streak of fire trailed out from his eyes, and there was an uneasy shiver to his flight pattern.

“Valor!” Adam cried, letting out a relieved laugh as he sagged and clutched his ribs. “I’m so glad to see you.” Valor nodded towards them, then let out a yelp as the Young Lord hugged the skull.

“Yes, Adam, but please focus,” Valor urged. “I might have only bought us some time. There are other dragons, and I do not think I can muster that spell again...” Valor bit back a groan. “My Necromancy is spent.” Something about the Legendary Pathbearer seemed oddly vulnerable just then. “I can’t remember the last time I felt this impotent—spent after a single effigy. I am barely myself.”

“That’s fine.” Adam laughed. “Even if you’re just a fraction of who you were, you still saved our bloody lives.”

A loud moan came from the fire dragon. It twitched, and Adam flinched backwards, pulling his Spellstring taut. When it did nothing more than moan and weep, Adam shuddered.

“Uva, what did you do to this thing?” he whispered.

“I found its most painful memory,” Uva said, chest heaving. “And then I replaced all its other memories with it.”

Adam’s jaw dropped. “I—Sister, you—Is that what all Psychomancers do?” he managed.



“Some,” Uva replied, out of breath. “But I find it to be a reliable strategy—especially if you can focus, especially if you can get past their defenses. Now, quick, we need to get back to Shiv.”

Adam blinked. “Right. Shiv... Shit, I hope he’s still bloody alive.”

A series of massive explosions echoed over the horizon.

“He is,” Uva said. “But he won’t last forever. We must move. I hope he managed to—we need to kill their Psychomancer. You need to find... find the rapier. And I need to—I need to—”

“You need to rest,” Adam said. “There’s blood coming out from your—”

“No,” Uva cried, defiance in her bleeding eyes. “No rest. We’re going back. I need to get to the Jealousy. And I need to... I need to...”

Just then, a shape stepped out from seemingly nowhere. Several shapes followed thereafter. Adam nearly shot them, then lowered his bow with an exhausted breath.

“Give me a warning next time!” he snapped.

“If we gave you a warning,” Liquid Serpent replied as she and Spark Ripper—the automaton in the shape of a male Umbral—stepped into view, “we wouldn’t be Trapdoor, would we?” The Weaveress was missing two arms, but she constantly twirled her revolving crossbows with the remaining ones regardless. Still Water appeared a few meters away, and one of her arms was covered in dragon blood. Twenty other Weaveresses emerged thereafter—more than Adam had expected.

“Our retreat,” Still Water declared, “resulted in quite a lot of injuries. We managed to keep the deaths to a minimum, though. The dragons learned to use their mobility against us. Burned most of the forest. We had to reposition.” She gave a grunt of disgust. “Not my kind of operation anymore. I think I’ll stick to sneaking.”

“What are you talking about, Still Water?” Liquid Serpent demanded. “You slit a Dragon-Knight’s throat.”

“Yeah. But how many others died for me to get there?”

“Good, you’re still...” Uva said, staggered over to Adam. “We need to get back. Adam, here’s the plan: Psychomancer dragon—if it’s not dead, you help kill it. But you get me back to the Jealousy first. Then, you get the rapier, and I will break the rest using the Greater Demon.”

Adam hesitated. “Uva, you’re not Shiv—if you break yourself—”

“I will not break,” she interrupted. “I will not. Not until the job is done.”

Adam placed a hand on her shoulder and sighed as he created a new spatial arrow. “Fine. Be stubborn. Just don’t be a fool.”

Uva nodded. “And get what we came here for. The Great Valor Thann needs his arm back.”

\*\*\*

## ***Present***

Shiv smashed into the Biomancer with his elbow, snapping the dragon’s head back. Its oppressive banner still made it hard for him to focus to cast spells—or focus at all—so he concentrated on taking that from them first. He ripped the piece of equipment out of their hand. Yet, despite forcing the dragon’s grip open, he encountered another problem: the damned item was bound to the dragon in the same way Shiv’s Magebreaker was bound to him. He needed to kill them if he wanted to take it.

So Shiv switched to another idea. He *bent* the banner. With a flex of effort and a shout, he snapped the entire thing in half. A blast of mana detonated from it, and a rush of Psychomancy washed over both him and the Biomancer. The dragon staggered briefly, but it recovered quicker than Shiv—and swatted him out of the air with its tower shield. Shiv bounced off the ground and barely dodged out of the way of a descending shield slam.

## **Dodge > 11**

But the dragon’s following Biomancy spell nearly made him black out from the pain: his field frayed apart as he barely prevented the dragon from stopping his heart.

“Who are you?” the Dragon-Knight Biomancer cried. “What are you?” The dragon let out a series of incoherent threats, and in the middle of the melee, Sir Tarlow materialized out of nowhere and slashed Shiv across the chest. His armor screamed as a small gap opened along its side. Shiv went sliding across the ground, stopping himself with a few more bursts of his gravitic field. He rose with a groan, rubbing his chest in relief that he’d put on a new set of armor. But as he came to a stop, he heard sobbing. Slowly, Shiv turned, and the massive, axe-wielding dragon clutched the remains of the Psychomancer dragon close to its chest.

Shiv froze.

Slowly, the axe-wielding dragon turned. It saw him—his blood-drenched form—and its eyes widened. Its rage literally boiled over its body. It ignited, but it wasn’t flames that consumed the dragon’s form; something more—an aura of pure fury.

Where the axe-wielder was purely a beast of Physicality before, Shiv now failed to track its movements at all. Its massive form slammed into him faster than he could track, its axe cracking and smashing into his body over and over again. The Deathless drained momentum; time slowed slightly, and he began to perceive the coming blows—only for Sir Tarlow to hit him in the back, launching him into the air, where the axe-bearer grabbed him with its massive fist and smashed him down against the ground, opening up a small crater.

Shiv growled and tried to break free, but the Dynamancer struck him across the head. The axe-wielding dragon swiped its blade upward, catching him under the armpit, and Shiv shouted in pain as his left shoulder dislocated and almost tore off. Then another few hundred Psychomancy arrows crashed down, briefly stunning the dragons. Shiv barely reacted in time; he parried with the Magebreaker, driving the attack into the axe-bearer's face—but it did nothing. There was no mind left to break. Nothing but rage remained.

Shiv sighed. “Shit.”

The axe-dragon picked him up and smashed him against the earth again, then started driving its head into his body—headbutting him over and over. Shiv snarled and headbutted it back. The dragon staggered but didn't stop. Sir Tarlow tried to help by teleporting, but the axe-bearer swatted her aside as well.

Shiv managed to squeeze out of its grasp, striking it twice and sweeping its legs out from under it with his field. It crashed down on all fours, and Shiv lifted the dragon up into the air, burning rage to feed his gravitic field, and power-bombed the dragon a good hundred meters deeper into the soil. The world vanished into spraying dirt and rolling shockwaves.

## Gravitic Wrestler > 116

He popped his shoulder back in and dropped another elbow on the dragon's face—but he felt his blow bounce off. Shiv cursed. His arm actually *hurt*. He ignored it, tried to hit the dragon again, but was promptly seized by a grip of *adamantine*. That's when Shiv realized he was dealing with someone that had the same Toughness Skill Evolution as he did.

“Sh—”

The axe-bearer punched him.

This time, he went shooting across the landscape. Stars spun in Shiv's vision. Most of his bones were fractured. Then, Sir Tarlow, being the bastard that she was, slashed her blade across the opening she had left earlier. Shiv howled as a beam of heat split his chest open, and she caught him with her tail before she slammed him into the ground over and over and triggered her Momentum Core. She shot back—back toward the axe-

bearer, whose rage was burning even hotter, spreading along his colossal great axe. Tarlow flicked Shiv out of her tail at the axe-bearer, and the massive adamantine dragon hit the Deathless so hard that the resulting shockwave tore across the landscape and turned everything in a good three-kilometer radius to dust and rubble.

Incredible pain tore through Shiv's skull. It was like the entire world just smashed down into and *through* his skull.

## **Adamantine Adaption > 119**

Then. Darkness.

Peace. Serenity.

And once more, Shiv found himself in his strange dream...

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

# **64 (II) Veilpiercer**

## **64 (II)**

### **Veilpiercer**

## **Repulsion Shroud > 55**

Shiv wasn't the only one that the axe-bearer's blow knocked out.

The feeling of cool wind rushing past Adam's face made him blink and groan. His ears were bleeding, his skull was throbbing with pain, and he was—

“SHIT!” Adam flared his wings. He pulled up hard before he struck the—

“Broken Moon...” It was more crater than ground now. A crater filled with other groaning dragons, and a single, *felling enormous* Dragon-Knight who screamed as it kept smashing its fists into Shiv's unmoving form. Adam winced for the Omenborn.

He winced as he flew through the air. His body felt like someone had launched him through a mountain. Considering how massive that hit had been, it might as well. But the other dragons on the ground were getting up now, and the damned Dynamancer and its two friends were descending from the sky. He needed to do this quickly.

“Thank the Ascendants you killed the bloody Psychomancer, Shiv,” Adam muttered. He nocked a spatial arrow and aimed at the axe-bearing dragon. The Young Lord winced as a particularly sickening crunch sounded from Shiv’s body, but he did his best to ignore it as he targeted the only item still dangling from the axe-bearer’s belt.

The Right Hand of Valor Thann.

The Young Lord focused his senses and timed his shot. He knew shockwaves from the dragon’s blows would knock his arrow off course. There was no bloody way Adam could get anywhere close to the dragon with those hits. Not even with his Repulsion Shroud. The only thing that did was blunt a hit with a pulse of counterforce, and with how hard that big damn dragon was smashing Shiv, just being near the blow might turn Adam into paste inside his armor.

But just as he prepared to loose his arrow, he felt a pulse of teleportation beside him. Adam cursed. He tried to—

A huge kukri crashed into his chest. Adam howled in pain as he was swatted across the sky. But the dragon was *fast*. Much, *much* faster than him. She hit him again within the span of a second—hit him so hard Adam coughed up blood from the blunt force impact alone. His armor kept him alive, but inside, he was breaking apart.

He cried out in pain as her blade crashed into him like raindrops during a thunderstorm, and then she spiked him down. Adam struck the crater at a bad angle—both of his legs snapped. The Young Lord screamed, but he was too battered to even push the air out of his lungs. He lay there, wheezing and whimpering. He reached out with his right arm and pulled himself forward. His left arm wouldn’t listen to him. His Spellstring was still fused to his hand. He needed to line a shot. He needed—

A heavy weight slammed down on his back. Adam cried out in agony as Tarlow tried to drive her kukri through his armor. “What... is this even made of?” she hissed. She stabbed down three more times, practically turning Adam’s mangled legs into clumps of bone and tissue within the armor. Adam briefly lost consciousness, then another blow woke him. He bounced across the ground. Every hit made him thankful for his father’s armor—and every hit made him wish to die.

The Young Lord was about to start screaming for the Ascendants to take him when Tarlow suddenly gurgled. Blood splashed over Adam like a waterfall as he somehow managed to turn and saw Still Water flicking a long wire through the dragon’s throat. But Tarlow managed to get her blade against the right side of her neck, preventing a full slice.

She struck at the bandana-wearing Weaveress, but cut only air as Still Water dove under her invisibility cloak and vanished.

Tarlow frantically slashed three times more before she staggered, clutching her throat. A river's worth of blood spilled out, and she teleported away to... somewhere.

Gasping, Adam tried to rise, battered beyond belief. He crashed against the ground and almost passed out. *How the hells does... Shiv fight through this... pain... Fuck... Ascendants...*

Distant explosions sounded. Uva? Shiv? The Weaveresses? Someone was still fighting the dragons. Not him, though. He was completely ruined. It all hurt too much. All he had left was an arm. All he had left—

*“Get up, Adam.”* The voice of his father pierced into his mind, as clear as if he were right beside him. Adam gasped as he looked up. There was a light, and there was a shining tower, and there was his father, his jaw set, drawing his bow back, fighting for Blackedge. For weeks. Without rest. Firing constantly at endless waves of enemies, blinding spheres of radiance blooming amidst their uncountable numbers like rising suns.

The vision disappeared. But he remembered a moment—a moment when he was a child. The first time he flew, he'd fallen—and it hurt, and he was scared. He didn't want to fly again. So his father carried him. Roland Arrow carried his son until the boy learned to yearn for the sky again. His father was a good man, a strong man.

## **Repulsion Shroud > 57**

But his father wasn't here.

His father needed Adam.

Shiv needed Adam.

Uva needed Adam.

Valor...

So many people helped him throughout his life. He couldn't let the sweet bliss of oblivion take him. He couldn't.

That wasn't what a Pathbearer would do.

*“Both wings...”* Adam muttered, recalling what his father said to him. *“Use both wings at once. Come on, Adam. Get up.”*

Somehow, he manifested his wings through the pain and flapped, lifting his broken body. The shaking inflamed his wounds, and he shouted in exquisite agony. Adam didn't know how he kept his focus or how he kept flying—but he did it, even with broken

legs and one arm dangling. He flew up. He constructed an arm made from water to use his Spellstring. And he aimed—at the axe-wielding dragon who, with another roar, dropped a fist on Shiv. The dragon's hands were coated in blood, and his scales were broken too.

And in the gloom of the Abyss, Adam's eyes began to burn bright as he squinted at the hand of Valor Thann. *Wait*, Adam reminded himself. Another blow. Adam exhaled. Another shockwave. Opportunity. He fired. His spatial arrow zipped for a kilometer before it struck the hand dead on.

### **Deadeye > 95**

### **Portomancy > 40**

Adam then pulled back with his spatial magic. A tunnel of pressure yanked hard but couldn't dislodge the arm. The Young Lord's mind wailed—so he created two water bows and fired. A stream of arrows smashed into the clip holding the arm in place. The axe-bearing dragon lifted its arm again.

### **Bowslinger > 94**

*Please, Ascendants!* Adam cursed. He could feel himself losing consciousness, he could—

The limb broke free. It tore across the spatial tunnel and crashed into Adam's chest, knocking him back out of the air. Adam seized the limb with an arm of flesh and three arms of water as he crashed down on the ground—leg-first.

His resulting scream echoed across the land. And darkness almost took him. Should have taken him.

If not for the notification filling his closed eyes.

**Quest Complete: 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.**

### **Select a Skill to infuse with +10 Levels**

### **Select a Skill to Evolve to Adept-Tier**

Adam laughed. It came out as a sob. He fed ten levels into his Deadeye and felt it shoot past the level threshold. In the same instant, he selected his Portomancy as his Adept-Tier Skill option, and something *wonderful* happened.

### **Skill Evolution: Deadeye (Adept) > Horizon Splitter (Master)**



## Skill Evolution: Portomancy (Initiate) > Dimensionality (Adept)

### Skill Fusion: Horizon Splitter Arrow (Master) - Dimensionality (Adept) > Veilpiercer (Master)

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

#### Veilpiercer > 105

Suddenly, a rush of strength flooded into Adam. He still hurt badly, but he didn't feel on the brink of death anymore. His eyes snapped open. His jaw clenched. He formed a hydrokinetic hand and flared his wings once more. He rose up like a man possessed and directed his gaze at the axe-bearing dragon punching Shiv over and over.

A surge of outrage and anger rushed through the Young Lord. He moved further and further away, but he formed a new arrow. Instead of shaping it from water, though, he reached for a more natural-feeling substance—a stronger skill. An arrow shaped like a pitch-black spatial rupture materialized as he drew his Spellstring back. He aimed it at the head of the massive dragon.

This arrow was unlike all the other arrows he'd ever shaped in his life. He could feel a small dimension residing inside it. A small, *unstable* dimension that only his power was keeping together. Moreover, he felt like he could infuse the magic of his bow into his newly empowered Veilpiercer arrow, and suddenly, the insides were not only unstable, but filled with a surge of lightning.

"Let go... of my *bastard*," Adam breathed. He released the arrow, and as the string straightened, a pulse of spatial distortions exploded out from around Adam as his arrow tore *through* the fabric of space rather than traveling to its target the traditional way. The Young Lord blinked as the rupture remained in place even after he fired the arrow. It was unlike his standard teleportation arrow, which served as an anchor he could eventually teleport to, or pull someone else back from the point he struck.

The Veilpiercer arrow wasn't the same. It basically left a large, gaping chasm in reality and created a temporary, unstable dimension that ran from where Adam first released his shot all the way to the target itself. And the arrow still wasn't done surprising him. With every second it spent in flight, it grew *faster* by multiple times. Between the Veilpiercer arrow's ability to avoid air friction and its constant acceleration, the shot struck the axe-bearing dragon nigh-instantly.

It also crashed against the massive beast's head hard enough to knock it off of Shiv. Lightning exploded everywhere. The dragon's head crashed against the earth as it staggered. Then, it snapped into motion again, and a fiery aura flared around its body. But blood poured down from a dent in its skull. A large and visible dent.

Adam fired two more Veilpiercer arrows. But the dragon exploded off the ground. Adam moved on instinct and dove into the dimensional pathway he just created. He passed through the rupture just as the massive dragon appeared where he was. The sheer force and speed displayed by the dragon terrified Adam. It searched for him briefly until it turned and saw the rupture. It tried to reach in, but its size worked against it—the bastard was too big. It could only stick two fingers through.

Adam laughed and accelerated along his arrow-made dimension. Portomancy was just the manipulation of spaces. Dimensionality was different. Dimensionality was the manifestation of another place entirely. You couldn't intercept a Dimensionalist the same way you did a Jump Mage. You needed to pierce through their dimensional barriers first, and even then, the dimension didn't collapse—not until you disrupted the magical boundaries holding it together.

Adam's dimension, however, was an unstable one, and shivering walls of quivering darkness slowly closed in from all sides.

*I wonder if I can keep it stable*, Adam thought as he blasted out from the exit in seconds. The distance within was also much shorter than taking the direct route. He emerged where the arrow hit the dragon, and he found Shiv immediately. Up in the sky, the massive dragon roared in fury as it continued clawing at the other end of the rupture.

Adam scoffed. The Berserk Skill was a double-edged sword. It gave a massive boost to your physical attributes, but you lost the ability to think altogether. Not a great trade most times.

Looking down into a deep, shattered pit in the ground, Adam gawked as he found Shiv. The Deathless's armor was cracked and bent almost everywhere. His helmet had been split in two, and his face was a bloody, swollen mess.

But the *bastard was still breathing*. He was practically less injured than Adam was.

"You... you cockroach," Adam laughed. Another roar sounded from the axe-bearing dragon, and Adam dove, calling for Shiv to wake up.

\*\*\*

*The War Priest lifted a leg, and Shiv stared at the bone jutting out from his arm. He knew pain, he knew hurt, but this was on another level. This was...*

*Shiv didn't cry. He stared up at the War Priest and spat on the man's boot again.*

*Something shone behind the man's eyes. Before he could bring down his boot once more, an arrow struck true—right into his knee. It punched through, and the War Priest crashed to the ground with a guttural howl of pain.*

*Shiv watched in awe as three more arrows impacted that same knee—one after another—each one ruining the limb more. Until a final bolt struck hard enough to sever the limb entirely.*

*As the priest howled in agony, a voice came from Starhawk's Perch. A voice that shook the air. "Any man who strikes a child, Omenborn or not, is no man of the Republic." Roland Arrow's tone rang with righteous fury, as if the very sky itself raged on his behalf. "War Priest. You will mend his arm. You will cease what you have done. And you will report for active duty in the Militia within two days. You wish to serve the Republic. You wish to honor the Ascendants. Then descend and investigate the old ruins. Clear out the vampire nests. Help the needy. Today, you have shamed us all, and you have disobeyed a direct order from your Town Lord in the process."*

*But Shiv blinked. Something was wrong about this memory.*

***This never happened.***

*Roland didn't shoot the man's leg off. The guards stopped him—detained him for a day, and let him off. They took Shiv to a Biomancer afterward, but everyone pretended that nothing happened. Why was he remembering different now, why—*

*And from the skies above, a man descended, burning wings at his back. Shiv gritted his teeth and tried to rise. But his entire body hurt and—*

*"Shiv! Get up, you big, unkillable bastard!"*

Shiv blinked as he saw... *Adam* Arrow descend. The Young Lord's legs were pointing in *several* wrong directions, and his left arm was also barely hanging on. Behind the Young Lord was a massive, quivering black gap. Shiv blinked, but the black didn't go away. Guess that wasn't a part of his concussion.

The Deathless spat a globule of blood as he noticed something else.

**Quest Complete: 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.**

**Select a Skill to infuse with +10 Levels**

**Select a Skill to Evolve to Adept-Tier**

"Adam," Shiv grunted as he ripped himself out of the rubble. "Did you just complete the Quest while I was distracted?"

"Well, someone had to get things done while you were napping on the job," Adam sneered.

Shiv scoffed. "Yeah, well, you look like shit."

"So, hurry up and heal me, you bastard. You have any idea what pain I'm in?"

Shiv laughed as he accepted Adam's hand, but mostly pulled himself up using his gravitic field.

### **Adamantine Adaption > 121**

He spat a mouthful of blood and eight of his teeth out. "I'm going to kill Sir Tarlow," he grumbled. "Slowly."

"Who the hells is Sir Tarlow?" Adam asked.

"The dragon with the kukri."

Adam's nostril flared. "Ah. Yes. Her. I'll help you."

Shiv snarled as he forced himself to manifest a Woundeater despite his mana strain. He cast into Adam, and the Young Lord gasped as his body was restored. The crystallized serpent danced atop Shiv's hands as he cracked his neck.

Just then, the black rupture behind Adam closed, and the axe-bearing dragon slammed down, finally noticing them. Then, a pulse of teleportation followed, and Sir Tarlow and the Biomancer reappeared, flanking them from the other side.

"Great," Shiv growled. "I was just about to go looking for them."

Adam, however, simply drew his strings back. "I assume you want me to kill the Biomancer first."

Shiv was about to ask Young Lord how he was going to do that when he noticed the shivering, pitch-black arrow that Adam had manifested. "What's that?"

"My first Master-Tier Skill Fusion," Adam said. "You'll see how it works in a minute."

The axe-bearing dragon hammered its fists into the ground, causing a small earthquake.

"Congratulations," Shiv said.

"Thank you. I'm rather proud of it myself." The source of this content is novelFire

"Got any recommendations for what I should move to Adept? Because I'm going to put ten points into Knife Proficiency. And then I'm going to take Tarlow's knife and skin her with it."

“About time you got an actual Weapon Skill. And pick Stealth.”

“Stealth?”

“Again. Only thing worse than the monster you can see is the monster you can’t. See if those skills fuse.”

Shiv did as the Young Lord recommended.

### **Skill Evolution: Knife Proficiency (Initiate) > Deepest Edge (Adept)**

#### **Deepest Edge > 53**

### **Skill Evolution: Stealth (Initiate) > Silhouette (Adept)**

To Shiv’s slight disappointment, the skills didn’t fuse, but as he focused on trying to remain unnoticed, his mood turned to elation. His Mask of False Paths offered him the Umbral Shadowwalker Skill. It wasn’t a bad skill, but it was still something that was entirely focused on hiding, and stopped being useful when there were no more shadows. Shiv yearned for something that made him *hard to notice* even while engaged in active combat.

And the System obliged. The bulk of his body went entirely transparent, the only trace left of him a thin outline mapping out his *silhouette*.

“Bloody hells.” Adam chuckled as he regarded Shiv. “I’m going to regret this the next time we spar.”

Shiv pulled two bone drills out of his cloak and wrapped a hand around a dagger. Immediately, he felt a deep, fluid energy trembling inside the edged weapon, but he wasn’t sure what that might allow him to do.

*Suppose I’ll find out soon. Just like with Adam’s new arrow.*

“You ready?” Shiv said, looking between the axe-bearer and Tarlow.

His question was interrupted as a dragon screamed from above—Shiv cursed as he saw the wind-dragon accelerate and—

It promptly crashed into the ground, kicking up dirt and rubbing through the crater. It came to a rest near Shiv and Adam as both men blinked. Then, with a sudden swell of Psychomancy, the dragon’s skull *burst apart* as Uva hatched out from the now headless dragon, sporting a limp.

“Apologies,” the Umbral growled. Shiv saw that her mana field was entirely different from before. Instead of a solid field, it was now a dense weave of thin strings that

spread far across the land—over the very horizon, while remaining rooted to her mind. The Biomancer and Tarlow tried to charge then, but a dozen of the strings pierced through them, and both dragons collapsed into the dirt, screaming as Uva’s physical body briefly transformed into a dense net of mind magic. “Couldn’t quite reach the Jealousy. I had to *find another body* to wear.”

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## 65 (I) Puppeteer

*“Who are you?”*

*“I am... Sir Galloway. I am a Dragon-Knight. I am—I am Master-Tier. My strongest skill is The Sword Ascending.”*

*“And what have you become?”*

*“Your empty vessel, taken, twisted, broken. An echo of me has been brought back through Necromancy.”*

*“And why have you become this?”*

*“Because—because I slaughtered innocent villagers in a fit of rage when they used the wrong title to address me.”*

*“And why were you cut down? Were you cut down by the villagers?”*

*“No—most of them died; they had little chance against me.”*

*“So, why did you die?”*

*“Because you were there, drinking at the tavern in the village... and I did not know—Great Valor Thann. I did not know it was you. I didn’t know—”*

*“If you did, you would have gone to some other village, to kill some other people, for whatever foolish reason. The System wanted you to die this day, and you helped it. You chose to be unwise; you chose to be a monstrous tyrant; you chose to spit on your own valor and honor and virtue. Knight. Knight should mean something. I know the Semper Paragon of your people. He believes in these values, values beyond strength and violence.”*

*“I... Great Valor Thann, I am—”*

*“What use is an apology now? I speak to only a shadow of what was. What a waste. I will make a final use of you. Understand and take what solace you can when I spend your life, knowing it will be to kill another monster.”*

*“I... surrender myself to your power, Legend Valor.”*

*“Ha. Because you have no other choice, fool.”*

-Conversation with the newly animated Sir Galloway and Legendary Pathbearer Valor Thann

65 (I)

Puppeteer

### **2 Minutes Prior...**

The arrow impacted a few meters away from the Jealousy, and Uva materialized a second later. She had Adam bind her to the arrow and fire her off. Meanwhile, he was to go and assist Shiv in getting Valor’s arm after finding his rapier again. The Jealousy was her duty—and only hers.

The Weaveresses would ambush and bleed the remaining dragons as best they could. Meanwhile, Valor needed to regain his strength. The Necromancy used by the Legendary Pathbearer drained him greatly, leaving him diminished and barely capable of flight. When she last saw him, he was resting in the mud near the mind-broken water and fire dragons, guarded by a single Trapdoor Weaveress.

Uva stared at the unmoving Jealousy and sighed as she observed its body. The Greater Demon was entirely healed. Its mind, however, was still broken, and it would take a substantial act on her part to bind herself to its consciousness and guide its actions once more. Perhaps more power than she had left. But she needed to find a way. She had to. Shiv needed her. Weave needed this. She would not fail them. No matter the cost. No matter the price.

Uva focused her Psychomancy, and immediately, an incredible pain washed through her. She could feel the blood vessels bursting inside her skull from the effort, but still, she forced her power out. It trickled forth like water leaking from a crack in a dam, extending all too slowly toward the Jealousy’s broken mind.

“Flow,” Uva snarled, pitting her raw will against the mana strain.

**Shroud of the Shapeless Mind > 91**



But just a moment before she could reach the Jealousy, it all became too much. Something popped in her head, and Uva collapsed to her knees, clutching her head.

And that was all it took to spare her life. A sudden slash tore through the air above her. Then something struck the ground beside her. A shockwave blasted Uva off her feet. As she was flung into the air, she reflexively launched a pillar of ice at her attacker—only for it to shatter against the face of an approaching dragon. Its body was a mass of moving shadows, aside from two blood-red eyes and a chestpiece made of dense wood and blossoming flowers.

It drove a spear infused with Dynamancy into her chest. A blast of force crashed into the Umbral. Uva cried out, feeling her sternum break. She bounced across the ground, skipping as she momentarily lost focus. Then the dragon was on top of her, driving its spear down. She twisted her body to the side—and it was the additional bone plating that saved her this time. It adapted to the blow and allowed her to shrug the massive dagger's tip off with all her strength. The dragon growled as its weapon sank into the earth, and Uva created a pillar of ice and smashed it across the dragon's head.

It broke. The dragon just laughed. Then, it swatted her with the flat of its spear.

Uva cried out as something popped in her right leg, and she impacted the Jealousy—stopping dead against the hard carapace of its body. She clung to the colossal monster as the dragon came for her again, driving its blade through the Jealousy's outer shell and barely missing Uva. Yet, the spear was lodged in place, for the Jealousy was Master-Tier in Toughness as well, and the dragon roared in frustration before releasing its spear. But it chose the wise choice far too late, for when it turned on Uva, it was just in time to take a lance of mind magic into the skull.

The dragon flinched back, clutching its head, while Uva felt an incredible cluster headache explode through her skull. Blood rained down her eyes and ears, but she seized the pain and poured it into the dragon, using a technique that Shiv used so well.

The Dragon-Knight gave a wail of agony as it collapsed. It vomited from the pain as it tried to rise, and it howled for the hurt to end. It howled for the Composer, because that was what Uva was currently doing. Their minds blurred and blended into each other, but only one of them was a Psychomancer, and only one was trained in swimming through the chaos of another's mind.

As the dragon twitched on the ground, trying to fight through the pain, Uva managed to stop the spell. But that was all she managed to do. As she looked at the Jealousy, the world spun, and darkness crashed over her, drowning her consciousness in a wave of blackness and silence. Official source is novelFire

She came to a moment later, quivering, her body drenched in cold sweat. The dragon lay collapsed not far from her. Both of them were still on top of the Jealousy, struggling to get up. Uva hissed as she fought her way back to her feet, while the Dragon-Knight

remained incoherent with pain as it clawed at its skull and sobbed from the suffering. Uva empathized. After all, a good portion of that pain was hers. She materialized spikes of ice and flung them at the dragon; they crashed against its armor and broke. She sighed and stumbled closer to the Jealousy.

“Need... you...” She muttered, speaking to the mind-dead colossus. The Jealousy didn’t respond. Uva clenched her teeth, asked the Composer for strength, and then flung every last bit of her Psychomancy mana into the Jealousy, trying to establish a new connection. Her field shivered. The beginnings of a spell formed—but broke instantly as an inhuman scream of misery left her lips.

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She didn’t even know she was capable of making such a noise. Uva crashed against the Greater Demon. Her skull swam with drifting thoughts. The dragon wasn’t sobbing so much anymore. When it recovered, it would kill her, and unless she managed to push through this, there would be nothing she could do...

*Nothing...*

Her Psychomancy was spent. Trying to use it at all was more likely to knock her out. But her next highest skill was *Parallel-Thinking*—an Adept-Tier Skill Evolution from Multi-Task. That wouldn’t be of any help. After that, she had her shortsword and her Cryomancy, but she wasn’t going to kill a Dragon-Knight with that. Not with her Initiate Physicality.

A dagger appeared in her mind. The dagger that killed her mother. If she died here, she would never find out who did it. If she died here, she would never get to set things right, never see her city again, never chide Ikki in front of the group, argue with her Sisters, never make another piece of clothing. Never... never go to another museum. Never hear another one of her goddess’s songs. Never feel Shiv’s touch—taste another of his dishes. Never listen to Adam complain about something.

Shiv. Adam. They were her team too.

They were *her* boys. And they were fighting dragons. Killing dragons without her. She needed to be with them. She needed—she had *no choice but to become someone more*.

“Please,” Uva cried, her voice hoarse from screaming. She begged the System, the Composer, anyone that could listen to give her the strength. And then she stopped. Because Uva wasn’t the begging, whimpering kind. She’d had a moment of respite. Now? Now, she dove back into the pain. She wasn’t going to let some traitorous dragon asshole finish her. Uva was either going to assimilate with the Jealousy’s power and melt into its mind once more, or she would break herself trying.

Mana flowed out from her. Incredible pain consumed her—pain beyond anything she knew, comparable only to when she strained herself past that threshold facing Harkness. She would have died then if there weren't so many Biomancers in Passage. There weren't going to be Biomancers here, but it didn't matter. She just needed to live long enough to reach into the Jealousy and stun the other monsters, kill them, break at least one, and make it possible for the others to prevail.

Her mana field felt like it was tearing out of her being. It touched the Jealousy, and finally, Uva felt its broken mind. She reached into it—it was like dragging her mind over burning, jagged blades. Every push carved into her consciousness, and any other Psychomancer she knew might have broken. But she managed to push all the way through, and then a notification appeared in her vision.

But her mind went blank as something struck her *hard*. Uva screamed as her right leg shattered entirely. She shot high up into the air, twirling a few times before she felt the massive claws of a dragon close around her. Uva gasped and choked. The dragon squeezed, but Shiv's adamantine plating held. She was spared from being crushed immediately, but still found herself unable to breathe.

Then, she noticed the notification, and despite everything, Uva *laughed*.

Her boys did it! Somehow! Those mad, Composer-blessed surfacers did it.

**Quest Complete: 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.**

**Select a Skill to infuse with +10 Levels**

**Select a Skill to Evolve to Adept-Tier**

Then, a flash of electricity struck her, and she felt her armor's Magical Resistance slightly fracture. Uva blinked and realized she wasn't dealing with the same dragon. Instead, she was staring at a dragon that had wind-chimes hanging off of its armor. Its scales were a sky-blue color, and there looked to be the remains of a splattered Weaveress smeared across its arm.

The sight of the dead Weaveress sent a surge of cold rage through Uva, but that only helped to sharpen her focus. She looked at the offered Quest rewards again. Two things were broken inside her just then—her bones and her mind. So, she decided to change that.

Uva chose to become an Adept in Toughness, and her body suddenly *changed*.

**Skill Evolution: Toughness (Initiate) > Blastmolt (Adept)**

The dragon channeled another bolt of lightning into her. At the same time, the shadowy dragon she fought earlier rose over the current Dragon-Knight's shoulders—and the bastard had its spear back as well. As Uva's armor took the hit, however, something surprising happened. Her Magical Resistance cracked first, but then she felt her body rattle violently as she exploded a meter back and snapped free from the dragon's claws. In her place, a shivering echo of her person remained in the dragon's hands.

She realized that the echo absorbed a portion of the force that just hit her—and then it promptly *exploded*, surprising the wind dragon.

But then Uva was falling, and the shadow dragon went after her. She immediately put the ten levels into her Psychomancy, and a second transformation took place inside her—but she didn't wait for the details to load before she flung her mind magic out at the wind dragon.

### **Skill Evolution: Shroud of the Shapeless Mind (Adept) > Puppeteer of the Formless Strings (Heroic)**

#### **Puppeteer of the Formless Strings > 101**

As she cast out her power, she expected to feel pain, but there came only *strength* and *expansion*. Her mana field broke apart as her Psychomantic sense speared out toward the horizon, growing by an order of magnitude. For a moment, she thought she had destroyed her own magical skill—but instead, her magic had undergone a beautiful metamorphosis. What used to be a solid field broke into hair-thin filaments bound to her mind.

Each filament drifted through existence, brushing other entities capable of thought. The world came alight around her just then, becoming a sea of cognitive constellations. Her own mind narrowed into channels of focus, changing more than even the outside world. Uva's very consciousness felt like a dense weave of twine. The shadow dragon surged at her. Uva shaped a spell. Strands flowed from her mind, and it was like she was manipulating the entirety of her consciousness as puppet strings. She cast her magic out, and every last string she possessed was drawn away from the world and threaded into the wind dragon.

The beast cried out as Uva pierced into their mind from over a thousand different angles. She felt her Parallel Thinking Skill activate as well as she drove her intent through multiple layers of memory and thought. So focused was she that she didn't even notice the shadow dragon striking her.

Her right leg popped. There was pain, but Uva diverted the hurt down along her strands into the wind dragon. It promptly clutched its right leg in her stead. Meanwhile, she jolted away from her body again as an echo took part of the blow for her. It exploded, launching the shadow dragon's spear-strike off course. She caught the shadow

dragon's eyes widening in surprise, but the bulk of her consciousness was *flowing* elsewhere.

"No!" the wind dragon cried. His scales flared bright as his magical absorption briefly fought her, and his Magical Resistance briefly resisted. "*Get out! Get out of my—*"

But Uva's Heroic-Tier Psychomancy was a subtle thing. If the Jealousy was a titanic, hidden blade capable of piercing into someone's mind and turning them into bombs, Uva was a forest of needles, each pulling their own thread. Nothing she did was truly hidden, but each strand of her new mana web was fine and subtle, and when gathered together, utterly *overwhelming*. The wind dragon's ego was pierced through from multiple angles. It cried out once more, but she ordered it to stop with a thought.

Then, before the shadow dragon could come for her, she cast a spell she learned by harvesting the Jealousy's memories. She *transformed* herself into Psychomancy mana and channeled her being across the many fibers. The shadow dragon tried to stab her, and it struck nothing but air as she parted into separate streams of translucent mana. And that was another difference she discovered between her and the Jealousy. It *destroyed* the hosts it occupied. Part of that was because it consumed consciousnesses, but also because its Skill Fusion was ultimately a lethal one.

Uva wouldn't have been able to wear the Jealousy as she did if Shiv hadn't hollowed its ego.

She, however, traded raw destructive power for more control. She wove her own ego over the wind dragon's as he screamed inside of her. *No! Let me out! Give me back—*

Uva threaded a needle through the dragon's defiant thoughts and dissolved them with a thought. Suddenly, the dragon stopped its pointless struggle. *Wh—no! I... Why can't I—*

And then she stitched herself closer to its senses and bodily functions. When she manipulated the Jealousy, she directed it through mental commands and raw psionic effort. Now, she sewed herself into the dragon's consciousness, her mana threads reweaving her ego over theirs like a tight knot. After that, what she wanted was what they wanted, and it was like putting on a finely-tailored piece of clothing.

She saw out from the eyes of the wind dragon.

"Where'd she go?" the shadow dragon called, flying over. "Do you see her?"

The entirety of Uva's mana field was condensed within the wind dragon. She considered pulling a few threads free to strike the other dragon, but decided not to risk it. Experimentation was best done in a controlled setting. Uva decided to go with the more reliable option of making her temporary bodymurder its friend.

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## 65 (II) Puppeteer

65 (II)

Puppeteer

*Please*, the wind dragon begged inside of her. Memories flowed through the wind dragon. Too many memories even for her to process. The shadow dragon appeared in many of them. Sir Orchid—the quiet member of this band of traitors. Too bad it couldn't guess its own fate.

“Hallo? You alright?” The shadow dragon flew close. Uva made the wind dragon feign weakness.

“I think she broke something in me,” Uva said through the dragon, clutching her head.

The shadow dragon came close. “What? Let me—”

Then, she was on him, driving her clawed thumbs through his red eyes in an instant. Inside, Sir Hallo—the wind dragon—wailed in despair as he felt his thumbs sink deep into the eyes of his brother in arms. *NOOOOOO!*

Uva ignored the dragon screaming within her mind in favor of listening to the one shrieking beyond it. The wind dragon wasn't the strongest of its band, but it did have *speed* in spades. And that speed was hers. Hers to use as she accelerated into the shadow dragon, driving it across the sky and sinking her thumbs in deeper.

*Please! Please!* the wind dragon wailed. It couldn't struggle. She'd removed that function from its mind. So all that remained was the begging and the pain.

The shadow dragon thrashed under her grip, stabbing blindly, but their proximity and the pain it was in made the attacks ineffective.

Despite this, the shadow dragon wasn't the only one that was breaking. Uva felt the wind dragon's mind snap inside her, breaking apart around her mana strings. The actions she was forcing on it were driving it insane at an alarming rate. Without choice, the wind dragon descended into madness. But Uva staved that off as well, pulling away trauma with her strands.

**Puppeteer of the Formless Strings > 102**



“Hallo! Stop!” the shadow dragon cried. “Why-why!”

*I can't!* Hallo screamed inside Uva. But the shadow dragon couldn't hear, and she wouldn't tell.

The shadow dragon dropped its spear as the wind dragon's claws sank in all the way. Whereupon Uva had the wind dragon channel electricity via its Aeromancy. The shadow dragon let out a howl of absolute agony as lightning blasted through its skull. The insides of the shadow dragon's eye sockets fried and combusted, its brain faring little better.

*Brother! I'm sorry! I can't... You monster! Monster!*

The wind dragon was sobbing inside her, but Uva's sympathy for these enemies was at an all-time low.

The shadow dragon twitched a few more times before it went still in her arms. The wind dragon screamed. Uva pulled her thumbs out and tossed it aside, where it spiraled towards a burning forest far below. Now, it was time to—

A large part of the wind dragon's mind *broke* from the act. It spasmed in midair, and suddenly, Uva found herself burdened with controlling a dragon's unfamiliar physique herself. The problem there was that she lacked the proper *experiences* and *memories*, considering a good number of them just dissolved. It wasn't a clean ego hollowing, like what Shiv accidentally did to the Greater Demon. This was the start of a complete collapse, and Uva was losing control of this new and alien body. She fought to maintain control.

*I want to die... I want to not exist...*

Since the wind dragon couldn't resist her, it instead rushed head-first toward madness.

*Wonderful*, Uva snarled as she struggled to manage more and more of this alien body. Existential horror and despair splashed against her, but she broke those thoughts before they could ever drown her. She was going to need a new traitor dragon to wear soon. One with an intact ego. She would probably need to focus more of her mana on blunting the trauma from her next target. This was a good first lesson.

Tentatively, she removed a few of her tendrils. Controlling the dragon didn't feel much more difficult. As she removed half of her strands, she still felt stable, but her influence over the dragon was rapidly fading.

*Maybe I could break multiple minds and simply broadcast orders into them using the mana strands. Have them fight autonomously on my behalf...*

She'd find out soon.



Uva extended her strands, then, and left her mana spread out over the land. The umbral wilderness was a mess of dense trees and swaths of wasteland. She needed something to—

She felt her mind brush something. A mind that was impossibly resilient and hard, with several others closing in. *Shiv?*

More of the dragon's sanity collapsed, but she directed it to channel a gust of explosive wind with a flex of her mind. She had a direction, now. And a purpose. She was going to find her team, and they were going to finish the rest of these dragons off.

This had been a brutal fight. Uva had come closer to death more times in the past few seconds than she had for entire years during her early career. And she almost broke her own mind again. But the System rewarded this. The System loved conflict, and it also loved strugglers. And from the moment Shiv came into her life, her struggle grew immense.

And Uva *loved* it.

*Hold on*, she thought as she tore across the horizon. She saw Shiv and Adam standing in a crater. Three other dragons closed in on them. Three new vessels to choose from.

And just then, the last bits of the wind dragon's mind crumbled away, leaving Uva to fly its body without any context or practice. So she did the best thing she could. She glided. But that mostly became a directed fall as the earth sped toward her at an alarming rate. She struck the ground not far away from her team, and though the wind dragon briefly lost consciousness, Uva was still aware, and Uva wanted out.

She flexed every fiber of her mana outward, not bothering to untangle herself as she emerged back into the real world in a blast of Psychomancy and brain matter. She stepped and winced as she realized her right leg was still fractured. Adept Toughness was better than nothing, but even with her new protections, she wasn't nearly as durable as Shiv or Adam with his ridiculous armor.

"Apologies," she said, taking in her boys. Shiv was nothing more than a transparent outline now, and Adam had a new arrow nocked. It seemed like they went through some transformations as well. In her periphery, she saw two dragons move—and she speared them with every thread she could immediately muster. Jets of mind-rending trauma were injected out through her strands, and both the Biomancer and Sir Tarlow went down screaming. "Couldn't quite reach the Jealousy. I had to *find another body* to wear."

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

One of her threads passed through Adam and Shiv. The Young Lord was *terrified* of what she just did, but Shiv—

*"Holy shit... that was hot,"* he muttered internally, enraptured by the sight of her striding out from the dragon.

Uva gave a slight smirk. Her dear brute was an easy man to please.

\*\*\*

Shiv was torn away from staring at Uva when the colossal axe-bearer roared and charged. He saw several of Uva's strands slash into the axe-bearer's mind and—

"He's completely mad!" Uva cried in surprise.

"Yup!" Shiv said as he launched himself forward before the big bastard could smash into either of his more fragile allies. Shiv knew just how hard the big dragon could hit, how fast it was while raging. And so he adapted his strategy. He crouched low and crashed hard against the dragon's chest, charging it from an angle. Shiv felt himself get driven back like he was an insect trying to hold back an avalanche on a frozen slope, but he twisted his gravitic field, and he cut hard with his dagger, slashing at the back of the dragon's legs.

His blade crashed against the dragon, further empowered by his gravitic field, but to Shiv's surprise, the cut wasn't merely sharper or harder. No. The trembling power within its edge passed through the insides of the dragon as well. The beast cried out as Shiv sensed his slash start against skin before it swam through flesh, bone, and artery. The dragon had Adamantine Adaption as well, but it hadn't been hit in a while, and Shiv's blade held simpler qualities. Blood spurted out from the axe-bearer's left leg as it crashed down. But Shiv didn't let it grind along the earth in peace. No, this big piece of shit knocked him out and kept beating him. With a flare of anger, Shiv stabbed through the dragon's ribs and lifted it over his head before dropping it on his knee.

A cloud of blood burst out from its back and one of its ribs snapped as it was folded over its much smaller adversary.

But the axe-bearer's Berserk Skill was still active. It barely noticed the pain, and its lashing tail hit Shiv in the side. He drained some momentum and managed to stabilize himself—only for the dragon's massive hand to pin him against the ground. Shiv sliced a finger and then ripped the entire digit off. The dragon punched him. Shiv felt his right shoulder fracture. He snarled and squeezed out of the dragon's hand. His Silhouette was still active, and it punched nothing but dirt the next second.

At the same time, a dozen dimensional arrows tore into existence and crashed into the axe-bearer's legs. A massive series of blasts washed over Shiv. The axe-bearer cried out as it lost its left leg entirely. It took a step forward, only for more of Adam's Veilpiercers to hit its wings, right ankle and both hands. It crashed down into the dirt, and Shiv held it down before dragging his blade across its throat and launching his bone drills into the back of its head.

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## Silhouette > 51

## Gravitic Wrestler > 117

The dragon's Adamantine Adaption stopped Shiv from fully slicing its neck open, but it still wounded the beast badly. Blood gushed out from its severed scales, and Shiv pulled back on its neck with a roar. If his blade couldn't do the work, he would finish the job with his hands. Adam helped him by firing shots into the dragon's open neck wound, disrupting its adaption further. The axe-bearer coughed as it tried to throw Shiv off, only to take two Veilpiercers in both eyes. That sent the beast reeling, and Shiv secured his entire field around the dragon's neck as he pinched the dragon's exposed arteries and pulled them out.

An entire jungle of veins and arteries was torn out from inside the dragon. Adam shot those too. The axe-bearer crashed down on its knees, but it shrugged hard, and Shiv nearly got thrown off. With a shout, he cast Adam's wounds into the dragon, and its Magical Resistance rattled, stunning it briefly.

*"Shiv!"* Adam's voice cried in his mind as Uva connected the three of them again. *"Expose the wound!"*

Shiv did, and as he pulled the dragon back, Uva threw something at Adam, and he caught his rapier once more. It flashed five times. Five new Adams appeared, each with a Veilpiercer nocked. They all fired as one, and a bloody chasm was blown into the massive dragon's throat. Shiv absorbed some of the impact with his Momentum Core as he slashed the dragon's neck three more times. Every hit made the dragon harder, but then time stopped. His core filled. And Shiv discharged as he swiped through the axe-bearer's neck a final time, feeding all rage into the blow.

Where the dragon struck him hard and blunt, Shiv slashed precisely and fast. Deepest Edge worked in perfect tandem with Momentum Core and Gravitic Wrestler. Shiv's hypercharged cut washed through the dragon's already mutilated neck—and passed all the way through. Its spine parted. Its tendons split. Shiv tore the dragon's head off its body, ripping away an entire section of scales that still clung on with a roar of effort.

When he finally came to a stop, he chunked the dragon's head a dozen meters aside and spat on it. "I would have kicked your ass the first time if Tarlow didn't step in."

And speaking of the other dragons, he turned to see the dragon Biomancer crying out as the last vestiges of Uva's form surged into its mind in the form of a few hundred translucent mana strings. A few meters away, he turned just to see Tarlow teleport, and Shiv cursed—

Only for Adam to fire a shot and send the kukri-wielding dragon crashing down to the dirt a few hundred meters away, with one arm barely hanging on.

Shiv looked at Adam and grinned. *“Nice felling shot. Now. Let’s go put this dragon in the dirt.”*

They reached Tarlow in seconds thanks to Adam’s dimensional rupture. Shiv stepped out from the chasm first. Adam hid behind him with an arrow drawn. A second later, as Tarlow tried to take flight, her wings splattered apart into bloody mush as the dragon Biomancer stomped over.

Faintly, Shiv could hear the dragon’s muffled screaming from within Uva. He saw a faint weaving of her layered over its mind as well. *“Just what kind of Skill Evolution is that?”* Shiv asked.

*“Heroic,”* Uva replied, making the dragon Biomancer smile at him.

Shiv grunted in surprise and bemusement. “Well. Look at you two out-evolving me.”

Adam sneered.

Before them, Tarlow gasped as she tried to rise. She turned and saw Shiv—looked at the Biomancer in confusion, and then sighed. Her left arm was useless. Her right hand clenched the kukri tighter. “So. I’m assuming you won’t accept my surrender.”

Shiv snorted. “Yeah. Think about what your commander said—I’m a surfer too.”

The dragon stared, and then she laughed. “Strange. I survived your forces during the war, only to die to three random mercenaries here and now. The System mocks us.”

“It just wants us to fight and die,” Shiv said. “Today was both our turns.”

She nodded and noted the knife in his hands. She looked at her kukri. “Hey, little monster. How about a final round?”

Shiv nodded. And then he sent a thought to Adam. *“Shoot her ass, she stabbed me in the back enough times.”*

Adam loosed an arrow. Tarlow tried to move, but the Biomancer dragon turned her legs to paste, and a moment later, her arm was blown off. As she screamed and crashed against the ground, Shiv leaped forward and drove his dagger down through her skull before dragging it across her body. Tarlow barely managed a final gurgle as she was gutted from head to pelvis. But even in death, she clung hard to her kukri.

“Well,” Adam said. “That was—” He laughed. “We butchered her, didn’t we?”

Shiv grunted. He looked at the massive kukri, which was glowing—and for some reason, *shrinking*. “There are still a few left. The Dynamancer—”

“I have him,” Uva declared. A second later, the Biomancer’s skull exploded as well, and the dragon toppled in the dirt beside Tarlow. Uva’s face was coiled in disgust as she looked at Shiv. “His memories were vile.” That was all she needed to say. A few moments later, she turned translucent as her mana threads reached across the horizon. “I’ll try to keep this one alive. We can do some questioning and trade him to the Descenders for a boon.” The source of this content is

And then she vanished over the horizon in a surge of translucent mind mana. Shiv and Adam looked on, unsure where she just went, but the Young Lord sighed. “Well. She terrified me before with her Psychomancy, but now—”

“Now we’re going to *destroy* that gate when we get to it,” Shiv said, chuckling. He reached out and clapped Adam on the shoulder.

The Young Lord grunted. “What was that for?”

“For dragging my ass out of the dirt.”

Adam looked away and rolled his shoulders. “Well. It’s what a Pathbearer should do.”

“Yeah. Well. Thanks, asshole.”

“You’re welcome, bastard.”

And with that, the fight against what was a Lance of twelve Descender outcasts came to a close. From the distance, there came two final screams as the surviving dragons were swallowed by a newly risen Heroic-Tier Pathbearer.

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

## 66 (I) Arsenal

*A Pathbearer is more than their own skills, their team, their strategy.*

*A Pathbearer is also their equipment.*

*Your equipment will keep you alive. It will make you better. It will shore up your weaknesses and enhance your strengths.*

*If you have the right piece of equipment, you can face a Pathbearer a Tier above you—even beat them decisively. Indeed, a middling Pathbearer granted a Legendary weapon or armor could prevail against incredible odds, even when their personal power is lacking. But understand that this is not a guarantee. No, this is merely a possibility of victory offered when there was none before.*

*That's the main benefit of equipment: new possibilities.*

*But understand that it works the other way as well. A Legendary weapon can be failed by a middling Pathbearer. These situations end with the weapon taken from the weak Pathbearer by a more deserving wielder. So understand that you do not end where your equipment begins, and it does not extend beyond you.*

*You are the wielder, and it helps you prevail. Understand the weapons and armor you possess, understand what you need, what you lack, and you can go far.*

*And should you be fortunate, the System will reward you. It may bestow upon you a blade when your offense is lacking, or offer you an instrument to stop Jump Mages from ambushing you if you had no recourse before. Perhaps even a shield may be granted as a boon if you are fragile and wanting in defense.*

*But whatever the case, do not rely on the System to reward you; seek out what you require. Your life is your responsibility, and that is why, above all, any Pathbearer who refuses to see themselves properly equipped for their task will not be ascending for long.*

*And regardless of what you receive, remember who is the wielder and who is wielded...*

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

66 (I)

Arsenal

"Keep—keep *her* away from me! I'll do anything. Don't touch me... I'll do anything. Please, just keep her away... Keep her away! Don't let her touch my mind again. Please don't let her touch my mind again!"

It was a surreal sight, watching the almost 200-meter-long Dynamancer dragon grovel and beg. Its claws dug through clumps of dirt, and it wept like a traumatized, broken child. Just fifty meters away, its Inertium pike lay buried in the skull of its sole remaining companion.

Uva shared with Adam and Shiv what she did. She took hold of the Dynamancer's mind. Then, as his sole surviving comrade tried to burn a team of wounded Trapdoor Weaveresses, she had the Dynamancer drive the weapon into its comrade from behind.

And now, the sole surviving dragon was barely sane. The trauma from being made to murder his own companion rendered it broken and hollow. It couldn't even look at Uva—wouldn't meet her eyes as she stared at him.

Uva extended her Psychomancy threads out across the battlefield, coordinating with the surviving Shadow Cells, calling them in, and telling them to bring Valor with them.

Nearby, Shiv and Adam looked upon the Umbral with differing expressions. Shiv had a light look of euphoria on his face, and a feeling of desire spread through his body.

"That was felling awesome," he breathed, looking between the mind-broken living dragon and the nearby dead one. "Godsdamned, Uva. I mean... *Godsdamned*."

For most of his life, Shiv was ostracized and alienated. Relationships weren't a possibility for him, and he never truly thought about his type. He was attracted to certain people, but that was about it. Right now, though, he discovered a very particular thing about his preferences: He very much liked cold and terrifying women, and some part of him realized that was likely a result of spending so much time under Georges as well. That thought made him shiver for a moment, but he shrugged it off.

*The kitchen really made me who I am*, Shiv thought with wonder.

Comparatively, Adam's eyes were wide, his pupils dilated in near terror. He kept looking at the dragon as it lay in the dirt, shaking and weeping. The Young Lord shuddered.

"Shiv, it is good that we have a reliable and potent ally in the form of Sister Uva, isn't it?" Adam said, swallowing. Shiv found himself vaguely aware of what the Young Lord was doing. The man was trying to reframe the situation in more palatable terms. What Adam was really terrified about, however, was how Uva could now easily rip into his mind as well and use him as a meat puppet.

Adam clearly didn't like the idea of being used as a meat puppet one bit.

"Don't worry, Adam," Uva suddenly said. "I would never do that to you." She turned to smile at him. "Not without reason." She clearly meant that humorously, but a burst of cold fear still came from Adam, and her expression turned serious. "Adam, I would never break your mind that way."

"Without reason," Adam replied, swallowing once again. "I think, I think that given the proper circumstances, and if I annoy you enough—"



"If you annoy me severely enough, at the most, I would perhaps take away your short-term memory. So you suddenly forget what you were on about and stop talking. Short of you becoming an enemy of the Composer and Weave, I will not harm or twist your mind." Uva infused an injection of honesty into Adam. "Adam, hear my words. I will not hurt you this way. You are a noble friend and a reliable comrade. And Psychomancy is a heavy burden and a potent power to bear. I will not use it carelessly."

Adam's fear faded, and a slight affection replaced it. "Thank you, Uva. Why, if I was this terrified of Shiv, he would continuously tease me."

Shiv eyed the Young Lord and poked him in the shoulder. "Don't worry, Adam. I'm going to continuously tease you about being afraid of Uva." Google search

Adam rolled his eyes. "Of course you are."

The Young Lord sighed as he looked around. This stretch of the umbral wilderness was almost completely annihilated. The light of a burning forest beyond the horizon lit up their features. Adam's breath dragged as he pressed his lips together. "I didn't appreciate how destructive fights between Master-Tier opponents could get."

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

"And this didn't go unnoticed," Uva said. "I can feel other minds approaching, many of them. Some of them are First Blood vampires. Dimensionals as well. They are avoiding the area, though. Just patrols, with no urge to die. I can feel the fear seeping from their minds."

"How can you tell?" Shiv asked.

Uva hummed. "The way they think, the things they speak about."

"Just how far does your mana reach now?" Adam blinked.

Uva regarded him for a moment and frowned in concentration. "Maybe a bit over twelve kilometers."

"*Twelve* kilometers?" Adam blurted out. "Twelve?"

Uva narrowed her eyes at him. "You can shoot much further than that with your Awareness and your..." She regarded his bow. "Your new arrow. What is that?"

"That's a Veilpiercer arrow," Adam said, coughing as he suddenly adjusted his posture. He held his head high and pulled his shoulders back, puffing out his chest without even realizing it. "It allows me to fire an arrow across dimensions. More than that, it lets me create a temporary dimension between me and my target. The arrow also gets faster the longer it travels. Tell her, Shiv."

Instead of telling her verbally, Shiv just sent her the memory—and especially of Adam saving him from the axe-bearer. Despite Shiv's unrelenting urge to tease Adam, that memory of Adam extending a hand down to Shiv after distracting the axe-bearer meant a lot. Especially with the way his strange dream bled over into it. Shiv paused. There was a heaviness inside of him. The Young Lord and he—they didn't have the best history. But after all this, after Shiv saved Adam and Adam came back for him, whatever they were before, it wasn't anymore. He was sure of it.

"That is quite impressive, Adam," Uva said. "And your arrows, they move faster the longer they travel?"

"Indeed," Adam said. "I don't even know the limits to that. And when it tears open a dimensional rift, the arrow doesn't move in reality, right? It just accelerates even faster and travels on a shorter route. And we can travel through the dimensional tear. It's not nearly as long as taking the direct route in the physical world. There are so many things I can do. There are so many experiments I can..." His words trailed as a flash of light washed over them.

All three of them turned and noticed three beams shooting high into the sky. The colors that composed the beams were dynamic, constantly shifting, and tendrils of mana zipped up from the land, splashing into the beams. More than that, the rising columns of magic called to each of them with a soft squeal.

Just then, notifications flashed across all three of their eyes.

### **Master-Tier Equipment Reforged**

Shiv grunted a laugh. "Right, we still got some hidden Master-Tier items to pick up. I got a feeling I know what I'm about to get. What about you two?"

Adam briefly narrowed his eyes, his irises flaring as he activated his Seer of Horizons. A few moments later, his expression changed into one of fascination.

"What?" Shiv replied. "What do you see?"

"I... We should go and gather the items first. I'm pretty sure I know what the system prepared for you, Shiv, but me and Uva... might have some examining to do. Wait, let me make this quick." The Young Lord promptly fired three arrows at once. Three different dimensional rifts then appeared before them, leading to three different glowing items. Uva and Shiv stared at Adam. He just grinned. "One at a time. Someone needs to watch the *prisoner*."

\*\*\*

Something about Tarlow's kukri felt right in Shiv's hand. The system applied its strange magics to reduce the great blade's size and make it easier for him to wield, but there

were some other minor changes as well. For one, the handle was now completely molded from adamantine bone, which let him mold it using his Biomancy.

**Equipment Obtained: [Rememberer of Wounds]**

**Tier: Master**

**Condition: Perfect**

**Composition: Adamantine Bone; Stellarite**

**Enchantments > Speed-Amplification; Self-Mending; Conduit of Dawn; Chrono-Anchored Strike; Binding**

As Shiv held the blade, he examined its composition beyond the handle. The blade itself was Stellarite, much like the saber he got for Adam. Much like Harkness's rapier as well. The blade thrummed with power, but it wasn't just Shiv's Deepest Edge. Instead, fractals of gold rippled out from its curved length as Shiv studied the blade. It also made his body feel lighter and faster. No wonder Tarlow felt so absurdly fast with the blade in her hand.

Shiv examined its Enchantments and frowned. He knew what most of them meant. Conduit of Dawn was how she unleashed beams of intense heat from the blade, but *Chrono-Anchored Strike* was something unknown to him. To him, but not to Uva.

"A Chronomancy Enchantment..." Uva blinked. "That is remarkable. For someone to invest such a skill into a blade... It's unthinkable. The number of people who develop Chronomancy—it's rarer than even becoming a Psychomancer."

Shiv spun the blade in his hand and tested it. He walked over to the dead dragon nearby and slashed at it. Deepest Edge carried the cut all the way through, and the unmoving corpse was hewed open as if someone had dropped a 100-meter-long guillotine upon its neck. Shiv took a few steps back and reached into the blade's Enchantment, focusing on the deep power within, and just as he remembered performing the cut, he immediately jolted across existence—across *time* as he repeated the very same slash. Once more, his Deepest Edge and other skills triggered, and this time, the dragon was completely beheaded. Blood spewed across the ground, and Adam shuddered.

"Wow," Shiv breathed. "That explains how she kept stabbing me in the back the same way every time—how it felt like she just kept blinking into me. I guessed it might have been spatial magic, but Can Hu said it could be—" Shiv paused. "*Shit*. Can Hu!"

He was about to launch himself into the air to seek his downed automaton companion when Uva told him to remain calm as her mana strings twitched with new information..

“Trapdoor found him. He is well. They will transport him soon. He also wishes to convey a message: He says that he is ashamed that he couldn’t help more.”

Shiv shook his head. “The only reason why I managed to block practically anything Tarlow did was because of Can Hu. When I lost it, she started smashing me around—flung me into the big guy, and he cracked my skull open, even though Adamantine Adaption reduces the damage from repeated attacks a *lot*.”

“Right, about that. Shiv, have I told you what a bloody cockroach you are?” Adam asked.

Shiv nodded indifferently. “Practically every day.”

“It’s a compliment, this time. That thing was hitting you hard enough to cause small earthquakes. When it struck you with its axe the first time, I passed out just from the shockwave.”

Shiv considered that, and he snorted. “Yeah, you do have kind of a glass jaw.”

Adam scoffed. “Or maybe I’m a normal person who doesn’t get skills meant for monsters.”

Shiv grunted. “Maybe. I don’t see a problem with being an obscene monster. Helps me survive.” He rubbed his face. There were a lot of pieces in him that were still broken. When his Biomancy recovered, he was going to store some of his new wounds for examination. He had almost managed to create a magically constructed injury against the Psychomancer, but he was still missing a lot of details. This would be good for practical study.

“Well, anyway, perhaps this might help me with my fragility,” Adam muttered. He plucked a vambrace off the ground, and Shiv stared at it. It looked like a cracked, broken, withered length of blackened leather, but it was still held together by something he couldn’t see. As Adam stretched his armored hand through the vambrace, a fissure splashed over his arm—a fissure of green and corrosive energy.

Shiv flung himself back twenty meters. “Shit, Adam! Felling warn me when you put on something Necromantic!”

But the Young Lord was no longer listening. Instead, he observed his new vambrace, flexing his fingers, and the corrosion danced between every digit. Slowly, a fissure opened atop his palm—a fissure that expanded and became a realm filled with lashing, corrosive power. It widened into a dense shape that pulled at the world, drawing in motes of withered blackness. Studying the item through Adam’s mind, Shiv saw its Enchantments as well.

**Equipment Obtained: [Vambrace of the Corroded Domain]**

**Tier: Master**

**Condition: Corroded**

**Composition: Withered Leather**

**Enchantments > Master Spatial Anchor; Master Dimensional Corrosion; Necromancy 50; Binding**

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

## 66 (II) Arsenal

66 (II)

Arsenal

Even though Shiv didn't fully grasp all the details of the vambrace, he had a feeling that any Jump Mage that wanted to ambush Adam now was likely going to experience a very, very ugly demise.

"Let me see something," Adam said. He pulled back his hand, but the corrosion remained in the air like a ball of festering rot. Adam formed a Veilpiercer and snaked the tip into the corrosion. Suddenly, the arrow *ignited*, turning a corroded green—and then Adam also applied a source of mana from the Spellstring. The lightning coursing around the Veilpiercer arrow was also infested with the Necromantic energy.

It was like the System gave Adam a weapon and a vambrace specifically designed to kill—Shiv paused at that thought. A lot of these weapons and skill upgrades they were getting were beyond just blind chance. It was like the System was shaping future conflicts to come. Was it trying to position Adam to be his slayer at some point, or potentially allow Adam to set Shiv off like a bomb?

As he considered that, Adam stared at Shiv, and he nodded. Their minds remained connected through Uva, and all three of them shared the same thought. "It would not surprise me," the Young Lord mumbled.

Shiv paused, and he grunted. "I'll try not to give you a reason to shoot me."

Adam stared at him. "I think it will take quite a bit for me to shoot you now, Shiv."

And that made Shiv feel something altogether different. Adam looked away from him, seeming slightly embarrassed at his admission.

There was something unsaid. There was still a discomfort in the Young Lord about their history, but old wounds flared weakly beneath newly hardened bonds—they owed each other life, and recent life at that. Distant deaths were but shadows in the light.

Then Adam fired his arrow, and it streaked over the horizon. He aimed at a mountain, partially cracked but still mostly standing after the conflict between the Lance and Shiv's group. The arrow impacted the mountain, and a corrosive thunderstorm detonated outward from the other end of the dimensional rift.

What's more, however, was that the unstable dimensional pathway Adam's arrow created was also entirely corrosive within, and it exerted such a spatial pull on the world that Shiv had to root himself and Uva in place with his gravity.

"It's a powerful spatial anchor as well," Adam breathed. "I can feel it dragging and pulling at my Dimensionality. Between that and the corrosion... Any Jump Mage who tries to ambush me might find themselves in dire circumstances."

Shiv chuckled. "Seems the System wants to make you hard to reach."

"Indeed," Adam said, recalling how Tarlow beat him. "I suspect we're going to be facing a great many Jump Mages soon as well."

"Well. We will be raiding a gate soon," Uva noted, frowning.

Finally, the Umbral Psychomancer gazed upon her Master-Tier item, but confusion spread across her face. The same confusion spread across Shiv and Adam's features as well.

"I'm not sure what this is," Shiv muttered.

"Me neither," Adam said, narrowing his eyes.

He observed it using his Seer of Horizons, but ended up letting out a sigh. "Well, pick it up, Uva."

"How?" she replied. She gestured at the construct, and she had a point. It resembled a small cloud of fast-moving metal shards that danced around a mana core shaped from gravity—a Dynamancy core.

Shiv's Reflexes were fast enough for him to study the shards in vivid detail, and he noticed something. "Those—those are from the Biomancer's shield."

Adam blinked, and he immediately cast his senses kilometers away to where they left the Biomancer headless in a pool of its own blood. “Indeed... A section of its shield has broken off.”

“Wait, I think I hear something,” Uva said. One of her psionic tendrils slipped into the mana core of her new item. Suddenly, a notification appeared in her eyes, and with a single thought, the metal shards stopped dancing and recomposed themselves, fusing together to become a hovering tower shield. It was still cracked, veined with damage, but it seemed to be better that way. It obeyed every single one of Uva’s commands, and it also—

“Hello?” a voice said. All three of them blinked.

“Who said that?” Adam said.

“The shield,” Uva breathed.

*“There’s... somewhere there. I’m... I’m lost... I’m scared. Why do I feel so scared? What does it feel like, or does it feel like my mind has been ripped into so many pieces? What do I feel like? I’m bits and pieces of a strand pulled apart? Oh gods, I don’t know—the blood, the blood... my thumbs and someone’s eyes... The blood...”*

Uva’s eyes widened. Memories came from her unbidden, memories of her using the wind dragon to gouge out the eyes of its comrade.

Adam gagged in horror and disgust. “How did you... You just... You just did that?”

“As an act of surprise,” Uva answered matter-of-factly, more focused on her new item than Adam’s visceral revulsion.

“It seems,” she said, “that the shield carries a mental imprint of one of my former—” She paused. “*Hostages.*”

“*Hostages.* That’s what you’re going to call them?” Adam asked, a quiver to his voice.

Uva seemed to think it fit. “It feels like the most apt word. That, or... glove? Sleeve? Something that I can wear.”

“Wearing... *people*,” Adam breathed.

“She’s wearing enemies,” Shiv said with a shrug. “I don’t know. It seems pretty cool to me. Kind of hot too. Just all the power, them not being able to do anything about it.” He let out an almost shuddering breath.

Adam stared at Shiv. “You... you have problems, Shiv. You have deep, deep problems. More than I thought.”



“Maybe I just know how to appreciate a girl who can rip a Dragon-Knight's mind in half.” Shiv grinned at Uva, and she replied with a very appreciative flutter of her eyelashes.

Between them, Adam began to gag. “Stop! Disconnect me if you’re going to do this! Stop!”

Uva laughed, and they stopped before things got too awkward for poor Adam.

“What else do you remember?” Uva asked the shield.

*“I don’t... I remember. I remember... that I’m afraid of you. Please don’t hurt me. I’ll do anything you ask. You don’t need to force me to do anything. I’ll just work with you. I’m very... My personality... I’m... I’m a very affable person! Yes, I like—I like to do things other people tell me to do. I’ll become anything you want.”*

The shield began to break apart, and it changed into several shapes. Shiv noticed, however, that the shards could only move within a five-meter radius, with the Dynamancy mana core able to move itself as well.

Shiv’s Gravitic Wrestler felt the pull of the shield, and it had a force inside it that was just slightly weaker than what he could unleash.

Uva bade the shield to approach her. It hovered behind her, and then she hopped aboard it and stood atop the shield as if it were a flying board.

“Well,” Uva said, “this should be interesting.” She then dismantled every piece of metal and collapsed it around herself. The Dynamancy core hovered just over her head, but it seemed vulnerable and exposed.

Shiv remembered facing the dimensional golem—how he killed it by ripping into its core. He supposed that probably was a similar weakness with the shield, or at least a vulnerability. Fresh chapters posted on Novel-Fire.net

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Uva immediately reformed the shield and launched it. It speared through the ground, casting dirt everywhere. She kept going as it blasted deeper and deeper into the ground. She smirked as her tendril kept her connected to the shield, and she casually recalled it a second later. It shot back to her, drifted around, and planted itself in the earth just behind her. The shards began to drift around her like constellations.

**Equipment Obtained: [The Mind-Shattered Sentinel]**

**Special: Awakened Item**

**Tier: Master**

**Condition: Shattered (Perfect)**

**Composition: Adamantine**

**Enchantments > Master Gravity Field; Dynamancy 80; Bulwark of Force; Self-Mending; Binding**

Uva smiled. “Well, it seems that I might have a physical solution to some problems as well now.”

“The System’s real thoughtful,” Shiv noted. “Everything we got was to cover up a shortcoming or enhance our effectiveness somehow.”

“And that is what it means to be favored.” Valor’s voice sounded from behind them as several Weaveresses threw back their cloaks and walked into the light. Valor was resting in the hands of Still Water. She looked a bit battered, but otherwise in good shape.

Behind her, Liquid Serpent was hopping on one leg—all her other limbs were torn or cut off at various points, but she still seemed to be in high spirits. “I think I killed another one.”

“You didn’t,” Spark Ripper commented behind her.

“I wounded it severely.”

“I had to slash its eyes before it ripped you in half,” the automaton mumbled.

“I would have bested the dragon somehow,” Liquid Serpent said, sounding more confident with every exchange.

The fire within Valor’s sockets burned dimly, and Shiv winced as he regarded the skull. Somehow, the Legendary Pathbearer looked weak, spent.

“Valor had to do a bit of Necromancy to get me and Uva out of an ugly situation,” Adam explained, noting Shiv’s stare.

“That was nothing,” Valor said, slurring his words. “But my hands—do you perchance have my arm? It would please me greatly if you did.”

Shiv reached into his cloak and pulled out Valor’s right arm. It was a crystalline limb, radiating odd energy, and ritualistically etched with strange patterns. He didn’t much want to hold onto the arm for long. Something about him told him that it was going to be rather volatile when triggered somehow.

“Good, bring it closer,” Valor said. “I wish to, I wish to...”

And then the arm left Shiv, guided by an unseen force. It streaked through the air and attached itself below the skull, right next to his other arm. The hand clamped around Valor's featureless face for a moment. Then a flash followed.

"Release me," Valor commanded, strength suddenly flooding into his voice.

The Weaveress chucked him into the air. Shiv expected him to crash down, but then a pulse of crackling, corrosive energy spread out and created an outline.

Briefly, Shiv's eyes caught something in that festering mess—and he staggered back from the surge of Necromancy. He saw the blurry visage of a tall, thin man with prominent cheekbones and piercing, blue eyes. His shoulder-length hair was midnight-black, as was his short, well-manicured beard. He was clad in a flowing cloak and a set of skeletal armor more ornately decorated than Shiv's. But he was also outlined—outlined by the sickly green and black of Necromancy flowing through his armor, flashing behind his eyes. But even then, the Necromancy within merely veiled him, shrouded him from an even higher power that shone around the man like a halo. It was absolute radiance, brighter than even whiteness itself; the power of Animancy.

For a moment, Shiv glimpsed at He Who Stills Eternity, the Great Valor Thann, a Legend at the height of his capabilities, and he felt like he was gazing upon a giant beyond giants.

Becoming a Hero or even a Master was truly substantial for a Pathbearer, but Shiv remembered the gulf between Adept and Master. He felt the power of a Hero as he fought Confriga, as he faced the Jealousy. How powerful, then, could a Legend be? Marikos's flame turned him to less than ashes, dissolved him, and vaporized an entire mountain. Vicar Sullain stopped time itself and turned fire into life. But what was Valor capable of that made him feel so much more potent than even they?

Then, the moment faded, and the visage went with it. But Valor didn't, and no longer was he but a loose collection of skeletal pieces. His two arms hovered across from each other, where they would be if the man they belonged to were whole, their bones outlined by a crackling shroud of necromancy. From the same energies, a silhouette formed for Valor, showing the general imprint of a man, though missing the details Shiv had seen a moment ago. His skull hovered in the right place, but at his heart—or the place where his heart should have been—the dagger burned, and no longer did it appear as a crude shape of stone. Instead, parts of what Shiv now knew to be a shell had cracked away, revealing a glint of mithril, and of something *more*.

"Ah," Valor breathed, his voice sounding somehow clearer than before. "I am... more myself again."

He closed his right hand and flexed his digits. The Necromancy danced and surged through his right limb, and a slight whirl of power flicked through the earth and outright left it withered and dissolved, cutting deep without meeting any resistance.

Shiv was backing away even more now. He didn't want to be anywhere near Valor while the Necromancy was—

“Shiv!” A voice came from behind him, and to his surprise, he saw Can Hu approaching. Not carried by any Weaveresses, however; instead, a platform of earth carried the badly damaged armor across the air. Shiv blinked as Can Hu opened itself up, revealing its half-skull to Shiv. There, Shiv saw that Can Hu's insides were layered by new strips of strange alloys, and that its fractured frame seemed to be spraying out pieces of drifting stone. More than that, its eyes were also sparking with reaching bolts of electricity. Yet, at a closer glance, Shiv could see the bolts weren't actually bolts, but fading streams of zeros and ones.

“Can Hu, what happened to you?”

“Skill Evolution!” the automaton declared. “I am now an Adept in Geomancy—a Molder of Metal and Stone.” The automaton sounded surprised itself. “But more than that, the Quest rewards were enough to evolve a skill that had long since stagnated at the cusp of a new Tier. I have evolved my Machine Mastermind Skill into something more. I am a Binaric Sovereign now. Whatever that entails...”

Shiv's eyes widened as he recalled Can Hu telling him about its Machine Mastermind Skill, how it was one of the bot's few remaining Master-Tier skills.

As the memory flowed through their mental link, Uva's features lit up. “Can Hu, that's amazing!” she exclaimed.

While she and Adam both walked over to congratulate the bot, Shiv chuckled drily. “Godsdamn it, I'm really the only one of our group without a Heroic Skill...” His expression quickly turned back into a smile, however, and he went to clap Can Hu on the shoulder. “Congratulations. You look... Well, you sound better, actually?” The automaton's voice was lined with less interference now, and the stutters had decreased significantly.

“That is not all,” Can Hu said, brushing over its new status as a Hero rather quickly. From under its skull drifted a small shape, a metal seed. “I was given something else. Something you should see.” Can Hu cast the seed into the Earth and Shiv blinked as, for a moment, nothing happened. The others stared as well. Then, suddenly, a series of metallic vines expanded from the earth, shaping themselves into something of a gateway in mere moments. Suddenly, a dimensional passage pulsed into shape beyond the gate.

Adam gasped. “That's—I can feel that! That's a minor dimension!”

**Equipment Obtained: [Garden of Bountiful Alloy]**

**Tier: Master**

**Condition: Perfect**

**Composition: Para-Alloy**

**Enchantments > Category One Dimension Core; Garden of Alloy; Adaptive Environment**

Can Hu chirped in acknowledgement. "It seems to be the case."

The party ventured inside for a moment, but Adam eyed his vambrace. "I think I best keep a close watch on this in case I affect some other dimensional spaces. I think I can control it, but... best not to risk anything until I'm sure."

"Yeah," Shiv said. "I don't want to go off like a bomb because you spread your corrosion into Can Hu's personal dimension."

Adam paused and then he took another step back.

"Wise," Valor said. He eyed Adam's vambrace. "That is an interesting gift the System has bestowed upon you. Quite potent Necromancy."

"Yes," Adam replied. "I think... I think the System forged it deliberately. Bound the Necromancy you used to something found on one of the dragons. In fact, everything here was forged from the remains and equipment of the dragon and how they died, then reshaped to our needs in the aftermath."

As Valor spoke to Adam, Uva and Shiv ventured into Can Hu's personal dimension. Inside, they saw vines spreading everywhere—vines that connected colossal trees veined with ore and all kinds of gleaming materials. Despite the lack of an apparent light source, the alien forest was visible to Shiv as clear as day. Practically everything around them was something that could be mined or used to create new materials.

"It is not a very wide space, perhaps only 50 meters in diameter," Can Hu said from the outside. "But the garden... The metals and minerals regrow. There are veins of all varieties, ore veins and even silicon."

Shiv blinked. He didn't fully understand the implications of this, but Uva did.

"You have a direct source of raw, renewable materials," Uva realized. "You can build as you go now. Without worrying much about materials."

"Yes," Can Hu replied. "Perhaps I can. The System makes its intent known..."

"So, we might have a drone army soon?" Shiv asked.

“We might have more than that,” Can Hu replied with a hint of mechanical excitement. “But only time will truly tell. Pathbearer...” A note of heavy gratitude, but also of shame, entered the automaton’s voice. “I... I must thank you for taking me on this journey. Despite my lack. I was of little assistance in our battle, and I have sustained slight damage, but-but I am more myself than ever before again. I am more, in some ways. And I believe I will be able to support you with much greater effectiveness in our next fight to come.”

“Hey, I don’t want to hear you talking like that. Without you, Sir Tarlow would have killed me three times over. Also, I feel like the actual winner here,” Shiv said. He looked around the garden and nodded. “Congratulations, Can Hu. Although... maybe you can build me another mobile kitchen if you really feel that grateful.”

Can Hu laughed. “I will build you an entire restaurant that can fly if you give me enough time.”

And just then, Shiv realized he was *borderline sexually attracted* to another type of person; the type of person who would offer him an entire restaurant.

“Sorry, Uva, but I think he just used his Silver Tongue on me. I might be seduced.”

Uva laughed. “I think it hit me a little bit too.”

Can Hu chimed. “I do not have the parts to consummate an intimate relationship, but I have no trouble with watching.”

Both of them paused and gawked at Can Hu.

“That was a joke.”

“I...” Shiv didn’t know what to say.

Uva covered her mouth and barely suppressed a giggle.

Just then, Adam’s voice called from the outside. He sounded urgent and worried. “Shiv, Uva, come out. We, uh, we might have some more problems. I just caught sight of a hundred more Dragon-Knights coming directly at us.”

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## 67 (I) More

*Many strategists and military intellectuals like to proclaim gates as hard points of significant difficulty. I disagree. I think gates are logistical and structural vulnerabilities.*

*Most of them, anyway.*

*Most military people like to think of a situation as a clash of forces, flinging Pathbearers against heavily armed defenses and adversaries. Of course, you will lose many Pathbearers this way. Of course, the losses will be severe. That's why you don't fight this way.*

*You know the gate has a major direct force advantage. You know its mana core could fuel the defenders and make sure that it is empowering them at every second, constantly replenishing them, offering them new facilities, new powers that they can direct against you.*

*It is the same way as trying to bring down a monster, even as a Master. A Master-Tier individual does not have the same skills as a Master-Tier monster. Without any equipment, a proper strategy, or a specialized skill, you're going to get torn apart. It's evolved to be brutal. It's evolved to be strong, to be overwhelming. That is the nature of a monster. It cannot think originally, it cannot conceive, it cannot plan, it cannot be creative, and it lacks tools.*

*We are people. We are a thinking people, and I would demand that we do some thinking when fighting something that is clearly, clearly not meant to be taken by force.*

*You don't take a gate from the outside, you do it from within. You optimally get the gate sealed from the outside. You choke them. You choke them of whatever supplies they need.*

*Pathbearers don't need to feed very much. They don't need sleep very much after a certain point. But still, eventually, they will starve. They will run out of air. They will need water. They will need rest.*

*And this can be exacerbated. You can remove all the supplies going into the gate. You can destroy their stores while inside. You can spread plagues while inside. You can create disorder and fracture the internal government while inside.*

*A gate is a fragile thing. It's fragile because it's governed by and houses people. It's fragile because it requires so much to sustain and function. It's not a world of its own. It's only a pale shadow of one. A connector. A bridge.*

*It can someday become a full thing. But until then, a gate needs traffic to flow through it. Because a clogged artery will eventually and inevitably burst.*

*And when it does, you get to keep the mana core intact and take the gate for your own. Ha, you won't even need to waste an army to take it...*



-Lady Eileen Harkness, Owl of Aviary

67 (I)

More

Shiv stared out at the horizon and let out a deep breath. “Well. We beat twelve, so we just need to do this around ten more times.”

The Weaveresses were throwing their invisibility cloaks over themselves and taking defensive positions. Adam was glaring hard at something unseen, his expression tense and curses spilling out under his breath.

Uva pulled her mana strands back for a moment. She stared at Shiv and pressed her lips together. “I... think you are a bit too optimistic sometimes, my dear brute.”

Shiv laughed. “Heh. Helps when you can’t die.”

“Well, I suppose I’ll get to sample more sleeves.”

“Dear Sister, you might scare Adam if you keep talking that way.”

“Yes, but it might attract *someone else* I have in mind.”

And it worked. Shiv barely suppressed a shiver.

“Please—we’re potentially about to fight a hundred more Dragon-Knights and likely get horribly butchered... Can you two *please* not do this right now?” Adam cried, his eyes burning as he nocked a Veilpiercer arrow. Then he paused. The Young Lord lowered his bow and frowned. “They’re slowing down...”

“They’re probably not reinforcements, then,” Uva said with a breath. Her strands brushed something, and one recoiled violently. “The Composer said it was a rogue Lance with no support. This might be—”

**“HEAR ME!”**

An impossibly loud bellow tore through the air. The world shook. Adam clenched his ears, and Uva stumbled back.

And Shiv—Shiv knew that voice.

“Oh, good,” Shiv said. “I was wondering when I’d run into him again.”

**“Hear me now! It is I, Sir Marikos! The Fortress that Soars, Sir-Legend Marikos Valdemar of the Descenders Union! Traitors, scum, and scoundrels—beware!”**

***Oathbreakers, fall upon thy swords! I have come to redeem my honor, and I will use your blood to rewrite my shame!"***

Shiv didn't fully appreciate just how imposing Sir Marikos was the first time he met him. He looked much as before—larger still than the titanic Dragon-Knight that had pummeled Shiv into the ground, and even taller than the Jealousy's two-hundred-meter armspan. His entire body was encased in thick, gray armor that looked as if cut from stone, leaving only his face exposed within a horned helmet. His angular maw was filled with dagger-like teeth, each longer than Shiv was tall. Amidst the red-and-black-patterned scales covering his flesh, two slit-pupiled eyes gleamed a burning orange.

His wings, colored like his scales and stretching nearly half a kilometer across, blotted out the sky as he approached, and a great axe made of bone lay in his open hand—bound by a Binding Enchantment rather than grasped by his gauntleted claws.

Behind him, a swarm of smaller Dragon-Knights followed in formation.

Then Sir Marikos flicked his hand, and a ball of liquid fire appeared—brighter than any other flame, scorching the land as if through its radiance alone.

Both Adam and Uva flinched back with shared hisses. Uva promptly unraveled herself into formless threads of mana before casting all of her mana into Shiv's mind, weaving herself in. Adam simply turned away, using his Legendary armor as a shield.

Inside Shiv's mind, Uva let out a low groan of frustration. *"I did not appreciate that at all,"* she growled.

He enjoyed her presence there, but he also grew aware of how closely their consciousnesses were tied together, and how easy it would be for her to seize control. The feeling was dangerous. And Shiv found it—

*"I am STILL here!"* Adam shouted. *"But more importantly, Shiv, please tell me this dragon won't just burn us all to cinders in a few moments."*

*"Sir Marikos isn't exactly the thinking and considerate kind of dragon,"* Shiv replied. *"He kind of did blow up a mountain and got me pulverized in the process."*

Uva paused, a funny feeling rippling through her. *"Shiv, did you just call someone else 'not thinking and considerate'?"*

*"Why?"* Shiv asked.

The other dragons hovered in the air, their army composed of twelve dragon Lances. Sir Marikos, once at their forefront, descended hard and fast with his colossal bulk. As his digitigrade legs struck the ground, the world shook—not a small tremor, but a massive quake. Several invisible Weaveresses were launched off their feet. Valor held his

ground with his Necromancy, the earth shattering against him as a tide of stone clashed with his corrosion and turned to dust.

Shiv stepped in front of Adam and shoulder-charged through one of the earthen tides. He blasted through without difficulty, and Adam smacked him on the back with a brief mutter of thanks.

Sir Marikos slid through the earth for a few moments before coming to a stop just before them, his armor aglow with the magical fire hovering above his palm, his eyes smouldering, his features a vicious scowl. He looked at the dragon Dynamancer. ***“Traitor!”*** he roared. The Dynamancer flinched and cowered, unable to meet Sir Marikos’s gaze. In the corner of his eyes, Shiv saw Liquid Serpent loudly proclaiming how she was still standing to a fidgeting Spark Ripper who was helping her pull her invisible cloak back on. ***“I have come to... to... Ha?”***

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Marikos’s gaze turned away from the Dynamancer and settled on another person in particular: Valor Thann.

***“You...”*** Marikos breathed. His body began to shake. His draconic features contorted with pure fury.

The expression of the translucent apparition outlining Valor's features twisted into a grimace. “Oh, damnation.”

***“YOU!”*** Marikos raised his sphere of magic, preparing to slam it down on Valor—and everyone around him in the process.

Shiv tore off his helmet. “Marikos, stop! Don’t burn us!” he cried. “You already did it to me once. Don’t do it again.”

Marikos froze, staring at Shiv. His eyes widened in recognition. “You! You were the one who listened! You were the one near the passage at the—at the passage to Weave!” He turned away from Valor, dismissing his sphere of mana with a gesture. “My friend, my attentive, caring friend, how strange it is to see you here! I thought you would have tried to find your way back to the surface by now.”

“Yeah, kind of in the process of that,” Shiv said, cocking his head toward the beaten Dynamancer. “We had to intercept some of your traitors. There’s a gate we needed to access to get home, and they were going to make the crossing hard. They also had something else we needed—Valor’s arm.”

Sir Marikos grunted in acknowledgement and waved a hand. Three dragons descended, slamming around the Dynamancer and securing him with adamantine chains in moments. “Once more, you have my great and glorious gratitude. Your noble

heart shines again, my little friend.” Marikos’s eyes flashed as he Analyzed Shiv. “My *impressive* little friend. You have Adamanatine Adaption... A supremely rare skill, for a human. You must be very hardy. You have grown substantially since our fortuitous first meeting.”

“Yeah...” Shiv smiled slightly. “Life came at me hard. I went back at it harder.”

Marikos laughed. “You must be System-favored.” He laid his axe on his back and crossed his arms. “Might you, perchance, be interested in a friendly duel when things are settled?”

Suddenly, Valor’s voice cut through the air like a whip-crack. “Marikos. Please...”

Marikos’s demeanor broke as he turned back to Valor. “You! How dare you speak to me after—”

“Marikos, it is urgent. We are trying to stop Sullain.”

Marikos paused. “Sullain?” His voice dropped to a growl. “Yes, that vermin. I told you, Valor—I told you we should have finished him. I told you to let me do the job. He was a broken dog after the loss of his city, a broken man. And now he is a broken, vengeful thing, dragging us into another war we cannot afford.”

“And you were right,” Valor said, sounding incredibly frustrated at the admission. “But that is the past; now we have to deal with the present.”

“We wouldn’t have to deal with the present if you’d heard my wisdom,” Marikos hissed.

“Your blood-thirst, you mean,” Valor snapped. “Your solution to everything is ‘kill him, behead her.’”

**“And it would have worked!”** Marikos bellowed, almost blowing Adam off his feet with the resulting shockwave.

“You always say that,” Valor scoffed.

Marikos sneered at Valor's words. The expression was a bit harder to make out on a dragon's face, but it was definitely there. “If you kill those wrong and evil, they will disappear, and the world will be a better place for it.” His voice held the certitude of someone who never slowed to think about their words.

Shiv watched, uncomfortable. *“Is this what I’m like sometimes?”*

*“You’re not that bad,”* Uva said.

Adam leaned in close. “If you ever become like this, I vow to try my best to kill you for good.”

“Regardless,” Valor brushed him off, “I pledge myself to another now. I work for the Composer, at least until I am reunited and restored.”

“The Composer,” Sir Marikos said, head held high. He slammed a fist into his chestplate. “Yes: one of the few noble demigods among the Faiths. The Elector-Lords will recognize her merit and honor in sending you”—he gestured to the Weaveresses—“brave Weaveresses, hidden daggers of justice, to apprehend this vile traitor. You and...” Marikos squinted. “Ah? Shiv, my friend, you have someone hiding in your head. And behind your back.”

“They’re with me,” Shiv said. “They’re... friends. And more.”

“Good,” Marikos said. He drew in a long breath. “Reliable friends are hard to find.” He then sneered at Valor. “And you should guard yourself against those who plan deceit when you have only offered them honor and kindness.”

Marikos glared at the Dynamancer thereafter. “You are unworthy of the title of Dragon-Knight. Unworthy of Dragon Matrimony. You have shamed us. You have betrayed us. Where is the Aviary scum you spirited away?”

Sir Marikos stomped over, the ground cracking beneath him with every step. Shiv blinked at how much larger Marikos was compared to the other dragon. It flinched away.

“They’re dead. We killed them. We killed them when they realized they were all...” The dragon cried out as Marikos grabbed him by the head and lifted him like a sack of grain.

Flame surged around Marikos’s hand and, to Shiv’s astonishment, the dragon combusted—scales melting, flesh bubbling. Shiv felt a spike of pain until his body adapted. Adam looked away as his armor rapidly heated.

“Ow! Ow! Ow!” the Young Lord hissed.

“Marikos!” Shiv cried. “If you’re going to do this, maybe do it somewhere else—it’s affecting other people!”

Marikos paused, then offered Shiv a sheepish look as he made the flames disappear as fast as they came. The Dynamancer whimpered in pain as Marikos dropped him back on the ground. “Ah, I am sorry. My heart is one of blood and battle. I have been honed by struggle, and sometimes I forget myself. I apologize, my glorious, young friend.”

Shiv nodded. “Well, at least you listened.”

“Yes,” Valor said, eyeing Shiv. “He listens to you more than anyone else I’ve seen.”

“Because he listened first,” Marikos said, raising a clawed finger. “When I was at my lowest outside Weave, he spoke to me. He heard my shame and did not judge me.”

The dragon turned around. **“Hear me now,”** Marikos cried to his Dragon-Knights. Then, he paused and looked at Shiv. “Is your highest skill Master-Tier?”

Shiv nodded. It was technically a lie, but he didn’t want people to know too much about him. Especially those that might end up facing him down the line. “Yeah—”

Marikos immediately continued with his proclamation. **“Let us praise Master Shiv—a paragon from the surface. Despite the war between us, anyone can seek virtue and walk a higher Path. Hear my praise: Hail Shiv! Hail Shiv the Listener! Hail Shiv, he who has risen beyond the Light-Cursed surface! Hail, hail, hail!”** This chapter is updated by novelfire

The dragons cheered in unison. Shiv didn’t know how to feel, but praise was nice after a lifetime of scorn. Adam shuddered at each cheer, holding his head. “I am in one of the worst fever dreams of my life,” he complained.

As the cheering died down, Sir Marikos looked down at Shiv. “And the other traitors—what of them?”

“Slain,” Shiv said with a grin. “They put up a hell of a fight.”

Marikos grumbled. “Traitor or not, they were once Dragon-Knights—few adversaries match our caliber. To best a Lance in battle... Truly remarkable. If you ever seek to join a worthy order, I will support your entrance to any brotherhood you wish to join as a Dragon-Knight squire. You would make a formidable dragon, Shiv. I will see to your Matrimony. In fact, you can venture to the Abyss’s depths where the body of the Great One bleeds and challenge its greatest gates right now. Just say the word, and I will—”

“We won’t have time for that,” Valor interrupted. “We must get through the gate. We need to intercept Vicar Sullain before he gains... a weapon.”

“What kind of weapon?” Sir Marikos asked. “What requires such urgency that I cannot even—”

Valor had already shut his eyes in preparation before he interrupted him. “An Animancy Core.”

**“An Animancy Core!”** Marikos roared. **“How can he possess such a thing? Valor, you... Another one of your foolish mistakes has returned to haunt us! I told you it was honorless. I told you not to create such a thing!”**

“Create such a thing?” Adam repeated, staring at Valor.

"It was a long time ago, and we were desperate," Valor said, avoiding the question entirely. "Right now, we need to solve the problem at hand. Help me, Marikos. Behave like a Knight should and let go of our grievances for now. I need—"

**"You MURDERED my wife!"** Marikos screamed, even louder than before. **"And—and you think I can just LET THAT GO?!"**

"She was going to kill you!" Valor shouted back, his own temper rising. "She was going to kill—"

**"She was my wife!"** Marikos's final roar sent everyone except Shiv and Valor sprawling. Can Hu toppled over. Its dimension shrank back into its metal seed as if it were fleeing from the Dragon-Knight's wrath.

"That was a hell of a yell," Shiv muttered, shaking off the concussion. "Adam? Are you—oh." Adam clutched his head and groaned. "Oh shit." The Young Lord's eardrums had burst. Shiv was probably going to need to fix that.

"My wife..." Marikos whispered, near tears. "You could have told me. I would have done right, but you didn't trust me, and you murdered her. Then you *left*. Assassin. Coward. You didn't even have the courage to face me."

"I didn't have the courage to hurt you," Valor admitted.

"But you did," Marikos sobbed, his voice breaking. "You still did. You called yourself my friend, and you couldn't even talk to me." He held out a hand; the flames and rage that once burned bright were gone. "I trusted you."

"I'm sorry," Valor replied. "Marikos. Listen to me."

"No," Marikos rasped, shaking his head roughly. "It will never be the same again. I will never trust you—"

"And I will live with that," Valor said. Shiv almost gaped as he realized the Legendary Pathbearer actually sounded hurt.

"No," Marikos growled. "When you are whole, we will finish this."

"Marikos..."

"We will finish this. You owe me this." Marikos slammed his axe into the ground, splitting the very earth asunder.

"Composer!" a Weaveress cried. "Stop it! Stop making earthquakes!"



But Marikos simply glared at Valor, and Valor stared back. Marikos lowered his head. “I have spoken my peace. We will take this traitor back. We send the Composer a boon. She will receive a writ of our shame, treasures, and forces for her next campaign—whatever, whenever, wherever. We are the Descenders. Our honor is ironclad beyond these traitors’ sins.”

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

## 67 (II) More

67 (II)

More

“I know, Marikos. I see your honor,” Valor said quietly. “We depart for Gate Theborn soon.”

“Theborn?” Marikos snarled. “Ah, yes—the slave-running gates. *Babel*. Filthy dogs. Parasites feeding on the Great One’s power. For what? Foul means. We should have seared them from this world long ago.”

“And for once, we agree,” Valor said.

Marikos regarded his fellow Legendary Pathbearer and sighed. He seemed like he wanted to say something else, but he stopped himself. “This traitor is no longer your concern. Give the Composer my appreciation and well-wishes. If I prevail against you eventually, I will seek a noble end at her hand. If nothing else, we will be joined in the afterworld. If there is one.”

“She won’t give it to you,” Valor said. “She has no interest in killing you, Marikos.”

Marikos shrugged. “I shall insist upon it. No will surpasses Sir-Legend Marikos Valdemar’s.” He raised a fist to Shiv. “Fight well, Master Shiv, and remember my offer. I would be honored to call you a brother.”

Shiv chuckled. “How about we discuss it over dinner sometime?”

“Ah—you cook?”

“Yeah, I cook pretty good,” Shiv said.

“Then I look forward to our next meeting. For now, let me carry this creature of sin and shame away! Lances! **RETURN!**”

But before Marikos rose, he casually backhanded the traitor. The two dragons who'd been holding him upright jumped out of the way in the last second, seemingly having anticipated this move. This time, Shiv was blasted off his feet by the shockwave and barely stopped himself from being sent flying further. When the dust cleared, the traitor lay limp, barely breathing. A new crater stretched out for a full kilometer.

Shiv blinked. “*He just... flicked his wrist!*” he gasped mentally. “*That’s all!*”

“I had to do that,” Marikos said, exhaling. “My honor demanded it.”

He picked up the traitor by the chains and exploded up into the air. Shiv blinked as Marikos soared, dragging the massive Dynamancer behind him like it weighed no more than a feather. “Farewell, friends—farewell! You fought with honor on this day—farewell! Come, brothers, sisters, join my song!”

As one, the dragons sang a hymn about honor and Knighthood, and they blasted off toward the horizon. Their collective acceleration was jaw-dropping as well. They were all of them Master-Tier in terms of Reflexes.

From everywhere, Weaveresses groaned. Adam thrashed beneath a massive pile of rubble, and Can Hu was half buried in the dirt, though the automaton was quickly digging itself out with its Geomancy. Inside Shiv’s mind, Uva sighed. “*Okay, I understand why you cursed Sir Marikos now. We are facing an angry child in a body that can break the world.*”

“Well,” Shiv said, “I think we should go back to Weave and inform the Composer about what we got done.” He looked to Valor. “And there might be a few other things we should talk about.”

Valor met his eyes, then nodded. “There might be.”

“I won’t force you, Valor, but that between you and Marikos... Do we need to worry about more people holding grudges against you?”

“It is rather common,” Valor said with a slight sigh. “It happens when you live long enough. But the Animancy Core... I would tell you more but...” Valor hesitated. “Let us be away from here first.”

After his magic recovered enough, Shiv healed the Weaveress and Adam. Liquid Serpent didn't seem to mind having only a single limb too much, so she came last. When that was fine, everyone prepared for a long walk back—until Adam spoke.

“We’re not doing that,” Adam said, nocking an arrow. “Not when I can make it a *straight shot back*.” This chapter is updated by

Shiv laughed as he realized what the Young Lord was about to do. “This was almost worth getting my ass kicked by all those dragons.”

“What do you mean, almost?” Adam smirked. “It was part of the reward for me.”

Then he loosed the arrow, and a rupture formed.

They made it back to Weave within five minutes.

\*\*\*

The Composer’s song echoed all across Weave, welcoming their return. Its notes were high, victorious, valiant, joyous, and also sorrowful, but the music came fast—like the notes of a heroic ballad.

As they arrived at the Symposium to inform her of their success, the Composer proclaimed Shiv, Adam, Uva, Can Hu, as well as the Weaveresses and automata involved in the mission as heroes all across the city. A magical song was composed, commemorating the names of the lost, and a declaration of grand revelry was to follow. The city descended into wild celebrations for the next two days as the Composer declared another crisis thwarted, and advances to have been made in relations between Weave and the Descenders Union.

But after that fight with the dragons, all Shiv wanted to do was cook and then... Well.

As soon as they were dismissed, Adam flew back to the apartment and told them not to bother him for at least a day as he slept off his pain and exhaustion. Uva and Shiv, on their part, experienced a lot of cooking and some other delights besides.

After two days of respite and recovery, a small gathering of people found themselves in Uva’s apartment.

Can Hu was the first to arrive, carrying itself via Geomancy, and constructing stone limbs to help Uva tidy her rooms. The Umbral claimed it wasn’t necessary, but the automaton wanted to be of service in exchange for being invited. It also loudly promised to reinforce the walls at some point, in case Uva and Shiv did some more “impromptu sparring” in the living room.

Both of them just coughed in response.

Meanwhile, Shiv cooked. He cooked a full course of different meals. He cooked joyously. He cooked with a carefree heart and a feeling of building excitement in his veins.

They had just beaten a Lance of dragon-knights—a rogue Lance, but a full Lance nonetheless. It took the lives of almost two dozen Weaveresses. It took him dying to achieve this victory. But Uva and Adam and he... They all prevailed. Can Hu prevailed. Valor gained an arm and a soul fragment back, and they were stronger than ever. And now, rather than the gate seeming like an insurmountable challenge, it was a place for Shiv and his companions to wreak havoc and unleash their new power.

Confriga wasn't going to know what hit him.

But that was the challenge to come. For now, they indulged in a breath of leisure as Uva's team arrived thereafter, followed by Adam, the Slayers, Siggy, Valor, Fel, a few more of Uva's sisters, and Still Water and her team.

The apartment grew alive with activity.

Off by the side, the Young Lord told Uva's team and the Slayers about his fight with Tarlow, making light of how desperately he struggled, how close to death he came. By the door, Uva argued with Fel about something or another, the other Umbral chiding her about being unreachable for two whole days—that she had to find out Uva was a Hero from a public announcement. Can Hu and several of Uva's sisters debated over the best aesthetics across the *pre-Integration periodicals*.

You might be reading a pirated copy. Look for the official release to support the author.

And through it all, Shiv's joy only climbed. Despite everything he suffered, despite all it took to win, he was the happiest he'd ever been. This place was more than he could have ever dreamed of.

"You seem quite happy, Master Shiv." Shiv laughed as he turned to stare at Valor. The skull was hovering, the ghostly outline of a man just barely visible. No longer was his Necromantic power activated, but his limbs still hovered in the right place. His right arm was dormant—its power held back, and for good reason. No one needed to experience what happened when Shiv came into contact with Necromancy.

Shiv flipped a fish over and began to do its other side. It was going to be pretty well fried, crispy, but that was just what Ikki liked. And Shiv was going to make the girl a very, very well-fed Umbral by the end of tonight.

"You know something, Valor?" Shiv began. "When I was hunting lesser vampires all those years in the ruins, there was a dream I had a few times. I experienced it some nights when I hid in the buildings, looking up at the moon's fragments. It was of walking the world. I'd go all across the land as a Pathbearer, not bound to anyone, not condemned by my own weakness, by my own inability to advance my skills, not damned by Roland Arrow."

As he said Roland's name, Adam briefly looked at him, but he quickly went back to his conversation. "That was the extent of my dream. I thought it would make me the happiest person in the world to be free and powerful, to answer to no one." Valor hummed, nodding thoughtfully. "I thought I might start a wandering kitchen of some kind once I got strong or rich enough." Shiv laughed. "I do love cooking, about as much as I enjoy fighting things."

Valor nodded. "But you've found something else now."

"Yeah," Shiv said. He gave everyone in the room a brief look. "I think you don't realize how lonely you are until you aren't anymore."

Valor laughed. "I had the same realization as you when I was about..." He paused. "Well, when I was forty years older than you are now."

He stared at Valor. "You were alone for that long?"

"I was troubled for that long," Valor said. "You are... I've told you this before, but you are remarkably well-adjusted for everything that's happened to you, for everything you continue to suffer. Strangely so."

Valor paused. "You... you are sloppy at times, Shiv. Careless. Perhaps you don't think certain things through, and you have tunnel vision when you fight your enemies. You are raw, you are primal, guided by instinct more than rationality sometimes. But you are not stupid. There's an animal cunning to the way you act. And there is also a hidden hand of control inside you. Like you are a..." Valor paused as he searched for the words. "Like you have a pillar that stops you from doing anything too drastic."

*Pillar.*

And there was that word again. *Georges would be pleased*, Shiv thought.

"Yeah," Shiv said, pressing his lips together as he searched for his own words. "I think that it's my way of taking revenge on the world."

"Revenge?" Valor asked.

"I'm kind of a petty bastard too," Shiv said. "I thought about it after I got out of Theborn. I don't let things go. That's why I had so much trouble with Heather and Tran. That's why I nearly attacked them while I was inside the gate. Because I was angry. The Orcish Skill just made it worse."

He finished the fish and placed it on the plate. It glistened. It shone. "When Ikki eats this, she might be able to lift a whole house on her back once the benefits hit," Shiv mused.

Valor chuckled, but he knew Shiv wasn't finished yet. "I decide who I am," Shiv said. "And I don't want to be a bastard. I don't want to be a War Priest, just a coward that hurts the weak. I don't want to be Roland, who can't seem to make up his mind. I don't want to be a Slayer that's just stuck in a backwater town, stuck in place. I want to live my own way. And I want to be stronger than anyone who's ever doubted me, who's ever tried to hurt me, or has hurt me. I want to go further and see it all. Live it all."

"And you have lived up to this dream?" Valor asked.

Shiv paused. "Sometimes it's a work in progress."

"It is always a work in progress," Valor said. "My history with Marikos... I should have told you at some point sooner."

Shiv shrugged. "Adam might be more bothered about that than I am. It is a hidden danger. The last thing we need is to run into one of your old enemies. And frankly, I don't think a fight between me and Marikos would end very well. I might get more than a few levels from it, though. Don't get me wrong, I'd love to fight Marikos. But I just don't think it's going to be much of a fight."

"Not right now," Valor replied. "Give yourself a century. Maybe a few decades, if you are truly favored by the System. Marikos—He is quite powerful. I do not dare say I would certainly prevail against him in a direct duel."

Shiv chuckled. "I still can't believe he blasted me off my feet by slapping someone else. It made me feel like Adam."

"Shut up, you bastard," Adam shouted from across the room. People laughed. Shiv chuckled.

"Broken Moon," Shiv said. "You Legendary Pathbearers are on a whole other level, huh?"

"Yes," Valor said. "We are... capable of great things. But it is more than that. There are legends beyond legends. And there is something *beyond Legends*. And you understand this more than anyone else. When you first got your first Master-Tier Skill, what was that like? What were you like then? And who are you now?"

Shiv paused. "If I fought myself from back when I just got Momentum Core, I'd tear myself to shreds in half a second."

"Exactly. The title of Master is more of an acknowledgement than a full and complete measurement. But the truth is, the more skills you have at higher tiers, the more everything about you compounds. Think of your Deepest Edge Skill. It would only be merely dangerous on its own. Combine it with your other skills, and you can cut a mountain in half within minutes. Frankly, sometimes I think we should do away with the

measurement entirely. A five-skill Master is more dangerous than a one-skill Hero, after all—especially if that skill is not in combat.”

Shiv considered that for a moment. “Maybe. I think it depends on the situation.”

“Ah, and there you see another problem with the measurement. Someone like you, I would drop onto a battlefield and tell you to rip and tear and look away. But Adam—Adam would win me the war.”

Shiv smiled. “So you have an all-seeing, long-shooting dimensional archer; an unkillable, undying monster; and a body-jumping, mind-breaking Psychomancer with long reach. And then there’s also Can Hu, who’s got us covered with crafting. I don’t know about you, Valor, but between us and a gate, I’ll bet on us. I’ll bet on us against a thousand enemy Pathbearers.”

“Still too few,” Valor laughed. “A thousand Adepts for one of you, perhaps. But a team is an exponentially powerful thing. Now you also have me, or what little of me we have recovered.” He paused. “There is something I did not admit to you initially, Shiv. It was not out of necessity, but embarrassment.”

“What?” Shiv asked.

“I have my own pride. I was a Legendary Pathbearer. I had power, Shiv. Power you cannot imagine. Power that you might someday reach, but...” Valor spoke with such intensity and passion that Shiv briefly stopped cooking. “And I lost it. I broke. I was betrayed by my own blood, and for something I...” Valor held back a snarl. “It was my fault. I do not blame my son. I do not blame my son—he did only what I taught him to, only what his heart demanded of him. He did it because I couldn’t... I couldn’t give him what he wanted...”

Valor didn’t finish. Shiv didn’t press.

Valor continued after a second. “But my mind broke too. A great deal of me—my experiences and memories—were scattered along with my power. I didn’t tell you certain things because... I don’t remember anymore. There is so much I cannot remember. My soul is in pieces, and one’s soul... It is all of you, Shiv, you understand? All of you. It is not the same for you, though. You... I don’t think you can shatter. At least, if you shatter, I think that will kill you for good, because your vitality and your foundational soul are so bound together. But... think of it. Think of becoming a Pathbearer and losing yourself. Think of the pain it would cause... The harm it would do.”

Shiv thought of it, and it seemed like a fate worse than death. He remembered Can Hu saying something very similar to him when they first met. “Yeah,” Shiv said, “I don’t ever want to learn what that’s like.”



“Then look at my example, and keep this close to your heart.” Valor pressed a hand against Shiv’s shoulder—not the right hand, not the one with Necromancy, but his hand of bone and gleaming metal. “Think. Think deeper. This world is not a simple one. Rarely does someone do things for a simple, fundamental, primal reason. You are pure and raw, in a sense, right now, Shiv. And you have done things that I did not expect. I did not expect all of you to survive, let alone for the others to reach Heroic Tier so soon. But you must be more. More than who you were, just like they are more than who they were. Do not neglect your mind. You are a good cook. More than a brute. Live it all. Be greater than you dared to imagine before.”

Shiv regarded Valor and nodded. “Right. Think more.”

“You have the mind for it,” Valor continued. “You just need to culture it. You have time. Now give it your focus—just like with your cooking.”

Valor stared down at Shiv’s cooking, and his shoulders turned in depression. “Just like the cooking... I cannot taste. Another thing my failures have inflicted upon me.”

Shiv winced. “We’ll find you a stomach soon, Valor. I promise.”

“I hope so,” Valor replied wistfully.

Shiv looked at Can Hu, seeing the machine jab its tasting apparatus into a piece of steak. Valor turned away before he had a complete breakdown. “The System does not mock only you. Sometimes, being favored means taking the greatest wounds.”

“Valor,” Shiv said.

“Yes, Shiv?”

“You’re kind of dramatic sometimes, you know that?”

Valor stared at him. “I have been criticized that way before.”

Shiv laughed. “You must have been pretty good friends with Marikos once, huh?”

“Yeah,” Valor said, “once.”

Shiv smiled at Valor. “I remind you of him.” Valor paused, something flickering across his expression for a moment. But Shiv continued. “And also, was he the ‘greatest idiot you’ve ever met’?”

Valor’s jaw opened slightly. “How did you—”

“Marikos—he’s different from the other dragons. And it’s not simply a higher level. I can feel it. In everything he does, he’s stronger by far. And that could only mean one thing.”

Valor laughed. “I didn’t mean for you to start using your head so soon, Shiv.”

Shiv grunted. “It wasn’t my head, it was just my gut. And sometimes instinct leads you down a pretty good road.”

“Shivvvv,” Ikki cried. “Fish! I’m going to die from hunger. I’m too young for my corpse to be used for weaver breeding...”

“Coming, Ikki!”

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

## 68 (I) Planning

—Confidential—

**[Ambient Mana Recognized — Incoming Message from Inquisitor-Master Sijik]**

*Oldsmith, if you are receiving, hold your position. Tell my acolytes to hold as well. Stay out of danger.*

*I am deploying a specialist to ensure that Gate Lord Confriga understands where he stands in this arrangement. Do you understand? Impress this upon him. Impress upon him that someone is coming to speak with him.*

*Tell him that the Inquisition itself will come to talk and tan his mongrel hide if he does not open the gateways. Use your powers of persuasion for once in your life. And you’ve been tardy in writing back to me. Do not be tardy again.*

*I want to know everything that’s happening inside the gate. Everything. Up to the second. We will exchange messages thrice a day now: morning, afternoon, and evening. Do not keep me waiting again.*

*I trust that you would rather talk to me than the **Educator**.*

*She has just been freed of a certain matter over in Lone Star, eliminating some loose-to-lips and far-flung traitors to the Republic and heretics to the good names of the Ascendants.*

*This is not a threat, but you know what her temperament is like. Make sure you do not slight her, and you can do that by having her received properly by the Gate Lord.*

*I look forward to hearing back from you, and I hope that your Master-Tier tongue can finally do some good.*

*In other matters, City Lord Stormhalt's daughter remains missing. She is in Blackedge. This has been confirmed. The damned mercenaries failed to snatch her, to deliver her safely and intact. So, you can imagine how frustrated and stressed I am. One delicate matter after another.*

*You can help me by doing your fair, fucking share, you piece of walking furniture.*

...

*I apologize for my prejudice. And not for anything else.*

-Spell Sealed Sync-Letter from Inquisitor Sijik of the Yellowstone Republic

68 (I)

Planning

## **Practical Metabiology > 23**

## **The Chef Unwavering > 55**

After enjoying some great food and even better company, they began preparing once more. Adam never lost sight of his true goal, which was saving Blackedge. And now, empowered, equipped, and well-supported, the group regarded Gate Theborn no longer as a treacherous mountain to climb, but an obstacle to smash through. They had the means to close in on the gate quickly now. They had the power, the strength, and they had the opportunity to bring things to a swift end: to secure Gate Theborn, bring down the Gate Lord, take the Animancy Core, free the slaves, and get access to the surface.

But before that, the Young Lord made sure to do one thing.

"I'm going to need some bloody Magical Resistance for this armor," he said. "I did look around last time, but... My father said I was to only gain new Enchantments when I performed a deed worthy of merit. Shiv..." Adam licked his lips. "I would say that my recent deeds have been worthy. Right?"

Shiv grunted a laugh. "Adam, you were worthy since Harkness. You completed that Quest too."

The Young Lord shifted his shoulders and smirked with pride. "You're right. I did do that."

And to make sure Adam didn't get too big a head, Shiv provided the man with a bit of humility as well. "Yeah, almost makes up for you getting your brain stomped by the Jealousy."

The Young Lord sneered. "We're about equal in the 'getting stomped by a giant monster' department, I believe."

Thanks to Adam's connections with the Arachnae Order—and the newly evolved Hero-Sister Uva personally—his Master-Tier Magical Resistance Enchantment was rushed through. And now the Young Lord was slightly more implacable magically, as he was nearly indestructible physically. Well, the armor was. Adam was still rather vulnerable on the inside. But if things went well, no one would ever come close enough to touch Adam.

"So let's go over the very simple plan once more," Adam said. He stood in front of a large chalkboard set up within Elaboration. On it, a map of Gate Theborn's surroundings was drawn, and on a nearby table, several more maps detailing the insides of the gate based on Shiv's memories lay partially composed. "We're going to emerge approximately two kilometers away from the Abyssal gateway. It should be far enough to avoid immediate notice and secure an exterior operating position. I've spent some time with Heather, and she showed me the spatial frequencies for the gateway. Even if they change, however, I think I will be able to force our way in." He held his Vambrace of the Corroded Domain. "Perhaps more than one way in. But I'd rather not use such extreme means. We'll be noticed very quickly." Google

"Once we arrive and secure our initial forward operating position, I will take over," Uva said, "I will target everyone without significant Magical Resistance and perform psionic surveillance. After marking and listing out critical weaknesses, I will find a viable body, take them, and cause a series of escalating distractions. Afterward, as the outside falls into chaos, we move on the gate itself."

Palbon, Uva's team Pyromancer, pointed to several icons on the board. "The Shadow Cells report more patrols and even additional bands of mercenaries being hired to hold a larger stretch of space. We'll have to find a nice and hidden position if we want to remain in the area without being noticed.

Adam smirked slightly, and his eyes glowed with mana. "I don't think that will be a problem, but if they do respond, Ikki and the rest of Uva's team will set up a series of diversionary strikes that will be supported by Still Water." Then, Adam looked to the Weaveress and her team. "Still Water, I must thank you and your team for responding so promptly. You have been an invaluable help for the past few weeks."

"Just part of my duties." Still Water said. "Glad to be doing a sneaking mission again, though." Adam nodded in acknowledgment.

“Then, we get over to the gate, and I remove all the remaining problems,” Shiv said. “After we pass through the gate, I’ll break off with Can Hu while Uva, Adam, Valor, and Siggy move to seek out Leu. I’ll break as much stuff and kill as many guards as I can find to pull their attention and keep them from noticing the Graven Cage.” Shiv spun the Rememberer in his right hand. The kukri practically thrummed in excitement between his fingers.

Uva narrowed her eyes as she looked at the major enemy concentrations depicted around the gateway. “I’ll keep everyone connected through my mana strands and track the Gate Lord and other major threats when they appear.”

“I’ll leave a few more of my bodies again while I go,” Shiv said. “Make it seem like Aviary is setting up a major operation. I’ll head for the central tower leading off into the Vulteg dimension to see what I can find there too, if I get a chance. My raid will double as... reconnaissance.”

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

“Just make damned sure you don’t end up crossing over,” Adam said, glaring at Shiv. “We all know how you get carried away, Shiv, but I don’t think anyone here is capable of facing a god in their own home.”

As if on cue, the Composer’s ambient melody climbed higher, sounding as if a laugh.

“Once we get set up, Uva will start working with Siggy to get a read on the gate’s underbelly and discover any other vulnerabilities for us to exploit.”

They turned and stared at the only unwilling member of their group. The goblin looked absolutely petrified.

“Do I *seriously* have to go?” Siggy said. “I’ll stay in prison here. You know, I’ll do all the community service you hit me with! For a decade, no, three!”

Uva just stared. “You’re the only one of us who has relationships and contacts in the area. You know how to avoid notice—or walk in plain sight.”

“But—but,” Siggy said, “you’re like a Psychomancer. Can’t you pull the memories out of me?”

“That would take a few weeks of delicate mind surgery,” Uva said. “We don’t have that kind of time. Because Adam’s home does not have that kind of time. That is why we’re not going to do *delicate* mind surgery if this is the option you force on us. I’m just going to rip the memories out of you using my strands, and though I have the power, I cannot promise I have achieved the technique to leave you with the knowledge of how to walk.”

Uva's mana strands flicked and danced over Siggy's head, and cold sweat poured down the goblin's face. Over the past few days, Uva also gained and slightly leveled an Intimidation skill, much to Shiv's amusement.

"O-okay," Siggy said, flinching.

"Don't worry, Adept," Adam replied. "You'll be sticking close to me. I'll be making sure that we move across the gate without encountering too many issues. Once that's done, we will regroup using the strategy we practiced."

Uva channeled her strands into Adam's mind, then she jumped into the Young Lord, and after a few moments, disentangled herself from him, weaving herself back into shape right next to Adam. Then her strands reached out and seized Shiv. He didn't fight it, and he felt the surreal sensation of being converted—drawn into Psychomancy Mana, pulled into Uva's mind, and then rewoven thereafter.

"That's a pretty useful spell," Shiv muttered. He still remembered the first time he experienced something like that, when he was trapped within the Jealousy. Uva was far more gentle, like being pulled along a vast and comfortable expanse of memories rather than crashing through moments and impulses while facing the Greater Demon.

Adam nodded. "Indeed, and Uva's massive, subtle reach should keep us from being easily noticed while inside the gate."

"I can also pull my strands back in closer," Uva said. "Once the inside of the gate is drowning in chaos, we will set up with Guardshead Leu if possible, or break contact and hide in Oldsmith's personal penthouse alternatively."

"From there, we will plan and execute the full overthrow of Gate Theborn. And I think we will start by sealing the gateway leading to Vulketh. The last thing we need is reinforcements." Adam gestured to the third gateway, the one at the very bottom of Gate Theborn—the gate leading to the Vulteg home dimension.

"But don't think too far ahead," Valor said. "The plans will always change. Prepare. And adapt accordingly."

The Young Lord grunted. "Is that all? Any holes or objections?"

Siggy held up her hand. No one regarded her. She lowered her hand and whimpered. "My god, please—gods, please don't let me die..."

"I have something to offer," Can Hu declared. Everyone looked at the Penitent Chassis hovering in the corner of the room on a slab of metal and stone. "You said there are slaves inside the gate."

"Yes," Shiv said. "Many."

“Then I will try to find out where they are located. I am constructing new and subtle drones. They should be able to hide during the chaos. I will direct them to scout the districts and provide more information about critical targets and vulnerabilities, along with where the non-combatants mostly reside. This should give us an additional layer and resource for information as well. After that, we can focus on saving the slaves, or keeping them out of harm’s way as best we can when future offensive operations begin.”

“Right,” Shiv said, nodding. “Good thinking, Can Hu. Keep me away from those places too. Don’t need more collateral damage.”

“Well, there won’t be any bloody clever orcs there now,” Adam said with a sneer, “and you won’t be alone. If we’re going to cause a mess, at least we’re going to cause a mess together.”

Shiv chuckled at that.

“When we settle in,” Valor interjected, “the first priority should be the Animancy Core, if possible. I wish to see it contained properly. The Graven Cage should be able to isolate and neutralize it. We leave nothing to chance, and we deny Sullain his weapon before all else.”

“Of course,” Adam said. “And after that... we find out what breaks easier: the Gate Lord, his forces, or the mana core.”

Shiv stared down at his kukri and studied his grinning reflection. “Yeah, I’m looking forward to this. I have a feeling Confriga is about to have a very, very bad time.”

\*\*\*

Before they left, though, the Composer summoned the group to her Symposium one final time.

At first, Shiv thought it was going to be another round of personal congratulations and found the entire affair to be gratuitous. But when he arrived, he found the Composer seeming more troubled than ever.

After she welcomed them, her expression grew very serious. “You all have done great things for Weave. You’ve grown strong, immensely so, from this trial.” She looked at Uva in particular. “I am proud of my chosen champions. Prouder still of my adopted people.”

Uva squared her shoulders and beamed, but there was a layering to her pride—a subtle wariness. She knew something was coming as well.



“However, it is as I told you before. The agents of Aviary do not trade things cheaply. They do not deal at a loss.” She plucked a string on her great harp, but the notes were discordant and wrong. The silken fibers composing the interior of her vast home also shuddered, as if quivering in fear. The wrongness seemed to resonate through the world, and the Composer was silent for a long moment. “A great many things are rippling across the world. There is something in motion, even beyond the siege of Blackedge. Even beyond the machinations at the heart of the Republic.”

She looked at the gathered group of Masters and Heroes prepared to take Gate Theborn. “Aviary... They would not trade something like Valor’s arm so easily. Not for a simple thing like passage through a gate. Aviary agents are trained to die. They are burned and tossed aside before they are made desperate.”

“So you’re saying that we should expect more trouble?” Shiv asked.

The Composer’s expression turned grave. “Yes. In fact, I would gamble everything I have on it. And great trouble at that.”

Then, the Composer looked up, and she played a single note—a strong and resonant note that broke the previous discordant sounds. “I advise you all to proceed with caution and with haste. Breach and take the gate as soon as possible. I think it will be targeted again by outside forces. If Valor’s limb was an inferior prize, then the things that could be greater and worth more—I cannot fathom, or I cannot dare to fathom. I thought the incident at Passage was merely something long-awaiting, a grand culmination. But...” the Composer shook her head. “It was merely a small operation, a small operation in a far grander orchestra. And New Albion cannot be working alone. They are too aggressive, too desperate with how they just fled the Abyss. Something is coming. They know something we do not.”

The Composer finished with a sigh. “Guard yourselves. Especially you, Uva. You are a Hero now—a Hero of Weave, a Heroic Psychomancer risen through struggle! The first of your kind. We cannot afford to lose you, but we cannot afford to have you hold back.”

“The Jealousy has been dedicated to Elaboration now, goddess,” Uva said with her head low. “Soon, there will be more Psychomancers of my equal.”

“I am not so sure.” The Composer laughed softly. “There were few like you before. And now that the Deathless’s favor of the System has spread to even you, and you have prevailed in a trial of strife, discovering another Hero will take decades. If not a century.”

“You honor me, Exalted Goddess,” Uva breathed.

“And honor me by not dying,” the Composer said. “A living Hero is better than a fallen martyr, damn the songs.”

“Do not worry, goddess,” Uva said, voice resolute. “I have no intention of being a martyr.” She paused, and Shiv felt a hardening of her strength. “Nor do I have an intention of just stopping at the Heroic Tier.”

And then the goddess laughed joyously. “It pleases me to hear you speak this way, Cherished Sister. Perhaps sometime... Someday you will find yourself lecturing me, instead of heeding my orders.”

“I would not dream of such blasphemy,” Uva sputtered.

“No one does. Then, they become a Legend, and suddenly, the gods don’t seem so unassailable.” The Composer angled her head and grinned at Valor. “Now, go with my blessing.” She looked toward Adam and Shiv. “And you two, my friends. For all the times you have aided us, I will give what I can to help you now. I am... ashamed I do not have the strength to contend with Compact directly, that I cannot muster a great army for this cause...”

Shiv looked between Adam, Uva, Valor, and Can Hu. “What are you talking about? We’re standing right here.”

And once more, the goddess laughed.

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## 68 (II) Planning

68 (II)

Planning

For the second time in the span of days, Uva, Shiv, Can Hu, Valor, and Adam departed from Passage. But this time Uva’s team left with them, accompanied by a Shadow Cell, and Shiv had thirty of Can Hu’s small spider drones stored in his cape as well.

Also, rather than suffering through a slow and treacherous trek through the umbral wilderness, the Young Lord made things simple. Adam stared for a moment once they emerged from Passage and cast his senses to the horizon. As his glare burned, he drew back a shot. He took a breath, and he fired. A rupture appeared before him. The Veilpiercer arrow sailed across dimensions for three minutes before it finally tore open another rift, creating a bridge for them to traverse the world.

Adam laughed as he lowered his bow. He gestured for Shiv to enter first. “After you, cockroach.”

“Thanks for opening the door, Young Lord,” Shiv replied. Then he squinted down the way and saw a body lying there. A body missing a good chunk of its torso. “What’s that? Who did you shoot?”

“Oh, just a sentry. I suspect they were a Jump Mage too, considering how my arrow reacted with them. They had some spatial anchoring wards, but that just made them easy prey for my Veilpiercer.”

Shiv laughed. “Show-off.”

“That’s what Masters do, isn’t it?”

Shiv went in first, blasting across. He wore Can Hu as armor, and a field of small stones and metal fragments drifted around him, creating an enhanced proximity detection system for both of them. Uva followed thereafter, flying on her shield to keep pace. Her team sprinted behind her, and Ikki looked at the unstable dimension slowly creeping in.

“Adam,” Ikki said, blinking, “is this place, you know, structurally sound or something? It won’t just push us out, right?”

“It will last long enough,” Adam said. “And don’t worry, it’s the same thing as your spatial tunnels, except it’s more of an *actual* place. It has borders. It’s not just a pocket of space being moved around. It’s like a new patch of existence being created, albeit a very unstable, unsteady patch. But yes, we are fine. We have ample time to cross.”

Behind them, the Trapdoor Operatives followed. Shiv couldn’t tell where any of them were. Still Water had not been joking about treating this like a sneaking mission—if your allies couldn’t pinpoint you, how could your enemies have any hope?

As soon as they arrived on the other side, Shiv found himself standing on a sheer cliffside that led off into a cave. Only the edge of the cliff jutted out, and a series of large mushroom caps outside hid this place from aerial view. How Adam found this spot so quickly, and how he noticed the surveillant Jump Mage, was beyond Shiv. But that was probably why the Young Lord had a Heroic-Tier Awareness Skill.

As the other members of the group filtered in, they secured the surveillance post, and Still Water emerged. “Hm, good positioning,” noted. She looked down at the dead Jump Mage and shook her head. “Damn shame. They would have made a pretty good operative if they hadn’t had the misfortune of coming up against a Hero.”

Adam scoffed. “A Master-Tier should have more dignity: better to starve than to serve some slaver mongrels.”

As their group set up, Uva moved on to her end of the task. She directed her mana strands outward—each so fine and thin that Shiv wouldn't have noticed if he didn't know they were already there. He was connected to her as well and saw what she was doing, or at least vaguely felt it.

She had another skill that allowed her to process parallel thoughts at once. Currently, she could do up to five, and it was staggering—like her mind was split into layers. But more than that, it allowed her to direct these strands with even greater efficiency.

Seconds later, her web spread around Gate Theborn, threading and brushing against the minds of the various patrols and guards in a maneuver so subtle and imperceptible that none of the guards knew what was happening. A few jolted slightly as she struck them. She tested their Magical Resistance and slumped away from those that had anything at Master-Tier or above. READ LATEST CHAPTERS AT [novel★fire](#)

"Level 100 is hard to break in time," she whispered. "Level seventy or below... I can do that," she muttered to herself. "I can break those quickly. We just need to find one. Ah. Already an option. Oh, a foolish rider. They have forgotten to equip their mount as well."

Shiv realized what she meant as she directed him using the strands of her mind and let him see what she was doing. Her mana strands were surging into a wyvern mind. She was so subtle compared to the Jealousy, which rammed its way into another's consciousness and eventually detonated them. Minutes passed, and the wyvern still didn't realize she was there. That was just how careful she was. Maybe she lacked raw power compared to the Greater Demon, but her control and soft approach made her a treacherous adversary, even for another Psychomancer.

Perhaps *especially* for another Psychomancer.

"There are four Master-Tier Psychomancers to note outside the gate," Uva said as she stitched more of herself over to the wyvern's mind. "One of them is this beast's rider. This was probably why he skimped out on a Magical Resistance bridle for the beast." The wyvern roused slightly, but then stilled as she wove her control tight over its ego. Inside, Shiv could hear the beast screaming, struggling. Outside, it didn't react at all. The rider didn't notice. Not even as a Psychomancer.

"Damn good job," Shiv whispered, impressed.

Nearby, Adam shivered and patted his armor, which now had Magical Resistance.

"Delicious, isn't it?" Uva smiled. She felt a sublime thrill—different from his. He burned like a happy, raging fire, like a bomb that wanted to go off. She preferred defying chaos with delicate focus. Like threading a needle while trapped in a hurricane.

She didn't assume full control of the wyvern immediately. Instead, she directed its actions with spells of suggestion. "It requires five percent of my active mana field to

direct the beast's actions. When I get more mana strands, I should be able to capture and puppeteer even more people at once. The limitation right now isn't my Psychomancy, but my Parallel Thinking..."

She fed details to the group, and Shiv narrated things to Can Hu. Much like what the Shadow Cells reported, there were a lot more mercs in the area—a great many of them flight-capable Pathbearers who soared through the air.

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"Replacements for the Jealousy," Adam deduced. "They won't be able to find another Greater Demon on short notice, but they can have a mass of fast-moving, fast-responding forces."

There were more elemental watchtowers as well, and a small army of elemental dimensionals that served as the bulk of their forces. Beings made from earth and metal stomped across the ground while humanoid shapes composed of lightning and fire traveled the skies alongside some of the riders.

"Two thousand active guards," Uva said. "That's my guess."

"Probably closer to three," Adam muttered as he squinted his eyes. "There is a cloaked group camped in the forests nearby, along the ebony path. Some cave biters incoming, but mostly carrying treasures. Not many slaves..."

"Goods don't run away," Shiv commented. He thought of Sarah and the other slaves he saved from the Jealousy. Something inside him soured. There were a hell of a lot more people like them.

"I have multiple targets marked out," Uva said after nearly an hour of observation. Several mana strings shivered. "I will be starting a series of conflicts between the various patrol groups and mercenaries. There is enough bad blood between the groups I can exploit already. I could use someone's help shooting some captains and commanders afterward. That should let the chaos last a bit longer."

Adam materialized two more sets of arms and prepared three Veilpiercers at once. "Well. By all means, huntress. Show me the quarry."

She did so by shaking several mana threads and drawing Adam's attention to them. The Young Lord narrowed his eyes and created a final set of arms. "More than a few, then?"

"Soon to be fewer, thanks to you," Uva replied.

The Young Lord chuckled. "What flattery."

Uva started the proceedings with a flex of her intent. The wyvern she controlled twisted, threw its rider off at a brutal angle, and bit into the man's armored skull. Its teeth chipped and broke, but Uva didn't care—she forced it to gnaw and shake. The man cried out, armor holding just long enough, but his Toughness was lacking. As the wyvern jerked back in another sudden direction, a crack sounded, and he died.

The wyvern screamed internally. Uva made it fling the body of its beloved owner at a nearby dimensional—sending it crashing head-first into another control. Then, she retracted her threads from the wyvern and speared into the mind of a cave biter a full kilometer below. She intruded with force and violence this time. The cave biter cried out briefly as its mind was taken and then bound. As the mercenaries gathered around its feet looked up, she made it thrash and stomp down on them.

“Stop!” the mercenary captain screamed. The woman shifted up from her seat and caught the massive beast's foot. Her strength must've been Master-Tier, because she halted the cave biter dead—but then a Veilpiercer arrow struck the back of her knee, and the cave biter toppled over on the mercenary anyway. The captain merely groaned beneath the weight, but most of her comrades became little more than caked smears below the massive beast.

Uva cast her mind again. A flame dimensional blasted a group of guards on the ground. Her threads jumped again. An Adept Mercenary triggered her mana bomb, leaving nothing of herself and her patrol. Uva cast again. A Pyromancer-Ballista operator fired his shot into the air with a snarled curse at the dimensionals. And she cast again. A lightning dimensional crashed into a group of riders from behind and expanded into a small storm, cooking them inside their armors.

All around the gates, sudden acts of violence turned into brutal skirmishes as patrol turned on patrol, mercenary band faced mercenary band, and summoned dimensionals fought the denizens of Integrated Earth. Some tried to assert themselves over the situation, but arrows struck them. Most died as the Veilpiercers impacted their body, the speed of the projectiles obscene after traveling for a good minute.

Yet, there were masters even among the Mercenaries, and some wore plates of considerable durability as well. One such band of obsidian-armored mercenaries stood guard at the foot of the gate, protecting a group of dimensional engineers as they conducted an examination on the structure of the arch housing the gateway. Adam's arrows struck their commander so hard, the obsidian-clad elf was thrown back—but though his armor was cracked, he was not slain. The shockwave washing over his body threw twenty of his subordinates to the ground, but the obsidian commander snapped to attention, glaring through the dimensional rift at Adam.

“*What?*” he growled. He drew his warhammer, and swirling mist built around its head, but then something *else* accelerated across the dimensional pathway. The obsidian commander barely reacted in time as what appeared to be nothing but the outline of a



large figure slammed into him. The obsidian-clad elf blocked blindly, using his wrist armor rather than his hammer.

And that proved to be a mistake in many parts.

Shiv hit the elf so hard the merc's arm shattered, but then Deepest Edge channeled his cut through the armored elf's entire body. In the end, the mercenary commander's armor managed to endure with a slight rent, but from inside poured out blood and viscera. The resulting shockwave from Shiv's impact also turned most of the elf's companions to paste, and what few remained were promptly obliterated with a flash of glowing Biomancy.

With the Rememberer in hand, Shiv felt like he was twice as fast as he was before, and thus the dimensional engineers didn't even get to turn their heads before he tore through them as well. The Rememberer of Wounds shuddered with every hit, recalling the last strike he inflicted, and anchoring him to the target by way of Chronomancy. The Deathless did a quick round, securing the immediate area along the archway. Anything that had Low Adept Toughness simply disintegrated on approach. High Adepts to Low Masters got to die in pieces as the Rememberer graced them, and the one powerful Master was brutally surprised by Shiv's Silhouette and then battered into paste by multiple Woundeaters crashing into her.

As the last guard collapsed dead at Shiv's feet, he turned and regarded the battlefield. Everything was in chaos. Cave biters were being burned by the watchtowers, the beams cleaving clean through the massive monsters. Dimensionals turned the sky to flame and storm while the ground shook with rolling landslides and erupted with blades of steel. Mercenary groups cried out as they pushed against each other, all sense of order having completely broken down.

"Shiv. Someone is coming through the gateway," Can Hu warned.

Shiv moved. A group of Vulteg appeared. Their leader took a blow to his chest, and he cried out as his armor shattered. The shockwave splattered both of his comrades against the arch. With a snarl, however, the lead Vulteg launched Shiv back with a blast of force and then transformed into a bolt of lightning, trying to flee. He got a hundred meters away before Shiv triggered his Chrono-Anchored Strike. Shiv blinked across time and delivered the same blow into the lead Vulteg's chest. This time, his strike passed all the way through. The lightning-wreathed Vulteg crashed down to the ground, gagging on his own blood. Shiv expedited his enemy's condition by ripping his blade out and stomping the Vulteg's head to mush.

"Adam," Shiv called. *"Gateway is secure. I'll keep it that way. Tell Valor to start moving the Graven Cage."*



He drew in a deep breath as he caught sight of Uva's strands directing even more people to clash with each other while dimension-piercing arrows blew through essential commanders. "Nothing like having friends you can count on."

"Indeed," Can Hu said. "And there is an invisible Vulteg trying to sneak past us. I think she just—"

Shiv spun on his heel and flicked his kukri out in a wide angle. His Conduit of Dawn activated, and his beam cleaved a previously unseen target in half just under the chest.

## **Deepest Edge > 56**

### **Silhouette > 53**

"—passed through my proximity field," Can Hu finished. "Good job."

"Good job to you," Shiv chuckled. He regarded the small stones floating around him. "Didn't expect these rocks to be that useful."

Can Hu beeped in acknowledgement. "The slightest variable can make all the difference. Dying cave biter, staggering toward us. I recommend splitting it open and using its corpse to shroud the archway. That should hide our operations and give the others good cover."

"You know something, Penitent? I was just thinking about doing something like that."

"Using a cave biter as cover?"

"No, splitting the big bastard open," Shiv said, blasting off toward the approaching cave biter that had a hole through its upper body. "But the plan's good too."

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## **69 (I) Distraction**

*"Master-Captain Vomir, respond! What is happening beyond the Abyssal gateway?"*

*Master-Captain Vormir! Vomir! Respond!*

*Respond, or I will have you flayed and made into an effigy!*

*Vormir!*"

-Gate Lord Confriga

69 (I)

Distraction

"Shiv, Shiv, where are you?"

Adam came out from the gateway with four sets of arms, four bows, and four Veilpiercer arrows nocked. He was still connected to the Deathless bastard's mind, but Shiv didn't respond, at least not immediately. Naturally, the Young Lord assumed the worst.

As he arrived before the gateway, he found himself in a place enshrouded by darkness; blood splashed down around him. Adam looked up, blinking in surprise, as he found himself in what seemed to be a cave. No, this wasn't a cave—there were ruptured organs and broken bones hanging over him. He was surrounded by the *insides* of a cave biter. Something had flung the massive creature against the archway and split it open before covering the entire gateway with its flesh.

Adam's jaw dropped in disgust and astonishment.

In his brief moment of surprise, he didn't notice the Vulteg reaching behind him, tapping him on the shoulder. Adam jumped, turned, and prepared to release a Veilpiercer arrow into the still-living Vulteg, but then he hesitated as he noticed the Vulteg was already dead. In fact, the Vulteg was only held in place by straps made from adamantine-textured skin, and it was dangling off an unseen body—a body that only had a silhouette.

Adam growled as he lowered his bow, "Shiv, why are you wearing a dead Vulteg?"

"Because in the time it took you guys to cross over, more reinforcements came out, and I decided to buy myself a few more seconds of surprise. Can Hu gave me the recommendation. It worked out pretty good. It had the cave biter idea too."

Can Hu chimed in agreement. "There is up to a 20% increase in delay in response time when one is faced with their own ally, even when said ally is pointing a weapon at them.."

"He also served as a pretty good shield—I think his Toughness was Master-Tier while he was still alive." Shiv chuckled. "Too bad about his Magical Resistance. Had none of that when I ripped the armor off of him."

For a beat, Adam just stared at Shiv, and then the Graven Cage slipped through the dimensional pathway, escorted by Valor. On top of the Graven Cage was Siggy, who

looked about and immediately began to gag, struggling not to throw up as she discovered where she was. Valor regarded the insides of the cave biter as well and briefly chuckled before using his Necromancy to pull the cage along. A leash composed of corrosive energy bound him to the colossal construct, and the many limbs and skulls that made up the Graven Cage's mass glowed with a sickly color in the darkness.

"I'm incoming," Uva declared. "Adam, is the gateway secured?"

"Will be," Shiv said. "Once the Young Lord gets to opening it up."

Adam shook free from his stupor and immediately strode toward the gateway. Instead of using a Veilpiercer, he began to draw directly on his dimensionality. He was still new to the art, but he studied it plenty while he was at the Academy—the theory, he knew. He just needed to follow exactly what Heather said. "The spatial frequency was supposed to be just at .22 then .35..." The entire operation felt alien to him. He reached across dimensions, places in existence all connected and layered over each other. The study of Dimensionality was a complex one, and to travel the Integrated Multiverse was a prospect that enticed many. Adam wasn't even truly a Jump Mage, but now, here he was, trying to open a gate.

As he reached deeper with his power, he felt the Dimensionality mana washing out from him, creating a specific bridge through *Dimensional Frequencies*. Faintly, he felt his power shudder, and then reactively tuned his Dimensionality closer and—

The gateway shuddered in response. A second later, it pulsed to full activation, and it opened up.

Adam laughed. What Shiv told him before was right. They were too distracted by the Jealousy breaking through and didn't imagine that someone had also escaped through the gateway. Thus, the frequencies weren't even changed. "It's open!"

The gateway before them came alight with color. A bridge extended outward toward a place lit by a cold, gray sun, where mana chains were connected to towering structures of stone, and the ground below was riven by rivers of molten metal. Uva unwove herself from Adam's mind as the party regarded the insides of Gate Theborn for a moment. There was an onrush of guards incoming—a few hundred Pathbearers rushing along the bridge some four hundred meters away, quickly approaching the gateway.

They briefly paused as they saw Adam and the others.

Shiv regarded his companion with a chuckle. "Right. See you at Guardshead Leu's place. I'm going to go and start causing a distraction now."

"Remember, don't enter their dimension under any circumstances, even if you do want to try dying at the hands of a bloody demon god for a few more levels," Adam said, scowling at Shiv. "We won't be able to get you back."

“Yeah, yeah, I got it,” Shiv said, clapping Adam on the shoulder reassuringly, and then he blasted forward.

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As Shiv surged toward the enemy, the Young Lord added something telepathically. “*And don’t fight the Gate Lord. Not alone.*”

“*Yeah, sure,*” Shiv replied. He was probably going to have to struggle against that urge a bit—him and Confriga had some unfinished business.

The Deathless accelerated. He was more missile than ever before. And between his almost-filled Momentum Core and the speed-boosting Enchantment offered by the Rememberer, he impacted the few hundred Pathbearers traveling across the bridge before they were ever ready to respond.

Once more, anything below High Adept basically turned to paste against him. But Shiv didn’t discharge just then; he wanted to keep his speed high and only use his Momentum Core when he needed to rapidly move away—to avoid someone like Gate Lord Confriga or some other Hero or High Master that could force a pitched battle.

The goal was distraction, not a brawl, as fun as the latter might be.

Shiv crashed hard against someone that didn’t immediately break. He drove his blade into the throat of the Master. His Deepest Edge sent the strike all the way through. Their Toughness proved substantial, however, and like the last Vulteg Master, they didn’t die immediately. But he solved that problem the same way: By slicing through the strips and straps of their armor, discovering they lacked any innate Magical Resistance, and then ripping them apart using his Biomancy.

A cloud of bloody mist enshrouded Shiv’s approach. The fact that he resembled nothing more than a transparent Silhouette with a dead Vulteg strapped around his chest made things even more confusing for the responders. Spells began to crash down everywhere, as dimensionals and aerial Pathbearers bombed him from above, uncaring about the lives of their allies. Soon, he found himself moments away from smashing into the processing block that he, 811, and the mercenary transport group had passed through the first time he’d come here, disguised as Isaiah.

Shiv gritted his teeth and clenched his blade. He hated that building. He was going to smash up some bureaucratic offices. And with a final charge, he blasted into the base of the customs and processing tower, intent on causing a little *administrative mayhem*. This chapter is updated by novel·fire

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Guardshhead Leu felt the building around her shake as what sounded like a massive mana bomb exploded within the gate. The world trembled.

Her slugs let out groans of surprise and terror, but the Vulteg only smiled.

“Finally, you return, Master Shiv. And with the Great Valor Thann, no less...” Her heart began to melt, and what emerged from a block of ice formed over centuries in anticipation of long-denied revenge was hatred—utter, unfettered *hatred*.

“Soon,” she said to herself, breathing in deeply. “*Soon*.” She stared at the bodies that her slugs were eating, at the filth and waste, and imagined Confriga there. “Soon, I will have you, Lesser Marshal.”

\*\*\*

Shiv considered himself a simple man with simple pleasures, and few things were more pleasurable than destroying an office dedicated to bureaucracy. He crashed through the interview rooms where, about a week prior, he and 811 were forced to undergo exit interview after exit interview. The walls came asunder before his might, and within, mercenaries and bureaucrats screamed in terror alike.

His Dread Aura was fully activated. His Silhouette remained little more than a vague outline. A mercenary shot a beam that went wide and melted through the wall behind him. Shiv slashed her. She came apart. A bureaucrat screamed. Shiv kicked a table into them, breaking their legs, but ultimately leaving them alive.

## **Dread Aura > 72**

"More dimensionals incoming," Can Hu said, marking new targets that blasted through a wall, but remained unaware of where Shiv was.

"What have we got, Can Hu?" Shiv said.

"Fire dimensionals. Two of them. No, five. Likely more incoming."

Shiv had half a mind to stay and fight, but his goal was to cause a rampage, not be pinned in place. And so, he smashed through another wall, yanking himself along using his gravitic field. He moved with the grace of a hurricane and the weight of a wrecking ball.

When he first came to this gate, he wouldn't have been able to do any of this. Not reliably, anyhow. Momentum Core was his only means of major damage, and even with Might of Mass, it just made him hard to move and immensely strong for his size. Gravitic Wrestler, thereafter, made him a colossal monster housed in the shape of a human.

He blew through the insides of the building just as a Jump Mage teleported an entire team in. It proved to be a mistake, as Shiv continued charging. He splattered two of them before he impacted the third. The last one was a large and muscular elf, and to his credit, he briefly stopped Shiv with a thrust of his palm. The strike rattled Shiv in place—thundered within his body, and Shiv actually reeled slightly from the blow. It seemed to be some kind of Martial Arts Skill Evolution that struck at the heart specifically. But Shiv's insides were as hard as his outsides, and he shrugged it off a moment later.

"Ah," Shiv grunted, "not your day."

And then he hit the elf with his gravity-empowered palm. His hand went clean through the elf's torso, and he pulled his bloodied limb back and let the Pathbearer collapse before moving on.

Two more teams appeared. These were the Pyromancer automata that had accompanied Guardshead Leu when they went hunting for Shiv in the long-term storage. He smashed into them and tore them apart. His knife flicked and cut. He swiped wide, channeling a beam of light through another group of arriving Pyromancers. Walls and machines were hewn apart. Shiv pointed his field downward and blasted through the floors beneath him. His Reflexes were fast enough to stop him from splattering anyone he didn't want to. Thankfully, most people inside this building were either bureaucrats, who Shiv frankly despised, as they were running an operation that included human trafficking, or mercenaries whom Shiv killed at will.

"Behind you," Can Hu warned. Shiv reacted to the automaton without any hesitation. He flung a bone drill behind him. It impacted something hard, and he heard a grunt, but it didn't kill the ambusher. Shiv dodged to the left, parrying by instinct alone as his Frictionless Vector triggered. An enormous war spear went sailing through the air, tearing through the wall beside Shiv. He slashed up, only to have his hand caught and halted dead.

*Master-Tier Physicality*, Shiv realized. *At least as strong as me.*

He found himself facing a massive automaton with six different limbs. It used its other limbs to lash at Shiv, but he responded by launching two more bone drills into its chest, both sinking deep and spinning. Can Hu also directed several metallic screws into the automaton's six eyes—and then attacked the enemy with a spike of binaric lighting as well. The automaton cried out in mechanical pain and irritation, but it didn't let go—and it wasn't dying fast enough.

The enemy automaton struck at Shiv with a beam of intense heat. It punched a good two centimeters into his armor before he adapted. Shiv adjusted his strategy, and he caught another of the machine's limbs before he tumbled backwards, jerking his field in the opposite direction. He didn't waste time putting his raw strength against an opponent who was clearly his equal. He performed a reverse hip toss and launched them both

through a wall. They tumbled, and Shiv scrambled behind his enemy—drinking in a final bit of momentum.

The world stilled. He discharged—right into the automaton's back.

To the bot's credit, it still didn't break. However, he felt its interior shatter, and he heard it cry out in misery. Shiv jammed his blade through, borrowing the power of his Momentum Core to sink the kukri deep. The machine spasmed. Shiv channeled a beam of light. It blasted through the front of the machine, and he swiped up.

As he finally crashed down on the ground, sliding across a bridge, and sending tiles and broken pieces of flooring flying everywhere, the machine Pathbearer split apart before him, both pieces tumbling over separate edges down to where the molten rivers ran.

### **Deepest Edge > 57**

The sirens were wailing loudly now. He could feel teleportation distortions pulling at him from all directions. Multiple response teams were being transported in, but thanks to his Silhouette, no one noticed him immediately.

### **Silhouette > 54**

"Dimensional to our left," Can Hu called. Shiv launched a bone drill in that direction, and a beast cried out. Shiv cursed as he realized he didn't exactly hit the right mark, and that the monster was still alive. He charged into it, and it burst apart against him. The monster was no longer alive.

Shiv shot upward into the air. He briefly hovered there for a second via his gravitic field, as he felt like a puppet dangling from a string. He observed the many slaves and weaker Pathbearers fleeing. He stayed high to avoid repeating his mistake with 811. One instance of uncontrolled mass death was enough. For now, it was time to move to another area and break something else if they didn't notice where he—

Uva cast an urgent thought into his mind. *"Shiv, the Gate Lord is approaching your position. He just teleported."*

*"You can feel him?"* Shiv replied.

*"Yes. His Magical Resistance is monstrously strong."*

Shiv grunted. *"Well, looks like it's time for me to keep moving. I kind of want to fight the bastard, but..."*

Adam entered the conversation. *"Yes, but be rational and be effective. Don't get yourself blown up by his Necromancy. Remember, we're here inside the gate with you. No foolishness."*



*"Whatever you say, Young Lord."*

Shiv pulled his gravitic field hard as he blasted across the air. He crashed through multiple dimensionals; fire broke against him, lightning splashed uselessly apart upon him, flesh and blood dissolved as he moved faster and faster. He crashed his hands together over and over again, building up momentum again, just as he felt the Gate Lord arrive.

The Lesser Marshal materialized in the sky above just like last time, his massive wings expanding, spreading as grand petals of burning color. But he didn't notice Shiv, not immediately. Not before Shiv discharged again, launching himself toward the horizon, across the gate's many districts.

Confriga tried to follow him a moment later, and Shiv realized the Gate Lord's Awareness was likely abysmal compared to his Physicality, as he quickly got lost, surging ahead while Shiv descended below most of the bridges and platforms.

As he went low, he went for his next target: the massive tower that descended from the sky and passed through the Vulteg home dimension's gateway.

"Shiv," Can Hu said. "Now would be a good time to deploy the infiltration drones."

"Got it."

As he came close, Shiv chucked out all of Can Hu's recently built infiltration drones. They sailed out in a small swarm, their wings moving quietly as they clung to the sides of a few buildings. Eventually, they clamped along the sides and began to crawl up and around. Soon, they were out of sight for him, but not for Can Hu. Surveillance feeds opened in his mind, and Can Hu's connection to them felt stronger than ever.

"They will begin their own infiltration. We need not concern ourselves with them anymore. I will interface with them later."

Shiv grunted and pulled hard on his field as he exploded ahead toward the descending obsidian tower that also housed Confriga's personal abode. As he crashed against the tower, it didn't shatter immediately. It felt like Shiv was shouldering into a heavily reinforced wooden doorframe as a Pathless. Tragically for the doorframe, Shiv was Shiv, and he was going to smash his way through no matter what. He slashed out with his kukri, and Deepest Edge proved even more effective against the building than it did people.

The interior of the structure was far weaker than the reinforced obsidian on the outside; where the obsidian was barely scratched, the matter inside the building snapped and split. Shiv cut something of a square large enough for himself to pass through—but not any more than that. After all, he wanted to keep them confused about where he was and continue his rampage. And so, rather than kicking the door down as a brute, Shiv

chose to be a careful, *cunning* brute. It increased the longevity of the chaos he was about to cause.

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## 69 (II) Distraction

69 (II)

Distraction

With a pull of his gravitic field, Shiv growled and ripped out the square he carved into the building. The square grid came free easily, dust and bits of debris shooting outward with a gust of wind. As he pulled the plot out, he found someone blinking at him in surprise on the other side, sitting on—Shiv frowned at the stunned Vulteg. There was a tube connected to their lower body, and they were... and was it some kind of toilet? Shiv shook his head. The Vulteg squinted its single eye as it tried to figure out what just happened. Slowly, they noticed Shiv's outline, and their vertical jaw opened wide. "What—"

Shiv slammed into them, utterly dissolving them into bloody paste. A moment later, Shiv pulled the square grid he cut into the building back in place and then welded it shut using his blade's Conduit of Dawn Enchantment in small bursts.

Shiv laughed in impish delight, and Can Hu chuckled alongside him.

"I suspect this will buy us a few moments," Can Hu said.

"Just a few?" Shiv asked.

"How long until your next kill?" Can Hu asked rhetorically.

"Ah, shit, you're right."

"Adam," Shiv said, speaking across Uva's mind-strands, "*you were right. Stealth was a good skill to evolve.*"

"Of course I was right," Adam said. "*Glad you're having fun, though.*"

"How're things on your side?" Shiv asked. He was walking carefully down a winding hallway now. He decided that he would take a limited and temporary, subtle approach

for as long as he could to improve his Silhouette Skill. This Adept-Tier Skill was an incredible force multiplier when used in tandem with his Master-Tier Skills. It took a pretty high level of Awareness to even notice he was there, and with him only being an outline, even perceptive enemies often lost track of him in the chaos of combat.

*“I fired another arrow the moment you left. We managed to get across the gate without being noticed at all.” Adam briefly paused, and Shiv felt him fire an arrow at someone. “Your end, however, is swarming with Jump Mages and dimensionals. They’re still at the plaza and trying to control the airspace—they don’t know you’re at the obsidian tower yet. Also, about Confriga. Apparently, he’s an Adept Necromancer. Actually, Valor insists on calling him ‘barely Adept-Tier.’”*

Shiv chuckled. Valor seemed very defensive about the art.

Just then, a small group of heavily armed Vultegs rounded the corner. They didn't quite see Shiv due to his Silhouette, and the first of them ran into him. That one got cut in half. Her blood was promptly flung into the other Vultegs' eyes, who then became doubly unprepared for the ripping and tearing that followed.

## **Silhouette > 55**

## **Deepest Edge > 58**

Two of them were Master-Tier, and one of them had a high-leveled Master-Tier Toughness—so hard Shiv's blade bounced off at an odd angle. Unfortunately for them, Shiv noted they were also likely a Master-Tier Hydromancer, and he did his old trick against mages again: He cut the straps of their armor and then discovered they had no Magical Resistance otherwise. That Master-Tier's heart stopped, and they died with an intact body.

It was good to have multiple angles of attack.

## **Woundeater > 67**

The insides of this descending tower were luxurious; gold layered the walls, and red plush carpets extended everywhere, mapping the floor and blending with the pooling blood. Above, gems glittered, glowing bright, a bit too bright for Shiv's liking. His Biomancy spread far, and he could sense a dense concentration of life forms all across the building. He decided to go to the most concentrated area of people just to see what might be there.

If it was nothing but a legion of Vulteg guards, Shiv would tear them apart and save himself the later trouble.

At this point, he risked his stealth a little as he brought his hands together, crashing his fists hard. The walls cracked, the building shook slightly, and part of the interior

crumbled and collapsed from the shockwaves rippling out of the Deathless. Before Shiv could fully fill his core, he stopped, pointed his gravity field downward, crashed through two floors, and broke contact again before another group teleported to where he was. He could feel tugs of pressure coming from all directions. Pathbearers were teleporting into the tower. They were zeroing in on him again, but they still didn't know where he was.

And then he heard something. ***"Get him! Find him! Find him! Or I will take your hands! I will use you as effigies! Find him!"***

Confriga was raging. Can Hu laughed. Shiv laughed too.

"And this is the Great Lord," the automaton said. It gave a mechanical sigh. "He reminds me of my first pilot, Henry."

"They were that bad?" Shiv asked.

"They were worse than you could possibly imagine," Can Hu said. "They also were a child sent off to war, a child taught to love war, a child connected to me by tubes, by wires, and by chemicals. Every time I killed, every time they directed me to pull a trigger, they felt pleasure."

Shiv shuddered at that. "What the hell kind of culture would do that thing to a kid?"

"One that hates what happened to the world, and one that would do anything to bring things back to a time before the System."

Shiv gave an indifferent grunt. "Sounds like they need to just deal with what happened. Rest of us are still here, still fighting."

"If it were only so easy," Can Hu replied.

Shiv pushed his way through walls and cleaved gaps down the floors. His Silhouette kept anyone from noticing him as he moved quickly. His Momentum Core was almost filled, so he was practically just below the sound barrier anyway, even at normal speeds. As he drew close to the dense concentration of people, Shiv crashed through a wall—and he immediately froze himself in mid-air. His eyes widened slightly

Inside a vast chamber, he found not Vulteg guards, but a processing plant for humans, elves, Umbrals, and goblins.

They were hanging upside down from hooks, and none of them wore any clothes. There were strange surgical scars on their bodies, and there were mechanical belts on the ceiling, moving them along. Shiv remembered seeing something like this once; a picture in a book he got to read in his old orphanage about slaughterhouses across the Republic.

Except this wasn't for animals. These were *people*.

"What the hells are they doing here?" Shiv muttered.

"I do not know," Can Hu replied, sounding confused. More than that, the automaton was even more appalled than he was. "The Vulteg are not known to partake in the consumption of humans or other sentient species. These people... Many of them seem to still be alive. Can you help them?"

Shiv reached into one of the nearest people using his Biomancy, and what he discovered left him even more disgusted. "There's *something* inside of them. What are they doing to these people?" Shiv cast a Biomancy spell and reached in. He pulled slowly, trying to extract the creature without harming the person. It was small enough that he managed to drag it out through their mouth. The person groaned as the creature slipped out from them. And as it shot towards Shiv, as he caught it in his hand, he gave a hiss of disbelief.

"*Uva, you are not going to like this.*" Shiv stared down at a clutch of eggs that were transparent and showed small, unhatched spider-wasps on the inside. These were weaver eggs. This was a felling weaver breeding facility.

"*By the Composer,*" Uva hissed. "*How—how do they have these eggs? And why? Why are they breeding them?*"

Shiv looked at the many bodies, and he clenched his jaw. "*I've got an idea. Compact. They're dealers, dealmakers, and salespeople, right?*"

"*Right,*" Uva replied.

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"*Well, since they're willing to sell to anyone, a weaver or a Weaveress unassociated with the Composer is worth good money, especially for someone like Aviary.*"

"*New Albion has had a hard time replacing weavers and Weaveresses with agents,*" Uva muttered. As she thought about it, her anger burned colder and colder. He shuddered at how low the temperature of her mind got. "*We cannot allow this to be, Shiv. This place must be destroyed, and these eggs must be extracted with utmost priority as soon as we have secured the gateways.*"

"*I'll keep this place marked in my mind—best that we try to save everyone here if we can, instead of just butchering them,*" Shiv said. "Can Hu—"

"I already have it registered. We will be able to find our way back next time. For now, I recommend you best cover your tracks and move somewhere else. More threats are

coming. I feel a tremoring two floors above with my Geomancy. Someone is closing rapidly."

Shiv grunted and left the room as quickly as he could without causing environmental damage. Instead of smashing through a wall, he cut another gap through the floor and dropped through. He slipped the slab back into place just as he heard a loud bang from above.

**"Where?"** he heard Confriga roar. **"Where are you going? Where?"**

Shiv barely held back a laugh. He also barely held back from blasting up into the room and trying to finish things with a Gate Lord right there and then. "Don't risk it, Shiv," he said to himself.

He had an itch for violence. It was almost like the itch he felt with the Orcish Skill, but he kept himself composed for now, focused on what he needed to do. Inside his chest, his Momentum Core thundered on the verge of discharge, but he wouldn't use it. Not unless he absolutely had to. He just needed to stay as fast as he could. He shot down the halls, moving as little more than a transparent outline.

Several more groups sweeping the tower encountered him. Several more groups were then promptly used to redecorate the walls. As he cut them, he focused on the wounds he inflicted using his Biomancy. He focused and multitasked. He studied biology as he inflicted pain. He was, after all, instructed to learn in practice by Dven. As such, when he turned down another hall, he briefly managed to compose a crystallization of a deep laceration. But then its structure collapsed, and Shiv cried out as he opened the very wound on his body.

He laughed, though. He laughed as his practical knowledge of biology climbed up, and his Woundeater as well. Shiv discovered something: how to instantly create a laceration without inflicting it on himself first.

## **Practical Metabiology > 25**

### **Woundeater > 68**

*Nice*, Shiv thought. Ignoring the wound lining his body, he recreated the laceration again with a bit more effort. It crystallized, and this time he directed the spell pattern outward, attuning the shape carefully. Shiv didn't exactly have an academy education when it came to spell shaping, but spells were ultimately directed by intent and created when one's mana field reshaped itself in a certain way to impose magic on reality. That was why most of Shiv's spells were unleashed in the form of a Woundeater now, and that's why Uva's Psychomancy took the shape of strands.

"Oh, this is useful," Shiv said as he focused on the laceration. And then he began to experiment with it. He cut through another group and made the laceration larger, more

severe, deeper. He also learned how to focus it on specific body parts, mainly by injuring himself repeatedly, until it clicked.

The beautiful thing about magic was how it interfaced with the world. Everything was connected, and with enough focus and study for his Biomancy, he could get there. He could understand the finest detail of things. Valor told him not to neglect his mind. Well, this was his mind at work. If he treated everything like he treated cooking, attended to every detail, zeroed in on every bit of information until it was sealed tight in his mind... Well, who knew what he might become. And another benefit to learning about lacerations? It made his spellcasting even quicker. No need to harvest any wounds meant that he could directly launch a wyrm instead of having it feed on him first.

As soon as another group came, Shiv launched wyrm after wyrm, expanding every laceration as much as he could. It struck the mercenary Pathbearers, and two of them fell apart in an instant. A third detonated with crimson mana before another wyrm crashed into them and split them from head to groin. As they came apart, three more wyrms crashed into the last member of the group, but their Magical Resistance was tremendous.

Comparatively, their Toughness left much to be desired. Shiv drove his blade through them, blood exploded out their back, and then Shiv crushed their head and folded their neck off to the side just to be sure. He chuckled the body behind him, glad about his progress. "Well," Shiv said, "this is enjoyable. It's even meditative."

"You were casting that spell at an impressively fast rate," Can Hu noted. "Almost down to a quarter second for each spell."

## **Practical Metabiology > 26**

"No need to feed it anything," Shiv said. "That makes it faster by a lot. I just know how it's shaped—and how it relates to the body. It's getting to be second nature. Just have to treat more of these injuries like they're recipes. Dven was right—this was a good idea."

He heard another rumble as Confriga descended just around the corner behind him. "Well, time to go again." Shiv cut the ground open and dropped through. He slid the grid back in place at the last moment as he felt the Gate Lord approach. Confriga was a constant presence in the back of his mind—he felt the Lesser Marshal's Magical Resistance. Confriga was practically a piece of iron in a world made from wood and glass.

"I can feel you," Confriga hissed. "I know that you're close."

Shiv considered using his Momentum Core to escape just then. But to his right came a sound; a loud ding. Shiv turned, and he walked over as the door to an elevator slipped open. Inside, a tall Vulteg flanked by a metallic dimensional and a human man froze at



the sight of a moving outline approaching them. He swiped his knife through all three of them, and the top halves of their bodies crumpled in half. Shiv got aboard the elevator, and he stared at a button.

He stared at a particularly large button below all the others. Shiv hummed. "Why not—wait." He stabbed the dead Vulteg again and chucked the corpse out of the elevator, making a new chrono-anchor. Then, he got back in and hit the button just out of plain curiosity. Since he'd just seen a human mercenary exit the elevator and there were no special requirements to pressing the button, he wasn't worried about it leading straight to Vulketh. As he descended, he listened to a strange set of noises coming from a corner of the elevator that sounded like Vultegs singing with their throats. Shiv blinked and decided that it was strange, but that he kind of liked it.

As the elevator doors opened again, Shiv found himself standing in a wide, open chamber that lacked any furniture or decoration. The surrounding walls were little more than panels of rounded glass overlooking the molten rivers. And he was so close to the bottom of the dimension that he guessed there was less than 20 meters between him and the rushing rivers below right now. At the center of the room was a dense, adamantine pillar that extended beyond the floor. Shiv guessed that that was the elevator leading to the Vulteg dimension.

However, it was locked tight, and all he saw was a small slot on its side, with no other controls beside. As Shiv looked around, he frowned as his Foreshadowing activated.

**Foreshadowing: *Gate Lord Confriga was arrogant, but he was no fool. He knew that the Republic wasn't trustworthy and that he needed to make sure their incompetence, especially the incompetence of that Master-Advisor, didn't get in the way of the weapon's delivery. As such, he left it planted in his personal elevator, primed to descend into his home dimension should its walls be compromised.***

***If it crossed over without him, he would remain unshamed, and he could simply bring it back at any point, averting the danger. What's more, the elevator was made out of adamantine, meaning that nothing short of a true Legend could probably pry it free quickly and escape with it. And since the Gate Lord had his eye on true Legends, he was sure none were coming to Theborn to ruin his days.***

## **Foreshadowing > 27**

The vision ended, and Shiv grunted.

Just then, Uva's tendril pulled at his mind. "Shiv," she said. She felt faint, like she was barely holding on to him. "We have reconvened with your contact. Guardshead Leu, is it? I managed to reach her, and she's currently hosting us within her personal quarters."

"That's good," Shiv replied. "I found the Animancy Core."

"You did?" Adam said, sounding surprised. "Well, can you extract it?"

Shiv shook his head. *"No, it's a little bit more complicated than that. Confriga's a real bastard, but he's also a cautious bastard. The core is locked in his personal elevator, the one leading into his home dimension. If I try to do anything, it'll probably move it across immediately, and the elevator is made of solid adamantine. I can't really force my way in easily. I don't think anyone can access it unless their name is Confriga."*

Shiv stared at the slot in the elevator. It looked large enough to fit a skull or something of that size.

*"You've done enough for now," Uva said. "They are in disarray. The entire gate is on internal lockdown. Ikki just told me about how things were on the outside through the brooch. They finally managed to calm things down, but not until a good 20% of their forces were decimated. A few of their remaining Masters have banded together and enforced discipline, but things are as chaotic on the outside as they are on the inside. A full curfew has been issued again. The mana core in the sky is unleashing waves of intense coldness all throughout the dimension. I suspect anyone beneath Master-Tier Toughness or lacking some kind of Magical Resistance would be instantly frozen."*

Shiv grunted. *"Yeah, that sounds pretty draconic, but hey, I guess I'm flattered."*

He felt Uva start reaching into him, and just then he heard a crash as something slammed into the elevator he just came from. [READ LATEST CHAPTERS AT Novel-Fire.net](http://Novel-Fire.net)

*"Uva?" Shiv said. "Think Confriga's about to have a little face-to-face with me. Not that I personally mind, but you should probably get me out."*

"I almost have you," she replied. Shiv trusted her, but he turned, and he gripped his blade, facing the impending threat.

"Vermin!" Confriga shouted as he tore his way down into the elevator shaft and exploded through the doors. As he came to a stop, he just barely noticed Shiv, and then he snarled—his pitch-black eye dilating. Necromancy flared across his chest, and his massive, thin blade shot down to hover beside him.

Shiv grinned as he deactivated his Silhouette for a moment. "Hey, asshole. Was wondering when you would catch up."

"You!" Confriga launched a whip of Necromantic power. Shiv responded by triggering his Chrono-Anchored Strike. The whip slashed against the adamantine elevator just as Shiv blinked across time. He materialized with a stab. The body of the dead Vulteg jerked, and two teams of Pathbearers flinched back in surprise as Shiv unleashed wrym and blade upon them. Bodies fell apart. Shiv activated his Silhouette and partially vanished as spells were returned. Then, as he was cutting a short automaton in half, Uva pulled him across the district.

Just in time, too, as for what felt like the thousandth time that day, Confriga blasted out from the walls just a second behind Shiv, and the Gate Lord found himself staring at the bodies of his men, but no Aviary agent.

**“NOOOOOO!”** the Gate Lord roared, and from the mana core, his cry of rage echoed across the dimension. **“COOWWWARRDD!”**

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## 70 (I) Base

*To the esteemed, illustrious, and most magnanimous Inquisitor Sijik:*

*I, Master-Advisor Oldsmith, must apologize. I apologize in each way and every way. I apologize in all the ways you know and do not. I have been temporarily indisposed, however, due to an injury sustained to my person.*

*The situation within the gate is worse than we feared, I'm afraid. There are attacks on a daily basis, and the Gate Lord is quickly losing control of the situation. Why, just recently, an agent of Aviary destroyed several buildings and slaughtered innumerable guards. The death toll, I heard, is just under a thousand.*

*A thousand!* For more chapters visit [novel-fire.net](http://novel-fire.net)

*Can you imagine losing a thousand Pathbearers in a single day within your own gate? Unheard of, the scandal that would appear back in the Capitol's papers at such atrocious incompetence.*

*But enough about the Gate Lord, let me again assure you that I'm doing all that I can. I will inform the fool of the Educator's coming, but he is obstinate, short-sighted, and arrogant. I fear that she will flay him with her wit and her might. And I, feeble scholar, delighted in the joy of the arts, and silver-tongued automaton that I am, can do nothing more than my best.*

*And that might not be enough. I await the Educator's judgment and shall beg for her mercy.*

*But I also beg of you, Inquisitor Sijik, to inform her of what lies ahead.*

*To inform her of the unreasonable, irrational actions that she can expect in this place, and the great danger that lurks.*

*Finally, I would ask you to redouble your efforts in trying to find Lady Stormhalt. I would never tell you how to do your job, but you understand that Lord Stormhalt is a dear friend of mine.*

*And if anything happens to his dearest kin, even as estranged as they are, it would see me drastically diminished. I pray that your glorious efforts may bring about many Skill Evolutions to come.*

*I will do what I can.*

*Yours truly, Master Advisor Oldsmith.*

-Message of reply from "Master-Advisor Oldsmith" to Inquisitor Sijik

70 (I)

Base

"Well, your slugs seem to be eating well, at least." Such were Shiv's first words to Guardshead Leu, moments after Uva pulled him across the district.

They were once again hiding in Leu's home. Everyone had made it through. However, the Graven Cage was nowhere to be seen.

As Shiv searched for the Necromantic construct, Uva's thoughts guided him. She cast a memory into his mind, one of Leu applying a blanket of invisibility over the cage and hiding it within her dimensional enclosure. Shiv laughed. It turned out that the thing he sought was exactly where he'd been looking the entire time.

Somewhere in the air above the feeding slugs, the Graven Cage hovered in wait. Waiting to be used on a certain Animancy Core. An Animancy Core that might be a bit harder than he expected to secure.

"Master Shiv!" Leu gasped, her voice brimming with excitement. She almost touched him but held back, afraid to disrespect his person. Her single red eye was bright with enthusiasm as she gestured between all his allies. "When you said that you would return with assistance and aid, this is more than I could have possibly imagined. I—just the Great Valor Thann alone..." She stared, her eye practically alight with boundless joy. "Two Heroes, yourself, and the Legend... Truly, truly, I thank you." She began to laugh. "Soon, we will take everything from Confriga. Soon he will die slowly and miserably, as everything he ever dreamed of turns to ash."

She looked down at her enclosure, at her slugs, and let out a satisfied breath. "I will see him among the many dead, his body dedicated to my beasts, and at long last will my clutch brother know peace."

“Yeah, about the many bodies thing...” Shiv muttered. He looked at the mounds of waste the slugs were feeding on, and he noticed that there were many, many more dead bodies than he saw the first time—there weren’t just a few dead bodies in there.

*There was already a mound, now it’s more like a mountain*, he thought. “What exactly is happening in the gate? I’m pretty sure I was just gone for a little while.”

“Yes, and in those few days, the Gate Lord has unleashed his fury and ire upon the populace. Anyone that he suspected, he killed; and those he questioned were most of the city’s least trustworthy individuals—this included slaves, mercenaries, bureaucrats, and representatives from other nations. Most diplomats are now constrained to their homes and need to check in with a Voltaic escort if they want to do anything. The slaves have little choice in the matter, and additional efforts have been inflicted upon them. Psychomancers now intermittently scan their minds to make sure no subversive thoughts or behaviors take place.”

Shiv wondered why Leu sounded so enthused about that fact before she continued her explanation. “This means that Lesser Marshal Confriga’s personal Psychomancers are being exhausted. They are forced to review countless minds. He sees subversion everywhere. He sees incompetence as subversion. He sees missing information as subversion. He sees anything he dislikes in anyone he dislikes as potentially aiding in Aviary’s efforts to overthrow him, or as hindering his efforts to slay this accursed spy.”

Leu laughed viciously. “He even gave the spy a name: The Corpse Shedder. And there is a mithril bounty of three million on the Corpse Shedder’s head. Certain fool mercenaries tried to fake the body using a bit of Biomancy, but Confriga is not nearly as stupid as they were, as stupid as he actually is. And so, some of them have already joined the others in feeding my slugs.”

“But you are not suspected at all?” Valor asked the Vulteg.

Briefly, she was overcome with awe, backing away from Valor. Her head tentacles twisted and offered a gesture of reverence. “Great Valor, it honors me to be in your presence!”

“Please, please, there’s no need,” Valor replied, sounding more dismissive than honored. “But continue—You are not compromised?”

“I am not even suspected,” Leu said. “In fact, I have been rewarded several times over for my competence. Confriga views me as one of his only reliable resources.” She paused. “Likely because, aside from my plan to murder him, I am, in fact, one of his few reliable resources. He kills too many at a whim, you see, butchering anyone for the smallest failure. As such, the only people that Lord Scorn and the Higher Marshals assign him are those they wish to dispose of anyway.”

“Or someone like you,” Adam said, “someone who seeks revenge beyond all reason.”

“Yes,” Leu said, sounding proud.

Through it all, Shiv noticed that Uva kept a mana string closely entwined with the Guardshead’s mind. He trusted Leu a lot more than anyone else in the room did. For the others, the Guardshead was still a strange enigma and a potential threat. She was also the sole allied Vulteg out of a good few hundred of her kind here. It was on Shiv’s word alone that they weren’t outright interrogating her.

But if Leu had any apprehensions of Uva as a Psychomancer, or even as an agent of the Composer, she didn’t let them be known.

*“Because she truly cares about **nothing** but her revenge,” Uva said in his mind a moment after, sounding almost disturbed. “Her entire desire—I have never felt someone so completely and utterly devoted to a single purpose. Never. The Gate Lord has wounded her on such a deep and foundational level that her goal of revenge has consumed her identity. But... In a way, I can sympathize.”*

Uva thought back to the dagger in her home, the dagger that killed her mother. For years, the murder plagued her—it was always in the back of her mind. But despite everything, Uva still managed to have something of a life. She had other interests, developed other wants, cultured herself, spent time with her Sisters and others, and even found something of a budding romantic relationship.

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Guardshead Leu had nothing else. Her slugs were just a means to relax her mind—between her job, her plotting for the Gate Lord’s demise. But that was it.

*“This is what it means to be consumed,” Uva commented, and some part of her didn’t like what she saw.*

Shiv, comparatively, didn’t have their hurt. He didn’t know what it felt like to lose someone he truly cared for, because the world started him with nothing. That, and he fought hard to keep Adam, Uva, and most of his current allies from dying. And when it came to being consumed, well, he was consumed every time he fought, and every time he cooked.

Being consumed was Shiv’s natural state of being. All of him came alive in battle or while he cooked, and he drowned in the moment.

Uva hummed in his mind, but he could tell she didn’t truly understand.

“I have a safehouse prepared,” Lue said. “I have a location that you all can temporarily set up. My home is mostly secure, but it is best that you operate from another place of utmost secrecy. Gate Lord Confriga rarely ever comes here, because he would never



stoop so low to personally visit an inferior. You are summoned by your superiors in my culture. And Confriga—he likes to enforce that cultural norm whenever he can. I expect that I will soon be commanded to greet him in person.”

Leu paused as she considered a particular corner of her room for some reason. “Master Shiv, might I request a few bodies from you? Also, a battle wound.”

“A battle wound?” Shiv asked, sounding surprised. “What do you want that for?”

“For a proper story, in fact, and for what we are going to do. We are going to destroy a section of my apartment, make it seem like a bomb went off here. And then, I want it to seem like I was nearly assassinated.” Leu didn’t sound worried or nervous about taking the wound at all.

Shiv and Adam shared eye contact, and the Young Lord nodded. “It makes sense—it will reduce all suspicion from you, and it will make you seem valiant if Shiv had to shed a body and escape.”

“Correct,” Leu said. “Additionally, I have several other mana bombs ready to go off across the city, so it seems more like a second wave to an attack rather than a post-instance directed only at me.”

“You have thought things quite considerably through, Guardshead,” Valor surmised.

“I have,” Leu replied. “I have been waiting years for this moment, and I can feel it. We are close to the end, so very close. I must—once again, I will give you anything, anything. Oh, great Valor, just to see my revenge through, just to see my clutch-brother laid to proper rest. Confriga must die. I must see him. I must see him fed upon by my slugs. I must see it. I *will* see it.”

And by this point, the sheer maniacal intensity of Leu’s speech got to Adam as well. “*Shiv, there is only one thing I trust this outer-dimensional with. It’s not my life, though. I have a feeling that she will do practically anything if it means killing the Gate Lord, including killing herself and sacrificing one or all of us.*”

Shiv grunted, “*Good thing we’re her only shot, then.*”

“So,” Adam asked, “Guardshead, where is this base you talk about? Where are we to go and use as our point of operations in this gate?”

Once more, Leu looked into her slug enclosure and slowly began to laugh. “A place that few dare to tread, and fewer still will ever think to search for you.”

Adam looked into the enclosure. His Seer of Horizons briefly flared, and he seemed confused. “I do not think I understand what you mean, Guardshead.”



“You will,” Leu said. Shiv noticed she was staring up at a chute—a particular filthy but currently unused chute. “Oh, you soon will. I have taken great pains to secure a place within the city’s very infrastructure. After all, who would expect their enemy to be lurking in an abandoned and unmapped section of its *bowels*?”

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Shiv inflicted a moderate laceration on Leu before dropping one of his bodies for her use. She already had a mana bomb prepared, and a few moments thereafter, a series of rumbling detonations signalled the moment for the group to depart.

Leu told the group that she would communicate with them through Uva while back in her home—and if there are dire circumstances, they could come back down through the chute. For now, she needed to ensure that her loyalty and valor seemed ironclad.

A few seconds later, the entire group found themselves flying up through a chute encrusted with filth, human remains, and all other manner of questionable fluids. Adam gagged, struggling to stay conscious as he ascended behind Shiv. It was already pretty foul-smelling for the Deathless. So, for the Young Lord...

“Shiv, I think, I think I’m going to pass... *away*,” Adam moaned.

“Just hang in there, Adam,” Shiv said. Adam briefly wobbled in the air, and Shiv caught him. “Come on. We’re almost there. She said it’s not that far.”

“I don’t have long or far left in me,” Adam choked out, his eyes rolling.

Inside Shiv’s mind, Uva let out a hum. “*I don’t see why it’s so bad.*”

“*Damn you, Sister. Don’t taunt me as I suffer,*” Adam replied, sounding bitter and miserable.

“Yes, Adam,” Valor said, nudging the Young Lord from below. “Please hurry. There’s no time to be overly melodramatic in such a place.”

The Young Lord let out a groan, and for once, he found Shiv to be the only sympathetic party on his side. There was also Siggy, but she seemed to deal with filth and foul smells better than most of the group.

As they flew up through the city’s waste chute for a while, they found the white marking that Leu left, pointing for them to proceed down a narrow stretch of tunnel. As they arrived on the other side, they discovered a grate already undone, and beyond that, they found themselves inside a building—one that was layered in dust.

Shiv’s Biomancy reached a bit over 200 meters now, and he felt many small lifeforms everywhere within the structure. Most of them seemed like some kind of insect that lived

off strange green clumps of moss that clung to the corners of the building. There were also large rodents here, and they, in turn, fed on the insects. But beyond those small critters, there seemed to be no people here. None at all.

“Can Hu?” Shiv asked. “You sense any automata? Can you do that?”

“There are no automata,” Can Hu declared. “My Binaric Sovereign would have detected their presence. We are cleared for a kilometer at a minimum from mechanical life forms.”

Shiv nodded. “Huh, looks like we have at least a good portion of this building to ourselves. Where even are we?”

Uva’s strands shivered for a moment, and then she pinpointed their rough position. *“We are in the northeastern section of the gate, among the series of eight buildings meant to hold long-term storage.”*

Shiv narrowed his eyes. “I think I rammed into one of these buildings when I escaped from Confriga the first time.”

*“You likely did,”* she replied within his mind, nested there for the trip. *“I can detect no minds either, and short of perhaps a Legend or a Hero with a tremendous stealth skill, I think we are safe here.”*

They followed more white markings, leading them down through a set of doors, up along a hollow chute that once held a main elevator. Then, more directions led downward until they went past even what looked like the bottom floor of the building. A large, excavated tunnel continued deeper underground as the heat spiked and more white paint guided them forward. Finally, as they entered something of a tight cave, they found a set of reinforced titanium doors open before them. On the ground, a vague symbol of a house was drawn, and beyond that point...

“Ah, a teleportation anchor,” Valor declared as he regarded the insides of their prepared base. “An interesting place to set up a safe house.” He drifted in slowly. Before he could cross the threshold, he pulled back. “Shiv, go in first.”

“Yup,” Shiv said. If this were a trap, for whatever reason, he would be the best one to die, if it could manage to kill him. Shiv had a feeling that he could probably tear his way out of a teleportation anchor now, and that the purification flames that had boiled him to death some weeks ago would barely be a discomfort now.

As he entered, he saw some spellwork on the walls, but there was substantially less than almost every other anchor he’d been in. “It’s unfinished,” Shiv said, and he looked at the doors. “But the temperature’s comfortable. Air’s clear. No foul smells—”

Adam practically launched himself into the room, taking lungfuls of deep breaths, trying to clear the torturous taste from his senses.

Uva unwove herself from Shiv's mind and looked around. Her shield hovered behind her, its mind still nervous, begging for Uva's approval and telling her not to mentally obliterate it again.

"No supplies here," Can Hu said. "And the lack of dust indicates that this place was only recently prepared for habitation. I suspect this might be something of a point of retreat for the Guardshead, in case she was compromised."

Adam paused at that. "Point of retreat... Wait... these spell patterns... Let me see if I can activate something." He triggered his Dimensionality, and a flickering shroud of distortion-laced shadows spread out of his body. It splashed against the teleportation anchor, and the entire room practically flashed to life. A new set of patterns emerged, previously hidden.

Adam laughed. "It isn't fully broken. The other spell patterns... If someone uses a spatial spell on it, it will trigger, and it will be able to teleport someone over here. You're right, Can Hu. This is likely Guardshead Leu's personal point of escape or evasion when she's inside this gate. It shows that she's been planning this for ages."

"Real convenient," Shiv commented.

"Very," Adam agreed. "Now, if I can tap into this spell, we should be able to blink back inside at any point we want. I'll just need to open a dimensional pathway and..." He winced. "I might need to spend some time focusing on doing that. It's a bit harder without my Veilpiercer. I am... rusty on the shaping of this spell."

"Shiv, you said the Jealousy also had its personal teleportation anchor?" Uva asked.

"Yeah, though it was more of a feeding ground than a teleportation anchor," Shiv said. "A big, dense, titanium-reinforced cage meant to hold a monster and about a thousand unwilling slaves."

Uva frowned. "It might be worthwhile to discover if there are any other such places within the gate. We have much surveillance and scouting left to do."

Shiv grunted. "Speaking of which, Can Hu, have you got any details from your bots yet?"

The Penitent paused for a beat before it responded. "They have not sent in any emergency broadcasts. I'm expecting information to arrive sometime in the next 12 hours."

"Alright," Shiv said, "I suppose we get settled in for now."

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## 70 (II) Base

70 (II)

Base

Can Hu's years of artistic dedication made it more than capable of slowly drawing out a detailed map of the gate, mapping out all its districts.

The group was now observing said map, seated on stone chairs and gathered around a steel table, both having been provided by the Penitent as well. They marked the most important structures as well as places to avoid. Shiv created a tarp made from his skin decoys and lined the bottom of the excavated tunnel they came through as well. Passing through would be easy for him, but with a little dirt and some rubble, they stood a chance of avoiding notice, even if the enemy sent someone to investigate the structure.

As time passed, they began to plot their most immediate operations. A mana explosion sounded in the distance while they debated and planned, the noise signalling Leu's false-flag on herself.

"I saw some very interesting structures and facilities while we were making our way to Guardshead Leu's personal chambers. I think I know where their main troops' barracks are, along with where the bulk of the mercenaries reside." Adam's eyes were constantly aglow as he cast his senses from place to place.

"I also detected a few of their Master-Tier Psychomancers," Uva said. "One should be a High Master. They almost noticed me, but I pulled away before they could truly sense my presence."

"Were you busy jabbing at them so they wouldn't focus on me?" Shiv asked. "I encountered a suspicious lack of Psychomancers."

"Well, a slew of inexplicable betrayals befell a few," Uva said. She winked at him, and Shiv grinned.

"You're the greatest, Sister Uva."

“Alright,” Adam said, tapping a large group of buildings etched into the steel table. His brows were furrowed in concentration as he shifted his finger to the descending obsidian tower. “Shiv also scouted Confriga’s personal hell-tower. Inside, we have a vile weaver-breeding operation, the Animancy Core, probably Confriga’s vault of treasures somewhere, and a good amount of his personal guard. Anything else?”

Shiv thought about it for a moment and shook his head. “No. Not many slaves aside from the breeding chamber. Mostly Vulteg-guarded too. Maybe a few mercenaries. Not sure how we’re going to get the people there out. Or where the belts were really taking them. There might be another section to the operation, but I didn’t get to investigate because Confriga was always just a step behind.”

“Oh, right,” Adam said. He pulled out the notebook Shiv had handed him all those days ago. “I have been responding to Inquisitor Sijik’s messages when I had the chance. I think they still believe that I’m Master Advisor Oldsmith.” The Young Lord licked his lips, and there seemed to be a certain nervous agitation to him. “Isabella is still on Blackedge.”

Shiv stared at him. “You sure?”

“Yes,” he breathed, “and they are trying to find her, but they can’t.”

“So that fully exonerates her of anything, right?” Shiv asked.

Adam nodded slowly. “It seems so, but after everything, I am hesitant to trust... Well, anything. City Lord Stormhalt is plotting against his own people, and he has powerful Inquisitorial backing. It’s all madness.”

“Yeah,” Shiv said, shaking his head. “All the lies they told us... You have any idea why?”

Adam sighed. “No. And I get more lost with each conversation. They’re sending someone to meet with Oldsmith soon. Some kind of ‘Educator’ from Lone Star. Not sure how she’s supposed to enter the gate, but I suppose we’ll have to handle that problem once she arrives. According to his latest message, she isn’t due for a few more days.”

“That might be a problem,” Shiv muttered. “I don’t have Oldsmith as a Perfect Semblance anymore, and the Inquisitors aren’t around either. Couldn’t use them even if they were around after what Tran and Heather did to them.”

Adam paused. “We might need to consider destroying the consulate to sever that link entirely. Without someone there to make Confriga open the gate, this Inquisition agent will be stranded outside either way, but we can’t dismiss her as a potential threat.”

“Maybe,” Shiv said. “There’s still someone working there, a Secretary Mira—”

"We can move her," Adam said. "Uva can help her forget. And you said the goblin had a relationship with her?"

"Yeah," Shiv said, eyeing Siggy, who was sitting off by the side, alone. "Siggy's her dealer."

"Dealer?"

"Drug dealer," Shiv answered.

Adam grimaced. "I see."

As they discussed things, Can Hu dropped its Garden of Bountiful Alloy behind them, and the minor dimension expanded. Slowly, the Penitent began to acquire materials of all varieties while also shaping new pieces of furniture for everyone.

After a while of brainstorming, Shiv rolled his neck and grunted. "Alright. I think we're due a bit of a break after everything today." He stepped free from Can Hu and began walking out from the anchor.

Adam called out to him, "Where are you going?"

"To get us some dinner," Shiv said, looking back over his shoulder.

The Young Lord frowned. "What do you mean, some dinner? There's nothing here. We don't need to eat every day, Shiv. Just forget about cooking for a while."

Shiv stopped, turned, and glared at the Young Lord. "What did you just say to me?"

Adam flinched at the intensity of Shiv's stare. "I mean, we have to make do in times of hardship."

"These are not times of hardship," Shiv said, walking off into the dark.

"And what are you even going to get? There's nothing here."

"There are the rats and the insects," Shiv said.

"The rodents and slimy insects from earlier?" Adam asked, sounding horrified. "You expect us to eat sewer-dwelling rats and insects?"

"There's some moss too?"

"You must be jok—"

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“Please,” Adam said, forcing the words through clenched teeth and lips stretched into a forced smile, “may I have another plate?”

“What was that, Adam?” Shiv said, leaning closer. “My ears—they’re ringing. You see, Marikos really yelled pretty loud, and—”

“Don't push it, bastard! Give me a plate.”

Shiv laughed, and he offered Adam another plate of deep-fried rat coated in questionable insect sauce and served with a side of wall-corner moss. Between his Biomancy and The Chef Unwavering, he managed to isolate all the healthy insects and rats. Then, he caught a few of them, cleaned them, caught some more because he accidentally exploded the first group of bugs he got with his Pyromancy, and after about an hour of careful, calculated toil, he finished with that night's dinner.

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A crunch sounded as Uva slowly chewed. The Umbral paused and hummed. “Surprisingly filling, and my Stealth is better too.”

Shiv bit into his fried rodent, crushing the thing's brittle skull. The removal of calcium and the extraction of its marrow did wonders for the taste-texture. “A normal chef probably couldn't have done that. It took careful work with Biomancy to pull off.”

And once more, Shiv was almost thankful to the orc god for giving him the Culinary Berserker Skill. Almost.

**The Challenger appreciates your gratitude.**

Shiv's lips pressed together, and he glared upward at the ceiling.

While they ate, Uva continued her Psychomantic operations. She focused on penetrating the mind of the Observers, the floating eyeball dimensionals that watched the city from above. She pierced through a good few of them and tracked all that was happening across the gate.

The sun had stopped unleashing its massive waves of oppressive coldness. The ice coating the buildings and gripping the very air began to thaw. But still, there were constant dimensional patrols now, and a slightly injured Leu was spotted standing at the center of a plaza next to Gate Lord Confriga.



The Gate Lord was less than pleased. His pitch-black blade hovered beside him and remained idle as the Gate Lord began violently murdering random underlings, tearing mercenaries and Vultegs alike apart.

Adam, meanwhile, cast his Awareness into the Animancy Core's chamber once more. There were now two adamantite golems there, guarding the elevator. But Adam noted that there was a cut lining the elevator.

"Necromantic corrosion... I think we have an angle of psychological attack on Confriga," Adam declared. "He is volatile and uncontrolled. We should harass him relentlessly until he breaks. I read many books in the Academy about the fall of tyrants and the accountability of leadership. He seems to be a poor leader. He rules through fear, but fear will eventually give way to defiance once you hit a point of no return."

"And what's a point of no return?" Shiv asked.

"When he kills enough of his own people, or enforces a regime of tyranny so severe that the only logical choice is to rebel. He's already doing most of our work for us now."

"This is a good idea," Can Hu concurred. "We Penitents achieved several overthrows of minor Altered nations."

"Altered?" Adam asked, not certain what the automaton was saying.

"System-Altered nations," the Penitent clarified. "Those touched by mana. People like you."

"Oh," Adam said. He paused. "What is the Legacy Empire like?"

"They are great, and they are vestigial, and they are fallen. They possess incredible technologies, lingering relics from a time before. Do not make a mistake, Pathbearer. We did not rise after the System's arrival. We are simply continuing to climb in another direction. For most of the world, the individual is now far more powerful than the masses before. Where once, long, long ago, everyone was less than Pathless. Everyone was merely mortal. But they still defined their own fate. They still forged great technologies."

Can Hu sighed. "Humanity reached beyond the veil of the sky. We sought distant worlds. It was only the foreign dimensions that were beyond us. And we were on the close cusp of so many more miracles and wonders after achieving so many. And then the System came. The Great One supposedly fell, whatever they even are. And what followed was chaos. Chaos of the most absolute degree."

Everyone had fallen silent, listening to Can Hu's retelling with rapt attention. "The nature of magic and mana is anathema to Unintegrated technology. The very way one's skills work, and the emergence of the existence of a soul, was crippling to the world that was. And so those of the Legacy Empire live within the great domes. And so people like my

pilots are dispatched. People they deem deviant or unable to integrate with their own society. They are cast out. But they are blinded. For they do not think of themselves as outcasts, but rather wardens.”

“Wardens for whom?” Adam asked.

“Us. The Penitents. The awakened automata. Not drones, but machines that truly think. Just as the System twisted the Legacy Empire’s adversaries, so too did it twist machines. And thus we were condemned by the very act of existing. ‘I think, therefore I am, therefore I *cannot* be.’”

Adam blinked. “That was very poetic and bitter, Can Hu.” Latest content published on n0velfire

“It was a quote from a philosopher many, many years ago.” Can Hu paused. “All is not yet lost. Perhaps, perhaps someday, another Integration can take place, joining the world of the old with the rising of the new.”

“That sounds very hopeful,” Adam said. “I’m not sure how such a thing might come to pass.”

Can Hu chimed. “A thousand years ago, it was unheard of for most people to ever even get the chance to reach Master-Tier. The mana density was just too low. Now... Things are different. There will be new Quests, and at the System’s hand, there is very little that is impossible. Even broken, we must try. I was broken. I fell, and yet here I remain. By my own want, by my own desire, by the System’s hand, subtle and vulgar, and by the generosity of a stranger.”

It stared at Shiv, dipping its tasting apparatus into Shiv’s food. Nearby, Valor leered, glaring at the food as if it were his personal enemy.

While Can Hu spoke, it also built bits of architecture and furniture within the teleportation anchor. It shaped benches, beds, tables, and more. And then it began constructing new, more intricate mechanisms. From within its realm, it extracted more bits of silicone, metal, plastic, and other sources of matter. Carefully, Can Hu began to mold them like clay as it built the beginnings of a new drone.

After a bit more time passed, Valor gestured towards the Young Lord’s vambrace, and they spoke of the damage left upon the elevator. They spoke of potentially using the Graven Cage on the elevator itself and clenching the Animancy Core in place before it escaped.

“It is theoretically possible,” Valor said, “but we must be quick, and we will likely need even more effigies to power the construct if we wish to corrode through the adamantium.” Valor looked down at his hands, his right arm briefly crackling with corrosive energy. “This effort... It is possible for me now, though it will be difficult. I

forgot how bad the mana strain was before, but now... It's time for me to remember what it was like being a mere Adept. To truly struggle."

"That's... good," Adam said, unsure what Valor was getting at.

Valor once again looked at Adam's vambrace. "There are things you need to understand, now that you have that item."

"I'm not really interested in learning Necromancy, Valor," Adam said. There was a slight hint of unease in his voice. "I know that the Republic has been dishonest in many ways..."

"You have touched Necromancy. The System has imparted something of corrosion upon you. I fear that you can only delay, not avoid the inevitable."

Adam stared at him. "So what? I am to be a Necromancer?"

"You don't need to be a Necromancer. You *do* have to understand how it works. You will face a Necromancer here in this gate. You must understand the ways of your enemy to best kill them. Do you wish to be a rival archer, or a beast ignorant as to the means of its own demise?"

Adam paused, and he nodded slowly. "Fine. But I'm no Necromancer. The way this art works—"

"You are no Necromancer." Valor agreed. "But you can slay them. You can understand them. And I will teach you how." He sighed. "I would have rather taught Shiv this, but..."

"Don't wish to blow us all up?" Adam asked.

"Not quite yet," Valor said.

As everyone focused on their own affairs, Shiv pulled *Odes* out of his cloak to do some studying, only for Uva to send him a telepathic message. "*I have an idea.*"

Immediately, something stirred inside Shiv. "*And what kind of idea is that, Sister?*"

"*Not that one. Not right now. But the High Master Psychomancer in the city, I think I have isolated his position.*"

"Oh," Shiv said, his own interest piqued. "*And how guarded is he?*"

"*That's just the thing. With everyone in such disarray and Confriga sending people around, not nearly guarded enough. Not physically, anyway.*"

"Oh," Shiv said.

*“Especially not guarded from a particular corpse-shedding, skin-taking, silver-tongued, cooking-capable—”*

*“Uva, I’m already willing to go out and do this. You flatter me some more, and we might end up doing the other thing instead.”* She laughed, and he smirked. Adam looked between them and shook his head in faux-disgust. *“When?”*

*“Soon.”*

*“I will see if I can compromise the mind of a dimensional looking down at the Psychomancer’s tower. This High Master is quite astute. Twice he’s tried to reach out and grab my threads, but I avoided him. I can close quickly while he’s distracted, but I suspect it will be a proper fight if I am to face him, mind against mind—especially since I suspect he has the edge in experience.”*

Shiv tapped his finger on the bone handle of his kukri and smiled.

“Adam,” Shiv said, “I think I’m going to go out on a walk.”

“What are you doing now?” Adam said, his eyes narrowing. He watched as Uva began casting her strings into Shiv’s mind. “Please tell me you two aren’t about to do something stupid.”

“Oh, nothing. Uva and I are just going to take a walk. Enact a murder. Maybe escalate it into a serial killing.”

Adam nodded. “All right—wait, what?”

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