

# Path of the Deathless (Book 2 Completed)

## 71 (I) Terror

*There are few weapons more potent than fear, but fear is also to be wielded with care, precision, and careful consideration.*

*Many terrorists use fear as a cudgel. They break things. They blow things up. They destroy things that they will need later.*

*Consider the Southern Column's incompetent invasion of Lone Star while they were briefly weakened following the 143rd Orcish Wave two centuries ago. They managed to breach the outer layer of various border forts held by the Lone Star Kingdom. Then, rather than focusing on consolidating their territory and expanding bit by bit, one of their generals went on a wild rampage, sacking and burning everything and pushing for the capital.*

*This ended up rallying the Lone Star Kingdom, as they felt like they were fighting on death ground, and ridiculously, the damned orcs also took advantage of the chaos to sell themselves as experienced mercenaries.*

*Rather than slowly crushing their enemy, the Southern Column managed to achieve a feat that has not been repeated till this very day—they caused Lone Star to briefly ally with the orcs, and in the aftermath, Lone Star ensured the orcs were properly paid—as the warborn race was allowed to rampage unchecked through Southern Column territory.*

*Comparatively, orcs, they know fear. They use fear very well. An orc's eventual goal is to kill you. An orc's eventual goal is to harm you, to torture you slowly, to break you, but it will use any and all means to reach that point, including befriending you, including discovering what you are afraid to lose.*

*There are multiple instances of orcs kidnapping the loved ones of their Vaketh-Bakals. They will mail dismembered pieces back to the Beloved enemy. They will then heal the kidnapped victim and potentially repeat the process, just to rattle their target of affection.*

*Orcs know that the core of fear is loss, loss of control, loss of someone or something in your life, and they constantly remind you of that loss without fully concluding it.*

*Fear is built on hope. Hope that you can still survive the situation, hope that it might end, hope that it might be better. And contrasted with that hope is the possibility of things getting worse.*

*And so, if your great desire is to inflict fear, to inflict disorder, to let chaos reign, then strike at your enemy's deepest hopes. Make them bleed, but do not break them, not all at once. Push them, drain them, and let them collapse on their own.*

-The Ways of the Unseen: Aviary Training Manual

71 (I)

Terror

Something was wrong. Something was out there. Something...

But Master Psychomancer Moravega couldn't find the enemy. They were out there; a strand of mana had touched him twice. He knew it touched him. He knew it struck his mind, but it was so subtle, so fine that he couldn't react to it in time. And both strikes diverted his focus from pinpointing the rampaging Aviary agent as well.

Someone was helping the Corpse Shedder. Someone kept attacking him over and over as he tried to support the gate's defense. And that same someone had shattered the minds of his disciples.

The act was done with surgical efficiency. It was nothing like the Jealousy. That Greater Demon was a Psychomantic brute; this was done by a scheming mind. One that eliminated observers and compromised the most vulnerable minds to create openings...

And so Moravega stood within his chamber, clenching two jutting focus crystals that protruded from the ground. Focus crystals that connected him to more focus crystals, and additional Enchantments to amplify his potent Psychomancy. But even with all of this, even with his building empowered by a mana chain connected to the core of the gate itself, he still wasn't sure where the enemy Psychomancer was.

And he needed to be sure. He needed to be sure soon. Otherwise, Confriga...

Moravega shuddered. Confriga had torn one of Moravega's disciples apart in front of him. The poor girl. Her only mistake was voicing how her master needed more time, how she wasn't sure where the Corpse Shedder was. And that was all it took. All it took for the Gate Lord to shift his attention away from Moravega. She might have just saved her master, but it cost her everything. This text is hosted at [novelFire](#)

Her memory fueled the waves of cascading Psychomancy cascading out from Moravega. His Master-Tier Skill Evolution, Panoptical Stalker, was the main reason why Confriga wanted him as Head Psychomancer.

Back on their homeworld, he was a hunter of other people like himself: those who developed the skill of Psychomancy. And he proved good at intercepting information and eliminating enemy mind mages. A little too good.

Such was how he ended up in the Gate Lord's service, in fact.

Moravega discovered that a High Marshal had stolen a portion of his second in command's rightful loot after a hard-fought campaign in a far-flung dimension. Among the items was a Master-Tier armor of remarkable value. Moravega tried reporting this, being the dutiful Vulteg that he was.

And Moravega learned the naivety and misunderstanding he had about his own culture. The High Marshals knew each other *personally*. After centuries of struggle, despite all the bad blood between them, the Vulteg High Marshals held their positions due to a simple reason: solidarity.

Solidarity against even their own god, Lord Scorn.

Thus was how the High Marshals endured, becoming something of a pseudo-shadow council that actually ran the day-to-day of Vulketh. Their world and civilization were supposed to be Lord Scorn's to wield, but their god was distant, uncaring, indifferent. The only thing he truly wanted from his Vultegs was for them to serve him for random wars and tests from time to time. That, and for them to keep his old enemies from bothering him.

And thus, Moravega was rewarded for his service with a *field promotion*, a promotion into the most unwanted post for any proper soldier. He was drafted into Lesser Marshal Confriga's command, a command known to be fatal, dangerous, and ultimately miserable, due to the Lesser Marshal's wretched personality and casual willingness to butcher his own.

And so, Moravega spent every bit of his power, every bit of his focus, reaching and searching. His Psychomancy blasted out in waves, his mana layered and pulsing. It made him intermittently strong and weak when it came to power, but also hard to predict—and even harder to see coming. The effects of the Panopticonic Pulse never lasted long, its constant edge of surprise making him so dangerous against another Psychomancer.

But still, Moravega progressed with caution. He was not confused about his position in the world. He tried, briefly, to match the Jealousy a year ago. Moravega was a fool to do so. The creature noticed his pulse, allowed him to reach into its mind, and then showed him its *memories*. Memories of just how many Psychomancers it had consumed—greater Psychomancers than he.

Moravega nearly broke from the knowledge alone.

If he was facing another Heroic-Tier Psychomancer—

Just then, a rush of secondhand pain crashed into the Master Psychomancer's mind. Moravega cried out as he felt two of his disciples *die* about ten floors below him. He

responded immediately, turning his complete power downward. He didn't hesitate as he pushed into the mind of the dimensional meant to guard the two disciples that just—

Moravega gasped as he found himself staring out from the badly butchered body of a flame dimensional. The dimensional had been split clean in half, and from its eyes, he saw a room drenched in blood and death. His disciples lay in pieces. Other dimensionals were splattered against the walls, and one looked like it had been cut into so many pieces he couldn't tell what it had been.

Then, Moravega saw *it*. The shape leaving the room. The faint outline of a large humanoid figure. It turned the corner, but he cast his Psychomancy field at the hidden enemy. If this butcher thought—

Something speared into Moravega's mind. It cut deep. He cried out and pushed back with his Psychomancy. The attacker retreated from the angle they just struck, but stabbed in a dozen other places. His memories fractured. A splitting pain passed through Moravega as his skull felt like it was shattering from within. He unleashed a broad burst of Psychomancy that sent the foe scurrying, but then they were gone again.

As he cast out his waves of mind magic, he detected nothing.

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Nothing again. They were taunting him...

*That attack... The coordination... There must be a cell of Psychomancers working together. It wasn't strong enough to be Heroic. Maybe Low Master—but the sequences of attacks... I am facing an entire cadre of enemy magi. I must be.*

Moravega clenched his teeth as he considered how to respond. "*To all disciples,*" his mind echoed telepathically through his tower. He would have his disciples provide him with defensive measures, and focus entirely on finding the invisible—

He couldn't feel any of his disciples.

Worse, he felt he was only one of two thinking beings left in his entire building. Moravega's blood ran cold. *How?* There were over thirty guards here—one was Master-Tier! And his disciples numbered ten as well. How could—He pushed these thoughts away as he directed a magical attack at the physical target. It would be enough to hollow an undefended mind—to stun someone with Master-Tier Magical Resistance.

Yet, the second that he did, the hostile group of Psychomancers slashed at his mind again.

Moravega growled—but this time, his enemy didn't move away in time. This time, he caught onto them—

Only for him to realize the true nature of his adversary. There were *hundreds* of mana strands crashing against his mana, injecting bursts of damaging telepathy into his consciousness. It was like being stung from every direction at once. Following the strands, he found his enemy well over five kilometers away. To engage him at this range, they had to be a Hero after all. Moravega's stomach dropped.

Then, they materialized before him, creating a psionic projection of themselves. In a dense haze of Psychomancy, an Umbral stood before him. Her hair was short, and her features were sharp and hard—as if shaped from discipline and unrelenting focus. Her eyes gleamed a particular dark shade of blue, and her armor—Moravega did a double take. He had seen that armor worn by one of Oldsmith's "guards." Was she some kind of Inquisitor as well? An *Umbral* Inquisitor?

"You are quite skilled," she said. Her voice was low and husky, but her gaze was hard and cold. "A remarkable Skill Evolution. A shame. I wish I could take you alive and dedicate you to Elaboration."

"Who... are you?" Moravega growled. Mustering his courage, he prepared himself for a duel against a Heroic-Tier Psychomancer—

Then suddenly, Moravega gasped. A Stellarite blade punched clean through his chest, and Moravega felt himself casually lifted into the air. With a final exertion of will, he craned his neck and stared. He stared at what seemed to be a translucent outline. And he saw the Dimensionals guarding his doorway in pieces on the ground. His door had been cut clean through. The butcher that killed his disciples chuckled as he faced them. "M-monster," Moravega whimpered.

"Corpse," the unseen adversary replied. And then they dragged the blade up through Moravega's chest and cleaved his head in twain. A flash of pain, then heat, coldness, and slowly, the fingers of death clamped the Vulteg, pulling him away bit by bit, until there was nothing left.

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Shiv looked down at the dead Psychomancer with a moment's consideration. "*You know something, Uva? I really enjoy having a good Stealth Skill.*"

*"Quite useful, isn't it?" she replied.*

He hummed with amusement. *"People are a lot more vulnerable when they can't really track where you are. Makes killing easier. Well. I think we're done here. Got all the dimensionals, guards, and Psychomancers. No alarms raised. Good work."*

*"To you as well. Now. Let's go do it again. I think I've found another Psychomancer for us to eliminate."*

*"Just cutting down all the competition, huh?" Shiv asked.*

*"Absolutely," Uva replied. "I want to have free rein over this gate. And we will start by removing the only guardians capable of intercepting and contending with me."*

And between the two of them, a slightly vicious thrill was born. It was rather fun to be hunting prey with someone you cared for. And it was slightly intoxicating to discover that they enjoyed the act as much as you did. Together, they had cleared out Moravega's personal tower with clinical efficiency.

Whatever Uva couldn't break immediately with her mind magic, Shiv killed with his Biomancy or kukri. Together, they could avoid anyone raising any alarms until they wanted them to. Once someone entered the silent tower, they would find one of Shiv's corpses waiting for them as a taunt.

*"So, where to next?" Shiv said as he slipped out of the front door. The dimmed mana core was once again digging its frigid fingers into the world, and the air was humid. He would need to watch out so his breath wouldn't alert anyone to his presence. His outline was barely perceptible, and he slipped below two hovering air dimensionals who didn't even notice that he was there.*

Uva tugged on his mind with a mana strand, and he followed along, walking beneath the mana core's cold rays without any discomfort. The low temperature coated all windows around them in condensation, and a thick mist hung in the air as Shiv strolled through the cobblestone streets, following Uva's mana strands and observing the movement patterns of his enemies. They were on edge. He could tell that from their body language, from the whispering mental interference Uva picked up for him, offering him snippets of detail and warning him of what was to come.

They were scared. Scared of the Corpse Shedder getting them next. Scared that Confriga would butcher them in a fit of rage. *Scared.* His passive Dread Aura made everything worse for them. Some dimensionals and guards looked ready to explode from the stress, and Shiv looked forward to pushing them more.

*"Everyone fears differently," Uva said, studying the gate's population more vividly than Shiv did. "That is a darkly beautiful thing to discover when you gaze into someone's*



*mind. The unique ways they think. The unique ways they fear. It keeps you aware that you're killing a person sometimes."*

*"Does it bother you?" Shiv asked. "The killing. The breaking of their minds."*

*The Umbral Psychomancer paused as she considered that. "Not truly. As I told you before, a Psychomancer learns to control their own mind first. But there is also something else for me. The understanding of my adversary allows me to make a decision whether to spare or break. The ones we kill now would not offer mercy in return to us, nor would they care. And ultimately, mercy is the purview of the powerful. And I am but a recent Hero, in a land surrounded by enemies. I will choose the most effective, practical action every time, because I am responsible for more than just myself."*

*She paused. "If my misplaced softness killed me, I will not be punished. Death is not a punishment for the dead, I suspect, but a trauma imposed upon the living. Like you. Like my team, my city, or all the people I could have helped or saved in the future. Duty comes first."*

*Shiv listened to Uva's words as he drew closer to the target destination. "This might just be the first mortality conversation we ever had."*

*A brief note of surprise came from Uva. "Yes, it appears so. Well. What do you think? Do you find yourself affected by the killing?"*

*"No. And I don't really think about it that much. The ones who try to kill me have it coming. The ones who hurt people have it coming. I could spare some of them. But a lot of them could have lived better lives if they wanted to. There's choice in all of this. We're Pathbearers. I think.... I think I agree with Adam in a sense. If we're going to be more than mortal, we should behave better. Be more controlled. Seek strength and do what's good for the most people we can."*

*"A great many people cannot overcome the trials life pits against them," Uva offered as a counterpoint. "It might be natural for you to stand tall and struggle. But for some others, the instinct or the urge is altogether absent."*

*"Maybe," Shiv said. "Maybe I should think more about this thing. But I can only be myself for now. I can only decide what I do. And I know one thing: There's no life in which I become a slaver. There's no life where I just... turn into that. Everyone can choose to do the right thing, even if the System demands conflict. We're not animals. We can live long. We know what we're doing, and we have magic. We have power."*

*Shiv looked over the edge of the bridge he was crossing and spotted an unmoving slave lying on a bridge further below, frozen stiff. There were no life signs from the body. The Umbral's heart had stopped hours ago. "I'm not very versed in philosophy. That might be more Can Hu's thing. But I remember what it's like to be hurt. I remember the feeling of a boot breaking my bones. I remember understanding something after that. That I*

*needed to fight. That I needed to be my own warrior, and hurt the bastards that came for me and other people like me, no matter what."*

"As retribution?" Uva asked, curious.

*"As necessity," Shiv said. "Like you said: Mercy is for the strong. I might be stronger than most here, but I don't think I'm strong enough to take this gate at a disadvantage. And if we fail and Confriga slaughters us all, there will be no lessons learned. No one will care about our nobility. Our deaths would probably just result in a few skill levels for the bastard, and in Vicar Sullain getting the Animancy Core and obliterating Blackedge."*

*"Indeed. But from that perspective, can't you tell why someone might become like one of them?"* Uva was speaking of the guards, the slavers, the mercenaries.

*"Sure," Shiv said. "But we're not that. They just happen to have skills. They're not truly walking a Path. We're going somewhere, pain and struggle be damned. Only reason we might stop is if we're killed."*

*"Ah. Quite a bit of dehumanization."* Uva hummed. *"I suppose that helps."*

"You don't approve?" Shiv asked.

*"I would not say that. I just focus on a different reason. The outcome is ultimately the same. The act of killing and harming does not cling to us. Not like it does an actual murderer who does it for true pleasure. Or Adam, whose mind boils with regret. He thinks about the people he kills a lot."*

Shiv paused. He was almost at his new target. *"I didn't know that. Yeah. Adam is a... pretty decent guy, ultimately. His killing is mostly because he has to, but he doesn't like harming people at all. Probably why he didn't want to join in our little hunt."*

*"He didn't join in because it is no hunt to him at all,"* she replied. *"We are orchestrating a slaughter. We should be honest with ourselves about that."*

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## 71 (II) Terror

71 (II)

Terror



The Deathless grunted. *"Yeah. Suppose that's true. Speaking of—I see two guards out front. Vultegs. How many we got on the inside?"*

*"Not many. Fourteen a few minutes ago. Eight now. Quite a few Masters, though. I think it would be best to avoid most of them and just eliminate the target using your wall-cutting trick. I think I can distract them long enough for that to work."*

And Shiv noted another difference in the way they proceeded. He was completely fine with just waltzing in and tearing people apart. Dehumanization was exactly the right term. The moment he started really fighting someone, it was to the bone, and they stopped being people to him. Pulling them apart became a thing of reward and self-gratification. Meanwhile, Uva was objective-focused. As always.

*"Yeah,"* Shiv thought more to himself than Uva. *"I probably could use a bit more mission focus sometimes."*

*"It helps when you're not operating on your own,"* Uva said. *"A team always centered me. So. I can help center you."*

Shiv cut into the side of the building with a smile. He watched Uva's mana strands strike at his enemies with a smile. And he launched a bone drill through the unprepared Psychomancer's head with a smile.

Scream and cries for reinforcements sounded—but Shiv triggered his Chrono-Anchored Strike and blinked across the district. He drove his blade into Moravega's chest. Meanwhile, he listened to the chaos erupting in the distance, and he found himself slightly contemplative.

## **Silhouette > 59**

*"I think I'm going to take things a bit slower when I can,"* Shiv said.

*"Hm? What do you mean?"* Uva asked.

*"Stealth. I like it. I like focusing on it a lot. I like walking unseen and watching people. And I like the fact it gives the chance to maybe spare more people if I want to. If I behaved the way I usually did before, I suspect that would have been a bloodbath. Choice is power. And power gives you options."* Shiv grunted a laugh. *"Those guards owe you their lives, Uva. You got me in a rare introspective mood."*

She gave a soft chuckle. *"You often get into thinking moods, Shiv. Mainly for cooking. You're not truly a mindless brute."*

Shiv considered that. Artistry had a way of demanding someone to understand themselves better. Maybe he wasn't so simple. Maybe he was just *behind* when it came to developing certain thoughts. He spent most of his life struggling to survive and

desperately facing monsters in hopes of getting a Path, after all. There wasn't much use for philosophy and introspection in those cases.

*"Let's do this even more quietly, then," Shiv said. "Your way. Subtle. It'll be good practice for me and neater for us. And it'll give me some time to think about deeper personal stuff."* His words made Uva laugh. *"What?"*

*"What do you think Adam would have said to your statement just now?" she asked.*

Shiv paused to consider that. Then, he mentally did the Young Lord's voice. *"Of course you would treat someone else's death as philosophical lubricant, you bastard cockroach!"*

The Umbral chortled in his mind. *"Ah. Not exactly like him, but the spirit... The spirit is there. I'm going to send him your impression. I think he'll appreciate it. Even if he will pretend to be outraged."*

A moment later, both Shiv and Uva held back their mirth as the Young Lord began cursing at them. *"I was trying to focus on writing a letter to the Inquisitor, can you two mock me some other time? Don't you have some serial killings to perform?"*

*"Did a few already," Shiv said. "Killing a bunch of people in horrible ways got me thinking of you."*

*"Shiv. I do not appreciate that statement, and I wish to remind you that I have a particular vambrace right now that might advise more caution on your part."*

*"Aw, Adam," Shiv crooned mockingly. "We were just thinking about how good and decent you are. And a bit soft and fragile, but mostly good and decent."*

*"He's mostly being honest," Uva said, telling Adam Shiv's true feelings.*

The Young Lord just sighed. *"Well, I appreciate the clarity. I am well aware of my position as the team's moral core."*

*"Right, well, on that note: Who's next on the murder list, Uva?" Shiv asked.*

*"What a wonderful way to change the topic," Adam said with a sigh.*

*"I would go for the other two Master-Tier Psychomancers if I could," Uva began. "But they're always covering for each other, and they're also with the Gate Lord. Best not to risk having him discover my presence until things are far too late."*

*"I think we might be able to take them now," Shiv said. "Me against the Gate Lord. You against the mind mages. With a good ambush—"*

*"Shiv. What happened to take it slow and with more control?"*

*"Ah. Got carried away. I was kind of thinking whether Confriga's creepy sword could kill me and spike my Toughness again. It's going to be hard to level that without a really hard-hitting opponent. Dying's getting harder, too."*

*"I'm dropping out of this conversation," Adam grumbled. "Uva, release me. Shiv, don't just bloody start a fight with the Gate Lord and send this whole thing sideways."*

Shiv grunted. Uva grunted—mimicking him. Adam disconnected.

*"What was that?" Shiv asked.*

*"You," she said. "I'm considering what it would be like if I just aggressively attacked everything until all my problems were dead or I was."*

*"I recommend not staying dead. Works wonders for me."*

*"Ah. I'll have to keep that in mind. For now, let's talk about our next batch of prey: Bureaucrats."*

Shiv paused. *"What?"*

*"Administrators too," Uva said casually.*

*"Why are we murdering pencil pushers and non-martials?"*

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*"For one, they're easy prey, and secondly, well, secondly, they're integral to running this gate. Does Confriga strike you as someone who has the temperament to run a government?"*

Shiv paused. *"Not quite."* And he was beginning to see what she meant. *"So, you're asking me to actually kill the people keeping this place functional?"*

*"Yes. And for the fact that the worst people in Compact are the ones that authorize the slave trading and conduct the deals. They're a level removed, but their cruel hand is still heavy on the page. They are an integral part of this, even if we cannot see them. They are the ones that sell the weak, that enforce the present architecture. That makes them no different from enemy combatants."*

And Shiv noted another difference in their murder morality. He wasn't very comfortable killing the outright weak. Something about that seemed a bit *unfair* to him. They had to be openly cruel like Oldsmith to really make him want to kill them. Uva, meanwhile, decided on these targets purely based on pragmatic reasons.

*"Okay," Shiv said. "I'll do them in quietly. But there's one more group I want to add."* He then shared a memory with Uva. And she quickly realized what he wanted. Back when he pretended to be a slave, hiding using his Perfect Semblance to get smuggled into the Jealousy's den, there was the slaver that transported him. And then there was a Vulteg overseer.

*"Ah, yes, she should be included among the bureaucrats,"* Uva agreed. There was a slight sneer of disgust in her voice. *"These deaths, I think we can both look forward to. Give me a while. Let me see if I can find her after filtering through a few memories."*

While Uva searched, Shiv proceeded to his first batch of targets. He moved carefully and silently through offices and homes. Gravitic Wrestler wasn't just a good skill for strength, but it also made him borderline weightless when he wanted to. As such, he was rarely heard as well. He got to the bureaucrats and administrators as they slept in their beds, worked at their desks, and some were merely enjoying a spot of subpar dinner while screaming at a slave. Most times, his Silhouette was the last thing they saw. He made sure their deaths were quick as well. No sense gutting a non-combatant. No skills to be gained there, nor experience.

Uva, meanwhile, was absolutely clinical and indifferent, and the clarity between their modes of murder became truly obvious. Shiv was like a roaring flame. He spread about and if you touched him, he would burn you badly and not stop until you put him out. And he took pride in that. Uva was a blizzard. There was rarely enjoyment or that much emotion at all when it came to killing or breaking people. She simply thought someone needed to die and proceeded to plot the act. And Uva often got so focused on the details that family and other things like that became just variables to her.

She did pause once when they discovered a bureaucrat snoring beside his infant daughter. The rightful source is NovelFire

That one they both decided to spare. Uva for mostly personal reasons, and Shiv because he would actually feel bad and end up bringing the baby back to the anchor.

*"I can only imagine what Adam might say then,"* Uva muttered.

## **Silhouette > 61**

After they got done slaughtering their way through the city's most important logistical personnel, Uva managed to find the slave overseer. And by that point, Adam also contacted them. *"Shiv, Can Hu has something. It seems to have located the main structures storing most of the slaves. Some of the slaves are personally owned, but this gate has some kind of large public slave program. It's like transportation, but free use slavery for most people staying here."*

*"Free use slavery,"* Shiv muttered.

*"Yes, it's one of the major appeals. If you're important enough to live inside this gate, or you're with Compact, you get a free slave assigned to you. They'll do all your cooking, cleaning, even some midwife work." Adam shuddered. "Slave. I can't believe it's a Path. I can only imagine what that's like. Not being able to have combat skills... Gah."*

*"Almost anything that shapes someone's identity can be a Path," Uva said darkly. "Most Umbrals a few generations ago followed the Path of the Slave or Sacrifice. The vampires were very clear about what we were meant to be used for."*

Both Shiv and Adam briefly fell silent.

*"I think I'm going to visit the vampires when I have time. After all this is done," Shiv commented. "That'll be a guilt-free slaughter."*

*"Yes," Adam said. "I think I will perhaps take another trip down the Abyss once everything at home is settled..."*

*"I will not need leisure time to do this," Uva replied. "It is my professional duty to kill Bloodspawn. But I'm glad the great heroes of Weave are so determined to join me in my task."*

Adam hummed. *"Think nothing of it, Sister. After all, what are friends for?"*

The public-use slave quarters were located in the four corners of the gate. Each of the buildings housed a good twenty thousand slaves. But these were only the organic slaves. They were packed tight together in rooms that could be barely called dormitories. They were fed gruel. They were monitored by dimensionals and hired slavers. And they were assigned duties every day by a personal overseer.

The one Shiv had encountered wasn't even that high up the command chain, he realized.

Still, she needed to die. And so did every other slave hand there was. But that's why the plan changed. As he observed them, Uva's thoughts began to brew. *"I don't think we should kill them yet. Not so hastily. This needs to be more effective."*

Shiv was silent for a moment, watching as a man continued whipping a weary slave. She had tried to get up earlier, but exhaustion, malnutrition, and an accumulation of what seemed to be bodily injuries brought her down. And now, a slaver was trying to whip her back to a point of standing. A slaver Shiv recognized. *"I broke that asshole's wrist about a week back, when he was escorting me and a group of others to see the Jealousy. Sarah was in that group. He also wanted to molest us."*

Uva hummed. Then she reached into the man's mind with a mana string, and Shiv felt her slowly and brutally strip away most of his personality. The man clutched his head

and dropped to the ground. He started screaming. He slapped his ears and clawed at his eyes, and Shiv felt her destroy everything that made him *him*.

Shiv broke the slaver's wrist; Uva broke all there was to break inside the man and more. Soon he stopped kicking, and the slave turned to see the man drooling on the ground, an empty husk.

Shiv watched the scene from afar, and slowly a large smile spread across his face. *"Uva, when I see you in person later, I think I'm going to have to kiss you for that."*

She let out a breathy laugh. *"Ah. What reaction might I get from you if I hollow out even more slavers?"*

Between them, a flood of disgust came. Adam let out a sigh. *"You both have deep, deep issues, and are sick, sick people. But yes, I agree with the Sister. If you're just going to murder some overseers and slave hands indiscriminately, they will likely take it out on the slaves. They will assume that the Corpse Shedder is here to protect them—or among the slaves. And we will find several slaves nailed to the walls or some other horrendous thing next time we come here."*

A splash of memories followed, and Shiv realized Adam was speaking from experience from what he read in an Academy textbook. *"Considering how they're treating these slaves and, frankly, how casually they're wasting their lives, I would not be surprised if Gate Lord Confriga made them march out into the freezing cold until one of us decided to make a heroic rescue. Or until we were forced to watch them all die."*

Shiv frowned. *"I lost my cover against the Jealousy for doing something like that."*

*"System wants strife,"* Adam said. *"We can use our power to change situations, but aside from that, it always gives us a reason to break and kill. However, you should come back. Can Hu has additional details on where the automata slaves are stored."*

The Deathless let out a breath as he watched the slave look down at the slaver's body. Additional guards came by to regard the slaver's body, but after a while, they just dragged the corpse off like it was a piece of garbage and threw the slave back into a cell.

*"Yeah,"* Shiv grumbled to himself. *"Your way might just be right, Uva. Plenty of bastards in here, but they're also dime a dozen. We could be slaughtering hordes of these guys and get nowhere. We need a strategy. Not only for utterly wiping out all the guards, but also what to do with the slaves. Not sure what I was going to do on my own the first time."*

*"Probably leave a large mess, kill many people, die quite a few times, and see a good number of slaves dead as collateral damage as well,"* Uva summarized as accurately as she could. *"But you would have tried to save them. That I do know. Some of them did*



*live and escape, considering those you saved from the Jealousy. You have the capability to break the enemy now. Just let me give you the precision and support you need to make the process a clean one."*

Something about that was strangely heartening for Shiv. *"You know something, Uva? I'm pretty glad we came out tonight to kill some people."*

*"Me too. We should do this again."*

Adam's annoyance pulsed through them once more. *"Uva, for bloody—why did you reach into my mind again? Just to let me hear your burgeoning desires to murder more people? Stop it. Just stop. Please."*

Uva laughed. Shiv laughed. Adam groaned. And a few more administrators went missing before Shiv made it back to base.

## **Silhouette > 62**

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## **72 (I) Affliction**

*Everyone fights for something. This is a very simple statement, but you're going to discover how true and how important it is if you ever join up with an army for hire.*

*The Sell-Skilled... A lot of people think little of them, being mercenaries and all that. Personally, I don't dislike them. I find them to be remarkably honest as Pathbearers. In fact, I find them to be some of the most honest Pathbearers you can come across.*

*Most people who walk a Path, they're out there for their own benefit, for their own power. Mercenaries just want to get rich, without truly binding themselves to an ideological cause.*

*That makes them useful for disposable work. For messy, ugly work that you don't want to sink your own hands into. But it also makes them unreliable when you have matters of severe sensitivity or something that requires deep, personal loyalty.*

*Now, the stereotype of the mercenary betraying their master, that's pretty common, and it's not entirely false. However, there's another section to the stereotype.*

*It's the part where the mercenary doesn't get paid or feels crossed in some way.*

*Again, these are exceptionally honest people, and if you're going to treat them dishonestly, then they're going to show you how honest their anger and violence can be.*

*The Sell-Skilled want to be paid, and if you don't pay them, well, they're going to have to find a way to extract value. And sometimes that's sacking what you have and selling what you own, and sometimes it's selling you.*

*At the end of the day, there's no quicker way to make an outlaw of a mercenary than not paying them for far, far too long.*

*More than a few cities were burned down that way, and more than a few gates fell because its defenders simply ran out of money before they ever even came close to running out of supplies or "practical" manpower...*

*-Sell-Skilled: A History of Mercenaries*

72 (I)

Affliction

"They do not have a dedicated automaton slave overseer," Can Hu said. "I know this because I observed the condition of their automaton slaves. Most of them are not being used for long-term service. Instead, they are being dismantled."

"Dismantled?" Shiv said. "They're not keeping the automata alive?"

Can Hu groaned a note of low anger. "Their parts are to be sold. That is the primary profit from the automaton slaves. That is why you mostly do not see them mingling with the others. Good automaton slaves are sold as servants to specific Pathbearers as rewards. But even they are harder to maintain than organics. They require replacement components and active engineering. They need to commune with the System to maintain their awakened code stability. Automata are expensive and require devotion. Or they require the expertise for self-maintenance."

"Like you," Shiv said.

"I am different. I was always different. Penitent Chassis were meant to be enduring. We were designed from old world technologies before we awakened. Many of the altered automata are adapted, aligned to the System's rules. And they start out more fragile and vulnerable than we."

"Right, yes, I remember this," Adam said. "The Law of Skill Supremacy. It's why automata can't just replace their own parts and bypass Toughness. If you put a piece of adamantium on an automaton and use it as a transplant or a replacement component, the adamantium will become as brittle as their actual skill tier and level."

"Indeed," Can Hu concurred. "And so, though automata can work near constantly and function in harsher environments than most organics, they still require maintenance, energy, and time for internal code maintenance. That means logistical support—especially for the binary within their minds. This kind of logistical support is not present at Gate Theborn, and as such, the machines are merely temporary at best and fated to be taken apart. But this is to our advantage."

Can Hu placed a few stones on a few buildings listed as "automata holding sites" on the metal table that also doubled as their map. "I have found most of the automaton slaves in these locations. They are stored within storage containers, and the floors above are dedicated to decommissioning and dismantling." Can Hu paused as a stream of ones and zeros flashed back into its head. "Several of my drones have slipped in. This operation is run mostly by human mercenaries, and they are actively sorting the captured automata between immediate decommission, gradual dismantlement, and long-term service."

Shiv sneered. "It's like everything in this place is run like a godsdamned slaughterhouse."

"That is the nature of a place when you treat people who dwell inside it like they're just things," Can Hu replied.

"Yeah, well, they're going to find out what my nature is real soon," Shiv said, scowling.

"*Shiv,*" Uva said, casting a thought into him. "*Focus. Be vicious. Be brutal. But before all that, be effective.*"

"Right," Shiv said, nodding. "We wound to kill, not just to hurt. So far, we've bled them a little and have everyone in the gate on edge. But they're not broken. Not yet. That's where we want to get to—a point where Confriga has barely any support even within his own home."

"Still, we did well for a day," Uva said. "Two dead Master-Tier Psychomancers free up my effectiveness substantially. The missing bureaucrats and administrators will also see the day-to-day functions of this gate grind to a halt. I expect the mercenaries to start suffering first, as their payments and contracts will soon be trapped in limbo." The Umbral Psychomancer paused briefly. "Perhaps we should also destroy all their local banks to completely collapse the local means of exchange."

The Young Lord eyed Uva and immediately began picking out all the banking establishments on the map. "That is a good idea, actually. And it will do more than that—it'll devastate the connected businesses as well and turn things to the black market." Adam froze and then turned to regard Siggy.

The goblin shivered as Adam looked at her. "Uh? What?"

Adam considered her for a beat. "Shiv. Did you say this one was a drug dealer?"

Shiv nodded.

Adam approached Siggy with a plot churning in his mind. "Adept Siggy. I have a few questions for you to answer."

"Uh, I'll try to... give you answers," Siggy stuttered.

"Be thorough," Shiv said, spiking his Dread Aura. The goblin nearly fell over.

"Firstly, where do you usually deal?" Adam inquired. "And after you answer that, tell me what you usually deal."

"Well, Little Gomorrah is a big place. A-and the thing I hand out the most is Drift. That's gonna be in tight supply now that the gate's under lockdown, though. I won't be able to just get that stuff out of thin air if you want me to start slinging again."

"No," Adam said. "I just want to know where the black market is, and how to get there. Should we collapse the official channels of trade within this gate, it will cause a breakdown and a rush for precious goods." The Young Lord hummed. "Ah. Now it makes sense."

"What?" Shiv asked.

"The Republic fought a brief war with the Storm King of the Lost Atlantic before," Adam began. "It didn't go particularly well. During that time, a great many cities and towns were destroyed, and the economy nearly collapsed. We went from paper currency to a mithril standard in the aftermath because practically everyone was trading that material anyway. So. I think this means we have two sets of banks to hit. The obvious bank in the open, and the primary source of precious goods in this place's underbelly."

Shiv grunted. "Well, just show me the place and the targets, and I'll see what I can do." Then, Shiv paused. "Wait. Little Gomorrah... Siggy, does that place sell food too? I was only briefly there last time. I know it's also a brothel."

"A brothel?" Uva said, turning to regard Shiv. "You didn't tell me you went to a brothel."

"I wasn't really focused on which walls I was crashing through when fighting 811." He almost smirked at the absurdity of the memory. "We were beating each other to death through several private rooms."

He sent her what he could remember, and Uva squeezed her eyes shut. "... And the orc told you he loved you a few minutes later?"

"Yep," Shiv grunted. "But to the point..."

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“Yeah, it sells food.” Siggy wrinkled her nose. “Grub’s not that great, though. People are mostly there for the drinks and the succubi or incubi.”

And the grinding gears within Shiv’s head turned just a little faster. “Everyone. I think I have a cunning plan.”

Adam placed his hands on his hips and laughed. “This will be good. Let’s hear it.”

“There are lots of other restaurants too,” Shiv said. “Other establishments and sources for food. I’m thinking about *tainting* their supply.” He promptly pulled out the *Odes*, and Adam let out a groan. “There are chapters in the *Odes* on bacteria, viruses, and parasites. And I think some of the bugs and rats in our building are pretty sick.”

“Shiv,” Adam began, seeming incredibly uncomfortable with the idea. “This... this goes against every convention of warfare agreed upon between the Republic and other recognized nations.”

“Well, do they recognize Compact?” Shiv asked.

Adam paused. “...Not *officially*.”

“And I don’t remember attending any convention either,” Shiv deadpanned. “Ultimately, these people are slave trading bastards, so they can get tainted. And in fact, that’s what I’m going to do to them—taint their damn food.”

“This could have significant risks,” Uva said with a frown. “Plagues are a dangerous thing for a hidden dimension. Weave has suffered and still suffers immensely from the First Blood’s biological agents. There is a chance that this could backfire and even affect us if it is done poorly.”

“And that’s why I won’t do it poorly,” Shiv said. “I’ll experiment on some bugs first. Then I’ll move on to some mercs and Vultegs.”

“Where will you get mercenaries and Vultegs to experiment upon?” Adam asked. Uva and Shiv looked at Adam with shared expressions of suppressed amusement. “Oh, Ascendants. I let you two out to do one night of mass killings and already you’re both bloody spiraling into moral depravity. Kidnapping people and experimenting on them is a crime!”

“Who says anything about kidnapping them?” Shiv asked. “I’m just going to cast a spell on them from over 200 meters away.”

“And we will have no shortage of volunteers,” Uva said. “I’ll just make them participate consensually.”

The Young Lord’s eyes bulged in disbelief. “Uva, that’s... *Participate consensually?* Really?”

“It is technically accurate, is it not?” she asked.

“It’s effective. And they’re pieces of shit.” Shiv justified.

“It’s still... Killing them is one thing...” Adam grimaced, very much unsure about the moral dubiousness of it all.

Shiv and Uva looked at each other again and shared a smirk.

“Soft and fragile,” Shiv began.

“But good and decent,” Uva finished.

The lovers then shared a snort, patted Adam on his respective shoulders—who slapped their hands away with a scowl—and continued plotting how they were going to give every Vulteg, mercenary, and slaver the worst agony shits of their life without affecting anyone else.

“I have insights into biological warfare,” Can Hu spoke up. “I will provide additional recommendations where necessary.”

Adam licked his lips and looked around the room for someone else to protest. He stared at Siggy for a moment, and she awkwardly looked away from him. Finally, he looked to Valor, and the Legendary Pathbearer only sighed.

“I cannot fault you for wishing to have a level of conduct which everyone holds themselves to,” Valor began. Hope almost swelled inside Adam, but then Valor continued. “However, I murdered my mother and half-brother when I was around your age and then spread a grand fire that killed many who were not responsible and likely innocent to assist in my escape. What Uva and Shiv are planning should be rather effective as well. If nothing else, if their strategy is focused and Shiv’s spell is well cast, we will see a diminished number of enemy Adepts in the field soon.”

“It just feels dirty,” Adam muttered.

“It’s going to get dirty,” Shiv commented off by the side.

The Young Lord just sighed. “I suppose I’ll... I’ll oversee this so it doesn’t turn into another mass death incident.”



“You don’t trust me, Adam?” Uva said, batting her eyelashes at him—almost mockingly.

“No. You don’t care so long as something’s effective, and he’s enthusiastically doing this because he wants more skill levels. No, I don’t trust either of you. Tell me exactly what you’re doing so we don’t end up food poisoning a bunch of children to death too.”

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## **Practical Metabiology > 31**

### **Woundeater > 71**

Adam, Uva, and Shiv observed the progressive “*fruits*” of their labor through three stalls using Seer of Horizons. After a day delving through the *Odes*, finding the best location to target, ensuring that no slaves or innocents would be caught in the crossfire, and mind-wiping an elven chef, Shiv deployed instance one of his *Bowel-Breaker*.

Two Vultegs wailed with pain. One’s cries were far weaker than the other’s. At the far left end of the room, the healthiest Vulteg was shivering and delirious, but still standing. “L-Lord Scorn,” he whimpered. “Please end my life. Please just kill me. There is no more left in me... Why do I still—*aghhghhhh!*”

He shuddered as another series of stomach spasms followed.

In the stall to his right, a spent Vulteg lay crying from its single eye. It had collapsed forward, detaching from the waste-tubes and repainting the walls. He didn’t have the strength to pray. He didn’t have the strength to stand. Severe dehydration had set in, and soon unconsciousness would be his friend.

In the third stall was silence and death. Adam looked once in the third stall and never again as he struggled not to gag.

“Well, I think we got it,” Shiv said, nodding. “New spell: Bowel-Breaker.”

“It’s just modified dysentery,” Uva said. “Quite effective though. You learned to cast that rather fast.”

“Yeah, I just did a minor spin on what Ekkihurst did in the book. He’s a lot more complex with his spells, but I do believe I got the basics down. Now, if I can only learn how to cure it... It’s always harder to fix than to cause. Damn body’s too complicated. I’ll probably figure out how to mess up someone’s genetic patterns before I ever get to solving the cancer problem.” With every word Shiv spoke, Adam shuddered. “Hey, Adam. Can you go back to stall one? I want to check the—”

“No,” Adam growled. “Not stall one. Never stall one again. We already made the poor bastard shit himself to death. Let him have some peace.” And the Dimensional Archer sighed. “I can only imagine what poor fool will be made to clean this.”

“The only vector of spread should be the food you cast the spell on, correct?” Uva asked.

“Yeah,” Shiv replied. “It also doesn’t last that long. A few hours at most. I managed to figure out how that worked on the bugs and rodents. By the way, we shouldn’t go to the tenth floor anymore. I sealed the level off entirely to stop the infection from spreading, and I think I contained it.”

“I regret every second of this,” Adam whispered.

“I think it will be effective,” Uva replied. “When this is done, and most restaurants suffer a series of violent food poisoning incidents while Little Gomorrah seems relatively pristine as an option, more of the gate’s personnel will go there—where Shiv will be cooking. And we can harvest even more information from there.”

“You know most Pathbearers will eventually just stop eating and drinking when they catch on, yes?” Adam asked.

“Before I incapacitate a good percentage of all Adepts in the city?” Shiv asked.

“I—” Adam bit back a groan. “I hate this. So I can only imagine how the Gate Lord will feel.”

Uva hummed. “Shiv. Let’s test this on as many places frequented by the guards as we can. I think we’ll be able to see some of the most obvious effects by tomorrow.”

“Yeah. And sneaking around will be good for my Stealth as well,” Shiv said with a smile.

“Sneaking around, poisoning food, and making people defecate themselves to death,” Adam lamented. “Who have we become?”

“Heroes, Adam,” Shiv said, entirely earnest. “We’re doing all this for Blackedge. And the slaves. And more skill levels. Whatever it takes.”

“You can’t just justify everything by saying that over and—”

“Whatever. It. Takes.” Shiv began to chuckle. “I can’t wait to find out how Confriga’s going to react to this.”

\*\*\*

"This is unacceptable!" Confriga roared. "Thirty percent of the guard taking leave from their posts in a time of crisis! All of them fleeing toward the restrooms over and over! I will not accept this! I will find out what they are trying to hide from me! If this is another drug epidemic, I will flay every dealer I find!"

Leu followed closely behind him and winced. Master Shiv and the others warned her of what was actually happening, and though their ways were *odd*, she couldn't deny the effectiveness. "Gate Lord, perhaps I should handle this. The scene is... It's vile. It's disgusting. It's unbecoming of your person."

"Your concern is noted, Guardshead, but follow my orders and speak no more. I will rip those fools apart. I will rip them apart for defying me, for ignoring my commands. I have summoned them, and they will come even if they are on the verge of death!"

But as he blasted through the restroom door on the ground floor for the central Vulteg barracks, he saw a horrible, nightmarish sight. Confriga stumbled back, briefly shocked out of his blind rage.

On the ground were wailing Vultegs, all of them in various states of undress, and the floor, once white, was smeared with...

The Gate Lord looked away and he gagged at the *smell*. There were fights happening in the stalls. Vultegs were relieving themselves as they fought uncontrollably, jets of horrible color spraying across the wall, and the Gate Lord staggered away, shaken by the sight. "**Leu!** Execute all of these guards! Burn this place! Get the purifiers, burn this place!" And as he charged back up the hallway, he saw another small mob of guards rushing toward him with hands on their stomachs.

The Gate Lord stood still for a moment, just looking at each of the guards as they ran past his person. They didn't even acknowledge his presence or position. That's how much pain they were in. That's how bad the poisoning was.

"The... Several of our Biomancers have gone missing," Leu said, subtly trying to provoke the Gate Lord further. "And most of Compact's top lawyers, the internal maintenance engineers, the gateway dimensionality engineers, the bankers, and two of our foremost Psychomancers. The Corpse-Shedder is taunting us."

"Corpse-Shedder..." Gate Lord Confriga muttered, his eye widening in absolute fury. He threw his head back and roared. His voice echoed out from the mana core in the sky, and a massive, howling blizzard smashed down upon the city as Confriga fully unleashed its mana in a wild act of careless rage. "**CORPSE-SHEDDER!**"

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## 72 (II) Affliction

72 (II)

Affliction

***“CORPSE-SHEDDER!”***

**Practical Metabiology > 32**

**Silhouette > 63**

Shiv guffawed with laughter as he heard the Gate Lord’s roar of rage from kilometers away. Uva covered her mouth and tried not to double over. Adam was doing his best not to smirk, and he was failing. Off by the side, Valor and Can Hu chuckled along.

“Okay, fine,” Adam admitted with a sigh. “It’s a bit funny.”

Shiv wiped a tear out of his eye. “It’s the funniest thing I’ve ever done.”

“Even funnier than pretending not to know me and lying to me about the Weaveresses’ breeding habits?” Adam asked.

“Much funnier than that,” Shiv said, grinning. “Sneaking in and casting the spell on their military rations was a good idea, Uva.”

“I suspect we will be seeing a great deal more dimensionals and automata on patrol soon,” she said, looking proud of what they’ve done. “The Gate Lord cannot be everywhere, and his lesser facilities will soon be vulnerable. He will be consolidating his forces soon—trying to hold what he can.”

“And that will make him vulnerable,” Valor said. “If he wishes to keep this place’s mana core stable, he will need to battle to assert his control. And I fear he has neither the character nor the competence to achieve that. We have a major opening. And Adam and I might have a solution to the Animancy Core problem.”

“Might?” Shiv asked.

“It’s quite straightforward, but it will require a bit of...” Adam grimaced. “Precision. I examined the damage Confriga’s Necromantic whip left on the surface of the elevator. It was substantial. It corrodes adamantine like any other material, and perhaps with a few more hits, he could have cut clean through. Now.” Adam pointed at his vambrace. “I

have a means to contaminate a dimension with Necromancy. Theoretically, if we create a layering of spatial pockets or even minor dimensions around the elevator and corrode them all at once, I should be able to cut through the elevator itself before the Animancy Core is shuttled across to Vulketh.”

Adam paused and narrowed his eyes at Shiv. “If that happens, I fully expect you to dive across another dimension, try to fight a god, die horribly, and then somehow come back with the core anyway.”

“Seems to be the way things go for me,” Shiv said. “But yeah, that sounds pretty good. We can snatch the core and put it in the cage when the elevator ends up in freefall.”

“That is the general idea,” Adam said. “We just need a proper distraction for the Gate Lord. He moves quickly, the mana core of the gate can teleport him, and the only person here who can reliably face him directly might get us all killed if a Necromancy spell strikes them.”

“Such is where I come in,” Can Hu said.

“Not quite yet,” Adam corrected. “Not until we are truly desperate. I am thinking of a third party distraction. Since we’re planning to infiltrate Little Gomorrah to target the local underworld soon as well, I think Uva should plant the idea of a mass escape for a few of the mercenary groups. Then, we inform Leu, she informs Confriga—but only at the last minute as they are fleeing out of the Abyssal gate. He will be so busy trying to react to this that we’ll have an opening. Then, we make it seem like the Corpse-Shedder was working with some mercenaries at Little Gomorrah all along, increasing the internal tension of the gate, and forcing a crackdown on the underworld as well.”

“We’re making Confriga break even more of his gate.” Shiv nodded. “I like it.”

“This will also have the double effect of collapsing his authority entirely,” Valor said. “Do you understand how one becomes Gate Lord? Or the lord of any place?”

“Not exactly,” Shiv said. “Leu told me a bit about it—mostly about how Confriga can use the core’s mana to power himself and do things too. Mostly, he has just been blasting the gate with blizzards, but apparently, gates have their own skills as well.”

“Indeed. But the way a Gate Lord is decided is through authority and recognition. When the population of a gate believes and recognizes someone as Lord, that begins a process of mana synchronization. After a certain period, when the core is fully synchronized to someone’s mana, they will be able to direct and wield the gate’s mana and shape its development.”

Shiv hummed. “So, if people stop recognizing Confriga’s authority—”

“His is a slightly different case,” Valor said. “His authority is recognized by the lawyers of Compact, who the population accepts as their thought leaders. With many of their number dead and the gate in chaos, however, the outcome is the same. When a sufficient number of people stop accepting someone’s authority, a desynchronization will begin, and the Lord of the domain will only have so long to settle the problem. And during this time, challengers might emerge, and only when all other challengers choose to submit or are eliminated can a single Lord be ordained once more.”

And that captured Uva’s attention. “I see. So. Perhaps some people should start *openly* challenging Confriga soon.”

“We will need to target someone of sufficient power,” Valor said. “Confriga’s casual cruelty is accepted in this place, so we need someone he cannot easily kill. Several Master-Tiers. The goal here shouldn’t be to have them win, however, but to cause so much civil strife that Confriga is desynchronized from the core.”

“And then we all attack him at the same time,” Adam said. “While his forces are in disarray, with his core stolen, and while he is alone.”

The plan sounded good and clear. Now, the main question was speed and focus. Blackedge was still holding, since the Quest hadn’t failed yet, but they were racing against the clock. And there was also another issue on Shiv’s mind. “What about the third gateway? One leading off to Vulketh? Can you close that off with your vambrace too?”

“Yes,” Adam said. “But not for long. Which is the other thing Valor spoke to me about earlier.” The Young Lord hesitated. “We don’t need to permanently capture the Animancy Core, actually. We can just... cage it, and then destabilize it. Outside of this dimension. After I corrode the gateway for cover.”

Shiv, Uva, Can Hu, and Siggy stared at Adam.

“You want to set the bomb off?” Shiv asked.

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“I—kind of.”

“In Vulketh?” Uva added.

“I looked through the gateway,” Adam said. “There’s nothing for miles. It leads out into an ocean of molten metal connected to a submerged military base. It will likely *unmake* a section of Vulketh’s inner core, but the blast won’t go beyond a hundred kilometers or so.”



“That sounds pretty large, Adam,” Shiv muttered.

“Not on a planetary scale,” Valor corrected. “And not for a world like Vulketh. The main risk here is angering Lord Scorn. And that it might destabilize the gate, should it also destroy the gateway connecting Earth to Vulketh.”

Shiv stared harder. “Well, now it’s my turn to be unsure about this. What happens if that happens?”

“Then, the mana core starts imploding, and depending on if we’re closer to the surface gateway or the Abyssal gateway, we get squeezed out in a certain direction while a surge of unattuned mana washes over us.”

“Oh,” Shiv said, sighing. “Since the mana is unattuned, will it be like Passage, or just a bunch of colors?”

“Well, the ones who collapse a gate are usually rewarded in certain ways,” Adam said. “It’s how my father got this armor for me. Raiding and collapsing gates is practically a way of life for certain Pathbearers. A good deal of the mana will end up back with the System, but we will probably get something from this. However...” Adam winced at Uva. “I don’t think this is optimal due to other risks. Such as exposing the Sister to sunlight, should we be ejected from the surface gateway.”

Uva considered something for a moment. “I am interested in discovering if the Light-Curse can still affect me when I am in someone else’s mind. Wait. Great Valor, you said you traveled the world and have seen many things. Are you not afflicted with the Curse as well?”

“I am,” Valor said. “I simply avoided the light and used disposable bodies when I was forced to face my foes in the open. For your case... It depends on how your Skill Evolution functions, but this is what I suspect: You will be able to hide if you remain tight within a single mind, but if your mana strands emerge, you will be seared by the light, as it burns our very souls.”

The Umbral looked disturbed by Valor’s statement. “That... Do you know why the Curse was placed on us?”

“I do not think it was placed upon us directly. In fact, I believe it was placed on someone else, and we were just collateral.”

“Who?” Uva asked.

Valor paused for a moment. “The Great One fell for a reason. They lay broken for a reason. And there are burns on their body for a reason. We are merely afflicted because we share their dreaming tomb.”

A brief, contemplative silence followed. But it didn't last. A sudden, blaring siren sounded throughout the entire gate—loud enough that Shiv and the others could hear it clearly in the anchor.

"Oh, what did that bloody giant child of a Gate Lord do now?" Adam said. His eyes flared bright with rosy mana. As he cast his senses out, Uva connected everyone to his mind, and they watched as he accelerated his senses out from the anchor, up through their building, and into the air.

The mana core was unleashing massive surges of snow and howling winds, practically channeling a constant blizzard over the city, and the temperature was only dropping further with every moment. The core wailed while it did this, and several of its connected chains glowed brightly, painting the dimension with unnatural hues of black and gray. Then, Adam noticed a small army of ice dimensionals flying through the air, heading for a gateway.

The surface gateway.

"What the hells?" Adam muttered. He noticed a single, solitary figure walking across the bridge from the gateway, and his eyes widened. "This—*Shit!* She's here already?"

"Who's here?" Shiv asked.

"It slipped my bloody mind in the chaos—the Educator, that Inquisition agent that Sijik said was on her way. She wasn't due until—not now! She got here way too early! And why is she *alone*?"

The moment Adam spoke the woman's title, Shiv felt a massive blow strike his spirit. He staggered, and his Foreshadowing trembled, the beginnings of a vision creeping in from the corners of his eyes like a rising tide.

"Guys," Shiv grunted. Uva gripped his arm tightly. "I'm about to have a vision. And I think it might have something to do with our new friend."

However, as Adam's perception zoomed closer, he cried out as he felt his senses crash into something *unseen*. It was like a solid wall—a set of wards against perception that extended a good 500 meters around the figure, who strolled leisurely across the bridge. The blizzard didn't seem to bother her at all.

"She has *wards*," Adam hissed. "The bloody *Symposium* didn't have wards like these."

Everyone studied the woman through Adam's eyes. Even from half a kilometer away, they could make out some details. Her face was mature, but also odd in the way that Shiv couldn't tell how old she was at all. She didn't wear armor; rather, she was clad in a black and flowing scholar's robe with a red sash tied to her waist, the fabric fluttering in the wind behind her. She also had a brilliant crystal badge pinned to her shoulder, and

on her back was the largest tome Shiv had ever seen. The Educator wore the book like a backpack, and it was bound to her by chains.

Shiv's Foreshadowing thundered even harder. Something turned inside his stomach. An ill feeling of foreboding came over him like never before. "Adam. I think maybe we should—"

"She's—" a choked gasp cut off Adam's words.

Everyone went stiff.

The woman was staring directly at them. On her face was a look of wry amusement.

"It's very rude to peek, you know?" she said, tilting her head. "Oh. How surprising. An Aviary agent with Foreshadowing?" She licked her dry lip and hummed. "Perhaps we should have this conversation *in-person*, then?"

And then Shiv felt something snake out from her and strike his soul directly. The real world vanished around him entirely as something inside him cracked open. A vision began to swallow him. A vision stronger and more vivid than all the ones before.

**Foreshadowing: The Educator's Skill-Fusion of Awareness and Reflexes allows her to peer through her current observers, and she sees the boy looking at her— Ah? A surprise. Roland Arrow's only surviving child. The one with him, the boy in the skeletal armor... That's the son of *Harlon* and *Vera Lowe*. So, Roland kept him alive after all. But why are the two of them together?**

**Then there are others in the anchor with them. A lich. A goblin. A Penitent. And an Umbral. How odd, but interesting. She was wrong. They are not of Aviary. They are something else entirely. And she can't wait to find out what.**

**The Educator steps, then. She steps across Adam Arrow's perspective, having decided to make some new acquaintances.**

**Especially the Lowe boy listening to the System narrate this story right now.**

***Yes, I know you're reading this, Tanner.***

**Foreshadowing > 41**

Shiv broke out of the vision just in time to throw himself in front of Adam. The Educator stepped out into existence as if through thin air. He slashed at her using his kukri—and she parried the blow with a *brush*. She painted a stroke of black in the air, and Shiv's blow was sent entirely off course. He cast a laceration into the Educator. His mana detonated against her, and she strode forward unstagged, ignoring even Uva's strands converging on her entirely.

“Ah, Master-Tier.” She chuckled. “Your parents would have been so proud, Tanner. And Rose as well. Which leads me to my first question: Why do you have a fragment of Young Lord Adam’s mother inside your soul?”

And just then, a second vision consumed Shiv. Just as Adam fired his first arrow. Just as Valor cast a surge of Necromancy at the Educator. Just the chains holding her tome shattered, as its pages flung open, as the world dissolved and *changed*. This update is available on novelFire

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## 73 (I) Context

*To the Educator:*

***(Exposition: Most of them don’t know my name, and none of them know who I actually am. Nor do they care. They are content with their delusional belief that they are the ones who decide.)***

*The High Office of the Inquisition has dispatched new orders. You are to finish with matters in Lone Star immediately. Deal with what heretics are remaining and keep their cells suppressed for now.*

***(Exposition: Some scurrying heretics are the least of their problems. The Auroral pantheon is ripping itself apart, and their council in the process. The Starhawk is trying to break the very nature of their godhood, but the others cannot let go. They will not allow it. But even here, the others are divided. Two wish to kill Thaen and be done with things. The others still view him as their brother—merely lost and to be restrained.)***

*Gate Theborn is your next destination. You will find our liaison there and secure a weapon: an Animancy Core. You, then, will deliver the core to the Inquisition and await further instructions.*

***(Exposition: And there is more than just one conflict on display here. There are personal grudges being wielded by the divine. Roland Arrow has just as many enemies as his patron god, being the only favored champion of the Starhawk and the guardian of the Perch.)***

*High Office of the Inquisition, signed by Inquisitor Sijik.*

***(Exposition: This one will be on his way to Blackedge with a small force soon. He will be coming with Lord Stormhalt to finish the farce of an assassination they have planned. How pathetic.)***

-Commands Dispatched by the High Office of the Auroral Inquisition to the “Educator”

***(Exposition: Like they know anything about what is actually going on.)***

73 (I)

Context

**Foreshadowing: I am going to exploit this pseudo-vision I have inflicted upon you now. Foreshadowing is a very inconvenient skill to have. You should really evolve it beyond Adept as soon as you can. Here. Let me give you a bit of a hand.**

**Foreshadowing > 43**

Shiv grunted as he felt something smash into him hard. He briefly lurched back but caught himself with his field. He tried to strike back, but controlling his body during the visions felt like trying to claw his way out from inside a dream. His consciousness was partial at best right now, and it felt like his enemy was *manipulating* his Foreshadowing somehow.

**Foreshadowing: That’s because I am. I’m also not sure as to how a fragment of Rose Van Erren’s Foreshadowing Skill ended up inside you.**

Something else hit Shiv as the vision intensified. He felt something punch into the flesh of his neck before he adapted. He heard a note of surprise as something exploded against him again—but failed to push him back.

**Foreshadowing: And how in the Ascendants’ collective stupidity did you get Adamantine Adaption? That’s a skill common for colossal-category monsters, not individuals. Wait, your Path... What is that Path?**

**Foreshadowing > 45**

Shiv tried to push back. He did everything he could to break free from the chaotic flood of details the Educator was pouring into his mind.

**Foreshadowing: Not your mind. I am not a Psychomancer like your—your lover? Ha! And a Sister of the Arachnae Order no less. Wait, Silver Tongue? That’s *her* skill too! What is with all this debris in your soul? And how are you regenerating someone else’s broken skills? What a vexing mystery you are.**

Another series of strikes hit Shiv over the head. Blows that actually stung and *rocked* him. It was like he was getting pounded on by the axe-bearing dragon again. But instead of being pummeled unconscious, he was just getting screwed over by his own visions. He then felt something like a chain tighten around his neck, but he managed to fling it away with a brief pulse from his field.

**Foreshadowing: Gravitic Wrestler? Woundeater? The Chef Unwavering? What am I looking at? Why didn't I ever notice you before?**

## **Foreshadowing > 46**

The visions ended. At least for a moment. Shiv's senses returned to him, and he growled as he glared at the Educator. His helmet was cracked open, blood was trickling down from his forehead, and his neck was bleeding as well. He was inside some kind of ruined building, and the Educator ducked to the left as one of Adam's Veilpiercer arrows almost hit her. The shot slipped over her neck, and Shiv grunted as he parried the projectile aside.

It blasted through a wall behind them, and almost immediately, the building began to groan and shake.

"I have questions—" the Educator began.

Shiv slashed the ground with his kukri and charged her. He caught the robed woman rolling her eyes as he blasted toward her. He launched two bone drills; a laceration spell in one hand, followed by a Bowel-Breaker; then he shot up an odd angle with a pull of his field before diving in to claim her head.

She was a step ahead every single time. She caught one of his drills and used it to deflect the other. Both spells crashed and exploded against her, but she didn't seem to care—and for good reason. Her Magical Resistance made Confriga's feel *feeble*. As Shiv tried to cut her again, she parried him with her brush and painted something in the air. A shape lurched toward Shiv, and he immediately triggered his chrono-anchor.

He blinked across the room just as a symbol splashed the space where he had just been. Shiv narrowed his eyes at the attack. He didn't know what that was, but something about it told him he needed to avoid it at all costs. Just then, the building began to collapse. The ceiling above them broke apart and crashed down. Shiv didn't care much, and neither did the Educator.

They both regarded each other for a moment.

"That's an interesting knife," she said. "Mainly because of the Chronomancy. Secondly, because it reeks of the System's vulgar, unsubtle interest in you. In fact, you practically burn with the System's favor. So much that you ignited the other two with you. They're burning as well."



Just then, Uva's mana strands speared into the room from all sides. One went for Shiv while the others went for the Educator. Shiv activated his Silhouette then, and the Educator grinned. "Oh, now there's a *proper skill*." The building crashed down on them. Shiv launched himself forward, using the chaos to mask his attack—

Then another vision consumed him.

**Foreshadowing: Silhouette. Quite the skill—especially for someone like you. And at the Young Lord's recommendation, no less. You and he are almost like Roland and Harlon all those years ago, down to the very dynamic. Except, you seem to actually be the man your father wished he was. And the man your mother wished she had married.**

### **Foreshadowing > 47**

Shiv could faintly hear Uva calling for him—then her call broke off into a cry of pain. Something inside Shiv recoiled. He struggled against the vision as much as he could, trying to break out. He fed his anger into his Gravitic Wrestler and barely mustered the focus to stomp down on the ground.

The vision broke, and so did the world around him. The weight of the fallen building pressing down on his back vanished as a shockwave erupted out from Shiv. Light splashed down on him. Light and—for a brief moment, he was stunned. He stood amongst the skeletal remains of a ruined city. A ruined city he knew, that he traveled and explored for so many years, clearing out lesser vampire nests.

This was Lost Angeles. How was he *here*?

"I quite dislike magic, you know that?" the Educator said. Shiv froze. He couldn't see her at all anymore. He scanned his surroundings and focused on his Biomancy. "It twists one's perspective on things and makes acts far too impersonal. Truth be told, it just takes the *tension* out of things. So many magical battles are just someone hitting someone else with a spell, then death. No way out. No tension."

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"Well, come out, then," Shiv growled. slashed the ground again with his kukri as he rose into the air. "If you want some tension, I can give you some."

"Hmk. I take what I said in the vision back. You sound more like your mother. She was the aggressive one. Frankly, she was the one that made the mistake of conceiving you. Your father was far more cautious. Just a pity he loved her so much. And a pity it was the other way around with Roland and his Rose."

Shiv heard the words she was speaking, but he wasn't truly listening. Judging from how Adam's arrows briefly stopped coming, the Young Lord was, however. Shiv was too focused on trying to hunt his adversary down, and—

"S-Shiv—" Can Hu crackled.

*Shit!* Shiv cursed internally. He'd forgotten about Can Hu. The automaton sounded *broken*.

The Penitent tried to speak. "Something—actively interfering—can—"

Then, Shiv shouted in pain as the wet fibers of a paintbrush burrowed clean through his flesh without resistance. He faintly heard Uva calling his name, but he growled and turned—only to feel the brush stroke away more of him. Shiv shot forward through the air and clutched at his back. Blood gushed out from the deep channels painted into his flesh. *Painted*. His wounds bled colors of concrete and rusted metal—the colors of the ruins.

"What... in the godsdamned hells?" Shiv groaned as he looked at his hand. He hadn't been run through like that for weeks. Diamond Shell alone made him as hard on the inside as he was on the outside. Just what was that brush?

And *where* was that brush?

"A recommendation about being sneaky—you should avoid holding your bright, radiant kukri out in the open. Maybe hide it somewhere until you're ready to strike. It really does your Silhouette an injustice. You should treasure your Stealth Skill more, boy. Nothing feeds you more tension than that."

Shiv looked about and still couldn't find the damned woman. Just then, he saw Uva's strands slowly closing in—only for the Educator to materialize beside a string and strike it with her brush. Again, Shiv heard Uva scream.

Rage exploded through Shiv. He launched another laceration spell at the Educator, but she simply smiled, dove under him, and—

And he lost track of her again. It was like she vanished entirely as soon as she left his line of—

*Wait! Shit! She can move across someone's Awareness. That's how she got to us immediately. She jumped across Adam's Awareness! She's inside mine right now!*

A vision smashed into him again just as he realized the truth. "Godsdammit!" Shiv snarled. "Stop doing that!"

**Foreshadowing: No. Also, it's beneficial for you. The sooner you develop Exposition, the sooner you and I can have a proper conversation. Also, good job on remembering my Skill Fusion. You put things together awfully fast. Now. I'm going to—**

## **Foreshadowing > 50**

Shiv sobered, but only for a moment. That moment was long enough. He tried something desperate and blinded himself. His eyes burst. The vision didn't end. So he took a chance and went the rest of the way. Shiv stopped his heart, and he emerged as a Revenant a moment later, hoping it would be enough for him to escape the visions, or at least get a Skill Evolution capable of resisting his enemy.

## **Silhouette > 66**

## **Revenant > 11**

### **Skill Evolution: Foreshadowing (Adept) > Expositi—[Error: Skill Evolution Incompatible With Path]**

*What?* Shiv had never seen an Error notification before. But that thought crumbled away as something else consumed Shiv's attention. Heat. Immense heat. More heat than he ever felt in his entire life.

With the power she displayed, he expected the Educator to be strong of vitality, but nothing could have prepared him for what rose out from within the Educator.

And it did indeed *rise out*. Like a plant hatching and climbing toward sunlight. Except that the thing that grew out from the Educator was no plant, but a titanic, near-transparent, humanoid shape. It was so big that it blotted out Shiv's view of the sky. It should have been utterly invisible, but the fact that it had vitality burning within its body gave Shiv the impression of a titan of fire looking down at him.

The massive being had more vitality than everything and everyone Shiv had ever drained combined, and by orders of magnitude at that. If Shiv had resurrected before the sun, this is what it would have felt like. Original content can be found at Nove1Fire

### **Severe Path Incompatibility Detected: Unable to Evolve Skill into [Exposition]**

### **[Error: Unable to expand and modify Pathbearer's Soul without affecting Vitality]**

And at the same time, the colossal, burning entity glared down at Shiv. The Educator froze, long enough for one of Adam's arrows to crash into her and knock her back, long enough for Uva's strands to bounce off her Magical Resistance. But she stared at Shiv, and her expression was one of absolute shock. Her expression was matched by the

immense being's body language, and the sky itself shook as a voice like rolling thunder washed over him.

### **"What. Are. You."**

Another vision smashed into Shiv. It crashed hard against his consciousness, drowning him once more, but not manipulating his mind, just forcing details into him. Endless details, flashes of places and things he couldn't comprehend.

He caught a vision, a vision of twenty people condemned to death. Twenty people, all shackled to each other as they were marched to the edge of a chasm—the *Abyss*.

They were cast down by a burst of force, and each of them fell. They fell as one, and they fell as all. They fell as twenty, but then they fell as seventeen, then fifteen, and finally thirteen.

Then the vision broke, and once more Shiv felt his skill try to evolve, but his soul wouldn't allow it, and *pain*, pain unlike anything he'd ever experienced, consumed the root of his being. It was like something was hatching out from his very soul, ripping out from every fiber of his flesh.

**Foreshadowing: What are you? Why are you not evolving the skill? What did you just do to yourself?**

### **Foreshadowing: [Unable to Level Skill]**

The skill was cracking and breaking inside of him, trying to transform, but his soul wouldn't allow it. If Shiv had possessed a mouth then, he would have screamed, and he would have kept screaming and screaming forever. That's how bad the pain felt; it was beyond what he experienced when he was purified within the teleportation anchor, when he strained his soul, mind, and body facing the Jealousy, when he took the brutal beating at the hands of the dragon-knights.

This was an immediate thirteen out of ten on the pain spectrum.

Slowly, the skill began to forcibly break and twist inside him. It felt like someone was reshaping his very bones while still inside his flesh. Foreshadowing *needed* to evolve. It was already beyond the precipice. It couldn't be itself anymore.

But Exposition was not for him. It was a thing that couldn't touch one's vitality, that needed to be soul-deep for some reason, untainted by the existence of a life force. But Shiv was an undying flame—life enduring.

And so the skill had to become something else altogether. It spilled into his Integrated existence, and the pain abruptly ended as Shiv felt a sudden coldness wash through him as his very vitality was siphoned away into the skill.

*No, no! Shit!* Shiv immediately shot toward the Educator and activated Silhouette. He could feel himself growing colder at a rapid rate, and he needed to fuel himself. At the same time, he felt the Foreshadowing Skill dissolve before the raw, chaotic nature of his life force.

### **Skill Lost: Foreshadowing (Adept)**

Just as he seized the Educator, a flash of vitality pulsed through her—but Shiv realized she was but an empty vessel. There was no vitality to be sourced from her. Rather, she was just a channel—an *anchoring* vessel for the great being above. Their vitality surged into Shiv, and it went off inside him like a bomb. A mixture of brilliant red and white bubbled over Shiv, and the skill drank from that too.

The colossal entity cast a vision at him—tried to make him see something, but for a moment, Shiv was beyond their reach. His shadowy cocoon formed and began to crack in the same instant. His very existence was supercharged with a rush of power that was greater than anything he'd ever felt.

### **Vitality Drain > 30**

And through it all, the awesome entity stared on as a trickle of them zipped over to Shiv, and finally, a new notification materialized.

### **Skill Gained: Outside Context Problem (Unique)**

#### **Outside Context Problem > 51**

***“Why isn’t Exposition working on you anymore? Why can’t I see your skills?”***

Shiv ignored the colossal entity as he emerged from his resurrective husk. He drove his kukri into the face of the Educator. The blade only left a slight cut on her cheek, but nothing more. She responded by flicking her brush at him. The paint sailed through the air and—

***“NO!”***

Shiv felt himself get pulled away before it got close to him. But he wasn’t pulled back. Rather, he was pulled *through* something. Or at least that was how it felt. There was a layer of burning life-essence around him, red and white flames that shaped his very being. He was getting colder at an alarming rate. For a moment, he had thought he was truly dead, but when he looked down, he still had a body. He was still whole.

But there was something else here with him, in this space of red and white. *Someone* else. Just behind him.

He turned toward the unseen enemy in a blur, but his kukri froze an inch away from the throat of a ghostly visage, a person shaped from his very vitality.

She loomed over him, her body malformed but also strangely elegant. Her long hair was crimson, and a flowing, white dress whipped around her body in tassels. Shiv felt himself grow colder still, and he wasn't sure if it was his vitality burning away at an alarming rate or if it was just the sudden, horrible realization that he *knew* this woman. He'd seen her in paintings, in murals, in memorial photos, and more across Blackedge all his life.

This was... *Rose Van Erren*.

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## 73 (II) Context

### 73 (II)

#### Context

"How..." Shiv breathed, his eyes wide.

"I don't know," she replied. Her voice echoed slightly, but it was high and clear. She even sounded a bit like Adam. She looked at her hands. The vitality empowering both of them, that kept them in existence, was flickering away, like a dying flame exposed to falling rain. "I sensed there was danger... danger you wouldn't have been able to survive, and so I pulled you away. I pulled you out of the world."

Shiv just stared. "Out of the *what*?"

"The world," she repeated. "Outside, everything out there. It's dangerous, it's hateful, it's hurtful. There are so many threats everywhere. The waves of causality are so high..."

And as Shiv stared out through the film of his vitality, he realized something. The world had gone gray and dull, and his enemy seemed absolutely confused as to where he was at all.

In fact, the divine being was looking around, as was the Educator. Another Veilpiercer arrow crashed into her back and blew a chunk of her shoulder away. She barely noticed. Then, several more of Uva's strands stabbed at her, and they seemed to knock her out of her stupor.



"Everything outside is bound to the waves of choice and action. Action-reaction. But not you. You are not bound. You are the one thing that *they* have to tether themselves to. The Foreshadowing they cast... It broke against you several times, because you are not meant to be. You were never meant to be. I know, I know, because something of *mine* is there inside of *you*." She pointed at him, pointed at his chest, and there was a flash of hatred in her eyes. "You shouldn't be!"

She grabbed him by the neck, but her fingers melted into him. "You shouldn't be. Where? What did you take from me? Why? Why did you take it from me?"

"What are you even talking about?" he said, trying to distance himself from her hands. When he got a new skill, he didn't expect *this*.

"Give it back to me!" Her breaths came fast, and she began to hyperventilate. "Why am I bound to you? What is this? What is this madness? Give—give it back to me!"

Shiv considered stabbing her, but well, this was... He didn't know what this was. The woman looked like Adam's mother, but how did he *evolve Adam's mother* out of Foreshadowing?

For every second he spent within the shroud of his soul, Shiv could feel himself growing weaker at an alarming rate. He needed to drink someone else's vitality to restore this. He *needed* to if he wanted to remain in existence.

"Put me back," Shiv growled. "Put me back outside! I—we're going to fade away!"

She stared at him, then bit her lip in contemplation. "I... don't know how."

"What do you mean *you don't know how*?" Shiv asked, incredulous. "You pulled me into myself in the first place!"

She crossed her arms. "I was just reacting."

"Well," Shiv snarled. "React again. React!" He focused on his own vitality, and he began to pry. It didn't seem to help much, but then, her body superimposed over his, and they pulled together.

A second later, Shiv hatched back into existence, a blast of red-white fire searing the ground around him. Blood-red veins spread through the floor while white flowers bloomed from everything he touched. Flowers that pulsed as if they were beating hearts.

Shiv crashed down on the floor on all fours, feeling weaker than he could ever remember feeling. But he was back in the physical world, or wherever the Educator had dragged them. He looked around. There was color and sensation and—

"What just happened?" he breathed.

A massive blast erupted a few blocks away. "Shit," he muttered. "Adam. Uva."

"Wait, Can Hu!" He rushed over to the downed armor. He forced it open and ripped out his old body. He settled in and launched himself through the air with his gravitic field. "Can Hu? You there?"

"S-s-still—" was all the automaton managed to say.

"Shit!" Shiv cursed again. He couldn't have predicted this. What even was this? What kind of nightmarish skill evolution did the Educator force on him? And what was—

As Shiv sailed through the sky, he couldn't see the colossal entity anymore, but he knew it was there. He knew it existed. "What is that thing?"

"A *Demiurgos*," a voice suddenly whispered to him, speaking directly into his consciousness.

"Rose?" Shiv asked, his eyes widening.

*"It's an Ascendant. A false god pretending to be something much smaller. It is casting out waves, weaving schemes from the fabric of the world's history..."*

Shiv blinked. "I—What?"

*"I see things, but they do not see me. I've been pulled beyond the bounds of what should have been... Beyond the bounds..."*

"You're not making any sense," he muttered. Shiv considered if he had actually gone insane, but he didn't think things were that simple.

*"You're not supposed to be," she replied. "We aren't supposed to be this way. Right now, this moment, it's an impossibility. It is all an impossibility. I knew, I knew something... I was... I gleaned the threads of causality. I read, I learned. And you, you shouldn't exist. But something—something dreamed you into being. Someone."*

And just then, he heard Adam scream in the distance. "No!" Rose cried. "Go! Faster! Faster, now!"

He accelerated. He accelerated even though his entire body felt enervated. He hammered his fists together, building up his Momentum Core as he smashed through the top side of a building to find the painter with her brush jammed through the young lord's cheek.

Adam was biting the brush. It had gone through the insides of his mouth and chipped several teeth, but he was holding her back, pushing at her feebly with his Adept-Tier strength. His helmet was somewhere beyond sight, but Shiv's Silhouette was active as he—

Suddenly, he was pulled inside his own chaotic shroud of vitality. He let out a cry of exhaustion this time as his flame burned dim. Both Adam and the Educator briefly looked at him, but then they did a double take as if they weren't sure what they were staring at, as if they didn't know.

"Stop doing that," Shiv growled.

*"I'm trying to help you!" Rose said. "We cannot get close this way. We must be careful. We must strike without leaving any ripples. They can see the ripples, they can feel the causality. They are a source of it. They will paint you. The brush reshapes souls. And I felt it when she struck you. She felt it. But you merely bled. She couldn't reshape you. You are wrong. Abomination. Monster."*

Shiv ignored Rose as he advanced on the Educator. He could still move through the world even in his current state, and he didn't wait to find out if he could hurt her through his vitality shroud while he was... *outside the world* or whatever.

*Valor, I hope you can explain this shit to me because this is another level of felling weird,* Shiv thought.

Shiv drew close to the Educator. He heard a sickening snap as one of Adam's teeth broke off, and his eyes rolled. An adamantite shield exploded through the dilapidated room, smashing into the Educator's side at extreme speeds. Her ribs cracked. She folded over, but she didn't fall. Any normal person would have reacted in some way, but she seemed immune to pain.

Once more, the shield smashed into her from the side, and Uva's strands struck, but the Educator fought with one arm, throwing paint at the strands. Uva's mana flinched back, avoiding the paint, and somehow, somehow Shiv could feel her pain.

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The last few times Uva endured those attacks, she ended up having a seizure. She had just woken up a few seconds ago. The world was screaming at him through his film of vitality—and he paused. He knew all this because the woman was whispering it to him constantly, muttering random details into his mind like some kind of mad oracle bound to his very soul.

With every step growing more strenuous, and his soul dimming to a flicker, Shiv got just behind the Educator, and he drove his kukri up under her chin. He stabbed, and Rose Van Erren stabbed with him.

Both of them surged forth, and he exploded out into existence with a blast of his unstable vitality, red and white colors flooding the world. His kukri slammed into the Educator's jaw just as he cast out a wyrm. It swallowed Adam's wounds before slamming into the Educator.

A detonation of mana exploded across her. She staggered, and Adam fired two more Veilpiercers into her face. Another two blasts followed, both of them dimensional. Two stacked dimensional rifts expanded right in front of the Educator's face. Most of her skull was caved in, but her face bled *paint* rather than blood, and she kept fighting as if she hadn't been harmed at all.

The Educator tried to respond, but Uva's shield came back, and it crashed into the Educator's elbow, throwing her brush off. A sickening crack sounded, but the limb didn't break. Rather, a part of the shield was fractured.

Shiv stole the moment and seized the Educator in a tight lock before suplexing her through the ground. He blasted both of them down through the many floors of the building, spiking his acceleration with his gravitic field. As they crashed through surface after surface, he drained her.

Vitality flowed back into his body. Heat exploded out from inside him, and he suddenly didn't feel weak anymore. Suddenly, he could hear Rose's voice louder than ever before. She gasped as if a woman allowed a sip of water after years of wandering in the desert. And then he felt another rush of Foreshadowing crash against him, but the vision did not settle within his mind; rather, Rose intercepted it, and she muttered madly, cursing and screaming at the now-unseen entity.

**Foreshadowing: What is happening to you? Why can't I see you anymore? What is your Skill Evolution?**

As the Educator spoke to him, however, he realized her lips weren't moving, and her eyes were shifting around erratically.

He hit her three more times—a slice, two stabs—and then flung her through the final floor. He followed instantly, stomping down with both feet into her chest as he spiked his gravity field to its absolute limit.

The entire skyscraper burst apart and shattered with a deafening rumble. A slight crack sounded from her sternum, but she swiped her brush through Shiv's ankle, and he collapsed with a shout of pain. His left leg came apart in two. She swept her brush out again, aiming for his neck, but Shiv drew in a breath and *dove* into himself.

Once more, he splashed into his soul-vitality fusion, and the red and white flames that composed his being spread around him like a protective membrane as he simply *ceased* to be in the outside world.

## **Foreshadowing: What? Who was I just? Who was I fighting? I was fighting someone...**

The voice of the Educator came through, and she was confused, beyond confused. She was absolutely lost.

*"Here, we are the only ones that can reference ourselves," Rose said from beside him. "No one can remember us. We leave the context of the outside world. Break temporarily from collective existence. But this shouldn't be—we shouldn't be able to endure an acausal existence. Your soul is wrong. Shouldn't be able to do this. Shouldn't be."*

Shiv regarded the hysterical Rose, and he triggered his chrono-anchored strike. To his surprise, she remained with him, even as he delivered the blow to his adversary. Once more, he drove his kukri into the Educator, and a detonation of vitality followed the instant he made overt contact with the world.

He channeled a beam of light through his kukri and split the Educator from within. His Silhouette was active, so she swept her brush wide—but misjudged where he was due to his outline.

**Silhouette > 68** This content belongs to novel[f]ire

## **Deepest Edge > 60**

She twisted wide as her body came apart in a flurry of paint. Shiv *shifted* out of the world again and felt himself shivering from how little of his vitality was left. There, within the confines of his own soul, he looked up—and caught sight of the massive entity searching for him again.

*Outside Context*, he thought, and he spent a moment, just a single moment, thinking about what the Educator said. "Wait, Foreshadowing," he said. "A fragment of Rose's soul ended up in me. How the hell did..."

And it all went back to his birth, to the ritual. He stared at Rose.

*"We are bound," she said. "All of me should be gone. And you were... You were never supposed to be born. And my daughter, and you, and her, and you... This is not the shape of a soul."*

The colossal entity that was supposedly one of the Ascendants swept its head, looking across the land, trying to figure out what was hitting it. Once more, though, Shiv's flames burned dim. This new power, this new skill, drained his very existence rapidly. It sapped him at such an alarming rate that he might only be able to maintain it for ten seconds. Probably less.

He got behind the Educator again, and this time he dragged his blade across her throat, slamming the blade against bone as he began to sap her vitality once more.

Blood sprayed out from her, but it was colorful blood, kaleidoscopic blood. And as he flicked his dagger across, channeling Conduit of Dawn, he severed her head, only for her to turn around and kick him right in the chest. Shiv grunted as he forced himself to remain in place, and she swept out two strokes from her brush. The first he avoided conventionally, the second he evaded by going *Outside Context*. Rose drew him in once more, and he immediately exploded back out, launching a laceration into the Educator's face before he triggered his Chrono-Anchored strike and slit her throat again.

## **Silhouette > 70**

Every dive flooded his Stealth with more advancements, and the Educator's naked confusion was all-consuming as he drained her heat again.

"How?" She asked, unbothered by how most of her skull was caved in. His Dread Aura sensed a crack developing inside her being. It wasn't the normal kind of crack you would feel when someone turned to cowardice. No, it was the kind of fear that a warrior felt, that someone who was versed in combat felt. They weren't shaken, they weren't nearly broken, but they were *disturbed*.

Just then, a corrosive Veilpiercer tore through the air from above, and suddenly the Educator burst apart into sprays of paint. She disintegrated before Shiv, and he dove back from the Necromancy. He watched as the arrow melted through the ground, but blinked as the Educator's paint faded into the backdrop.

As he stood over where the Educator used to be, Adam descended into the room on burning wings and with his helmet back on. He looked at Shiv, and through the dust and rubble, Uva came, holding on to her shield as support. Blood was pouring from her eyes, and half of her face was swollen and bruised.

"She shattered my helmet with a kick," Uva said, blinking rapidly with her good eye. "Only thing that saved my life."

Shiv gave her a worried look and cast a wyrm into her. He healed whatever brain damage she sustained, and she gave him an appreciative nod.

"What... what happened back there?" Adam asked. "You were..." he paused. "I thought you didn't exist for a second. I completely forgot who you were. I was... I was so lost when I was looking at you. What did you just do?"

*"Adam... I remember... Adam... I want to hold you again... Please just let me hold him once more..."* Rose cried out from inside Shiv. She reached for Adam, but she was trapped inside Shiv's vitality. Practically a whole other existence away. *"Why... what did I do to deserve this torment..."*



"I, uh," Shiv stammered, swallowing. How the hell was he going to explain any of this to Adam? "I'm not exactly sure, Adam, I, uh..."

But just then, he heard a scream from inside of him. *"She's behind the girl!"*

Shiv cursed, and he threw himself at Uva. The Umbral wasn't nearly fast enough to react. The difference between an Adept-tier and Master-tier Reflex skill was colossal, especially with his Momentum Core fully filled. He pulled her aside just as a jet of paint tore across the land, splitting even the horizon behind them.

Uva reactively dove into Shiv's mind, and he slammed down behind Adam.

And once more, the surrounding environment changed. The colors of the world twisted, becoming less realistic and more...

"This looks like a bloody children's novel," Adam gasped. "What the hells? Where the hells are we? How the hells is she doing this?"

And from between the twisting shades of existential paint, Shiv caught a sign of movement. The ruins of Lost Angeles vanished, replaced by badly drawn trees, by crudely sketched clouds, and a sun that had a smile on it. He was standing within the page of a child's drawing. And from on high, something moved, a shrouded figure that loomed over them—loomed over seemingly the entire world itself. It seemed as large as another planet when gazed upon from the land.

*"By the Composer,"* Uva breathed.

*"By the Ascendants,"* Adam followed.

But then, the great being laughed. ***"Oh, no need to invoke my title in vain. I am here, Little Arrow. An Ascendant in the... Well, I'm not quite an Ascendant anymore. And I don't really have flesh. But more importantly..."***

Then, from the massive being descended a single droplet of paint, and it splashed down, reforming the Educator's body once more. She stepped through the badly drawn trees, and her eyes were locked onto Shiv. She held out a brush and pointed it at him. "But before that, I have questions. I thought I had answers to give, some useful puppets to recruit, and a lesson to teach, but now I just have questions."

Every word she spoke was with an angry clench of her jaw.

"You," she said. *"Tanner Lowe.* Why can't I see your skill status anymore? What did you just do? And how did you slip away from my very awareness? My very memories. What are you?"

Shiv swallowed slightly as he felt the presence of Rose Van Erren lean over him. "I think I'm still in the process of finding that out myself. Now, point that brush somewhere else before I kick your ass a second time."

The Educator paused, and then she *sneered*. "Oh. I wasn't trying to hurt any of you before. I was trying to bind you to my book of illustrations as intact as possible. Like I bound part of the Penitent and the other two. But you... My brush only *wounded* you. Your soul refuses to leave your flesh... How *peculiar*."

So that's what was wrong with Can Hu—and that's where Valor and Siggy were.

"Right," Shiv grunted. "Let them out, and I won't hurt you."

"No," the Educator said, widening her stance and assuming an actual combat posture. "Not until I figure a few things out. Not until I have you all stroked and collected within my pages."

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

## 74 (I) Burn

*Once there were twenty, but then the story changed, and the faith changed, and history changed, and so there were seventeen all along.*

*But then two more of our members disagreed about something major, something the others refused to abandon, and then there were fifteen all along. And finally, as the years dragged on, two more were weary. One settled their own affairs, and another simply disappeared. And finally, there were thirteen all along.*

*Except not.*

*Except I have always been here.*

*I have held a thin sliver... Just a strand of the power that once made us divine, and no one else thinks I'm still here. My statue in the church is gone. It has vanished. My power, driven by fate, shaped by history, has gotten cold.*

*But even so, even so, across the empire I have cults, and I have my agents, and I have my "Characters." And my former comrades-turned-fellow divines... They linger, they squabble and bicker, and they fight over this paltry power they call godhood. They fight,*

*but they don't see, and they don't realize, and they don't understand. They don't grow, and they don't change.*

*They are like a stale portrait. A pretty portrait, yes. Pretty every time you look at it. But it's the same portrait. And the portrait taunts you, because it is of a landscape. There is a horizon there, and they just refuse to seek it.*

*I am tired of this power. I am tired of it hanging on my neck like a shackle. I want to become something truly great, and I want to become it all on my own.*

*I want to be my own work.*

*My greatest regret of all isn't this power. It isn't what I had to do to maintain it. No. My greatest regret of all is that it's not mine.*

*Thaen is a blind, noble fool, but in this, he is right—we are not gods. We're just slaves of faith and legend.*

*-Tome of a Forgotten Artist*

74 (I)

Burn

*"Adam, stay close to me," Shiv growled. He dashed right in front of the Young Lord just as the Educator moved her brush. A wave of paint came forth—and Shiv threw one of his stored corpses at it. Colors of consuming red, white, pink, and more swallowed the body and faded from the world. A cold weight hardened inside Shiv. This wasn't like any foe he had ever fought before. "Stay close to me. She can travel across our perception. We cover each other. I have the speed. I'll give you an opening."*

*"Right," Adam said, breathing hard. There was still a lingering trace of terror. "We need to hit her with a Necromancy arrow. There will be—"*

*"To hell with the risk, we're getting Can Hu and Valor back from her. Whatever she is." Shiv regarded the educator. She was connected to something that Rose kept calling a god-born-of-borrowed-myth. She kept muttering those words from inside his merging of soul and vitality—his Vitae, as she called it.*

*"What is that brush?" Uva asked with a mental shudder. "Every time she strikes my mana with it, I suffer a near-seizure."*

*"I don't know what the hells she is," Shiv said. He triggered the Song of the Vigilant just then, and the world came alive with a resonant web. A web that couldn't detect the presence of the colossal being that was watching them, however. The world around the Educator was still, but she filled her other hand with what looked like a pencil. Great.*

Probably some new bullshit he'd have to deal with. *"I barely know what's happening with my new Skill Evolution."*

Adam paused, and his head slowly swiveled to Shiv. *"Skill Evolution?"*

*"She kept hitting me with Foreshadowing and drowning me in visions earlier. She was trying to get me to gain an Exposition Skill or something. Ended up—"* Shiv didn't finish that part. He refrained from sending Adam the memories of Rose and his Outside Context Problem Skill, but he did share them with Uva.

*"I... What?"* the Umbral choked out, seeming to be at an absolute loss. *"How is this possible? His mother is dead. How does a portion of someone return from a skill?"* That and a million other questions burned in her mind, but they all had more pressing problems.

*"Don't know,"* Shiv said. He glared at the Educator as she just stood there for a beat, tracing something in the air with her pencil. *"I think we're all going to need to have a long conversation after we kill her. Adam. Uva. I'm going in. Stay fluid. Stay close."*

Adam shaped four more arms and prepared five Veilpiercers at once in response.

Uva simply reared back her strands, preparing to strike.

Shiv blasted toward the Educator and cleaved the ground with his blade. He was on the enemy in a moment, and she flicked her brush at him—only for him to blink back to where he just was and smash into her. His almost filled Momentum Core kept him at peak speed, but he wasn't going to discharge anytime soon. Shiv needed the speed to keep Adam guarded.

The Educator slid back on the ground as he hooked his free hand under her left arm and controlled both her wrists. His blade turned into a blur of slashes and cuts. Conduit of Dawn activated. His physical slashes were amplified by a beam of searing heat. Slight scratches and cuts lined the Educator's body, but she showed no pain—even as every single one of Uva's strands stabbed into her.

Then, the Educator fixed him with a hard glare as he felt something splash into his Vitae.

*"She is trying to reach your soul,"* Rose whispered from within. *"But she cannot find it. She cannot separate it from the rest of your being. She is lost in here. This is not her domain. Within you, she cannot be any kind of god at all. Not even a shadow of one. Listen... Listen to what words her soul speaks."*

**Exposition: I have no idea how he's resisting my Soulsculpting. It's like there's nothing solid for me to carve. I can't touch any of his skills anymore. I can still sense that fragment of Foreshadowing—that piece of Rose Van Erren—but it has**

**changed as well. Something must be *wrong* with his soul. An Animancer must've reached into this boy at some point. Give me something, Exposition. Give me a glimpse of something—anything...**

"Here's a glimpse," Shiv snarled. He slashed his blade across the Educator's eyes as he held her in place. Adam called out for Shiv to lower his head. The Deathless did just that. A corrosive arrow almost impacted the Educator, but she promptly burst into nothing but paint and color. The Necromancy-tinged Veilpiercer blasted across the land, shredding and withering a long stretch of the pastel horizon. Some crudely drawn trees began to melt, and the sun above adopted a frown.

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"It is rude to deface someone else's art, poorly drawn though it might be." The Educator's voice came from all around them as Adam landed near Shiv.

*"We need to stop her from just turning into paint,"* the Young Lord snarled. He looked around, spreading his Awareness wide. His Seer of Horizons surged through the world, and he cursed. *"And it's just... It's all just bloody painting here. We're stuck in a painting against someone who paints."*

"Yeah," Shiv said. *"Real surrealist nightmare. Did the Academy offer you a class on this?"*

*"What? Fighting in a bloody painting dimension? No. Absolutely not."*

Adam reached for something, and a growl escaped him. *"I think she knocked the damn rapier off my hip earlier. I really need something to keep that thing on me. Damned spatial-temporal wardings affecting Binding Enchantments..."*

Uva, however, noticed something. *"Shiv. There's an inconsistency in the art piece we're in. It's not an amateur piece, but a master playing at a child's drawing."* She pointed a strand at a nearby tree, and he saw what she was indicating. Adam did too.

*"That trunk is... rather vivid,"* Adam said. *"Let's see if we can drop its quality to resemble the rest of the page."* He fired a Necromancy arrow at the trunk. It struck. And the entire world around them curled and dissolved. The effects of his arrow were like casting a canvas to an open flame. Better yet, the Educator herself cried out, and with it, Shiv felt her try to reach into his soul once more.

**Exposition: Ah, damnation, I forgot how much Necromancy stings. It's going to take some time rebuilding that skill. A good lesson, though. I got carried away with that tree. I should spend more time on review rather than composition. I would have noticed otherwise. Now. Back to the problems at hand—I need to remove the Young Lord first, then the Psychomancer. As for the Lowe boy... I'll**

need to take my time with him. I've never heard of a Deathless Path, and now I can't even see anything about him.

Best that I release a mind mage from one of my pages to incapacitate him after I deal with the Umbral—and now I can't even see her details either. And there was such an engaging story regarding the murder of her mother I was looking into.

For now, let us make this quick. They cost me enough illustrations already. I will reshape the Lowe boy slowly when I can. The others...

Udraal might be able to find some use in them. He will be pleased that I managed to find his father's wandering pieces as well.

*Udraal?* Shiv blinked.

*"Udraal Thann,"* Rose said, shuddering at the very mention of the name. *"Why—we slew him... How is he still alive?"*

And then the horizon *flipped* over them like the turning of a page, and they were back in the ruins Lost Angeles. But the Educator was right there among them. She swiped a brush at Adam, but Shiv reacted in time. The edge of his kukri slammed into the brush. A parry followed. Frictionless Vector activated. Her brush unleashed a tidal wave of color into a building. As the colors settled, the building was gone, and in its place was now a stretch of a roaring, blue ocean that was juxtaposed on both sides by the ruins of a once great city.

## **Frictionless Vector > 56**

Corrosion spread from Adam's vambrace into his new arrow. As he prepared to release the shot into the Educator, however, *another* version of her appeared right next to him.

This time, Shiv didn't react in time. A splash of paint crashed into Adam—but not before he released his arrow. The shot tore across the world, but it went wide. Two eerie, crackling green rifts opened at the point where Adam shot his arrow and right where the first Educator was. She almost dodged out of the way—but Shiv booted her back into the arrow. A blast of corrosive energy followed as the Educator cried out again.

**Exposition: This would be bloody over already if I was who I was before—I would have just drawn a few Heroic-Tier illustrations and been done with this farce instead of dropping Master after Master. Well. At least the Young Lord's dealt with.**

*"Adam!"* Shiv shouted. He caught sight of the terror in Adam's eyes as a rush of sky-blue paint consumed the Young Lord. *"No!"*



Rage exploded inside Shiv—but it paled before how much hatred was pouring forth from Rose. *“My son! Give him back! GIVE HIM BACK TO ME!”*

Shiv poured everything into Momentum Core. The other Educator was practically unmoving as Shiv smashed into her. He slashed and tore and cut. Multiple hues sprayed out of her body in place of blood. She struck back with a brush, but he hooked her arm around her elbow, snapped the limb and headbutted her in the face. He tried flinging her into the Necromantic rift, but she dissolved into paint again.

And just then, Rose screamed in his mind.

*“She is coming! More of her! All she can muster at once! Dive deep!”*

Shiv dove back into his own Vitae and out of the world’s context. The coldness hit him. And the coldness only grew as he saw Uva snap free from his mind. The Umbral cried out in alarm, and Shiv immediately reached back into reality after her.

*“No, stop! She’s—”*

But Shiv wasn’t listening to Rose anymore. He burst back out of his Vitae in nearly the same moment he went in. She couldn’t leave context with him—of course she couldn’t. She didn’t have his soul. Uva’s shield broke into pieces just in time. *Twenty* Educators splashed down around them in bursts of color and paint. Uva’s Mind-Shattered Sentinel cried out as the enemy painted it away in brush strokes—and through the gap a pencil was cast through.

A line was drawn between Shiv and Uva. He slammed into the line, but he found himself unable to move anymore.

*What the hells is this?* Shiv snarled, struggling. Check latest chapters at novel—fire

**Exposition: Ah. He cannot interact with my Border Sketching. Well. Now I feel like a fool. I could have started the fight this way. Alas, I wanted to recruit them intact and reshape him with minimal difficulty. Laziness always brings about more labor in the end.**

Shiv looked on, helpless, as the Educators swung their brushes, unleashing tides of paint over Uva. Her strands reached back for him, but they couldn’t pass through the Border Sketch outlined by her pencil. The fragments of her shield dissolved first, then the colors crashed over her. Fear flickered in Uva’s eyes for but a moment—then her courage solidified again, and acceptance followed. She looked at Shiv and called out. “Shiv. I—”

The colors swallowed her. The paint crashed over her body in a tide, and it melded her into the backdrop of the world. A second later, it was like Uva never existed.

*“Both are lost to the pages,” Rose moaned. Retreat. Hide. Please...*”

But Shiv wasn't listening. The scene he just witnessed was seared into his mind. He saw Uva looking at him, her expression; Adam's terror. Shiv shot beyond anger into a state of absolute hate-fueled serenity.

All around him were more Educators rushing in. He felt their brushes cleave into his back, stroking pain and hurt into his body. But unlike Uva and Adam, Shiv didn't fade. He just bled. He just got hurt. The pain couldn't take him, it could only wound his body.

And Shiv's magic was *fueled* by his wounds.

His Woundeater exploded out from him as he fed his Biomancy with his constant, enduring rage. It cracked against one of the Educators in a massive explosion of crimson. It barely affected her. What did affect her was Shiv slamming into her at sound barrier-breaking speeds. The Educators staggered back as the Deathless became a blur of absolute violence. Through everything he touched, he broke, he cut. He targeted the Educators' wrists and fingers. He ripped brushes from hands and shattered bones.

## **Deepest Edge > 61**

They painted him. More and more Educators spawned in to bring him down, but Shiv didn't care. He didn't give a damn about defense—he just wanted to hurt his enemy. He didn't care if they were a forgotten god or an Ascendant or anything. He would die and suffer as many times as it took to get his companions back.

A brush stroke went wide in the chaos, crashing over nothing. By this point, Shiv's Silhouette was doing more in his defense than he was.

## **Silhouette > 71**

Then, something crashed into his mind as he ripped one of the Educators off her feet by her ankles, using her as a flail against the others. Shiv cried out as he swung his Magebreaker in the direction of the attack. A spell broke. A person cried out. Shiv spotted an impossibly tall and thin creature striding amongst the Educators. Its eyes were bright and pure white, and its ears were so long that it went beyond merely elven ears. It looked at him with a mouth filled with sharp teeth, and it launched another Psychomancy spell. One Shiv parried into an Educator.

It became the last parry he performed as several jets of paint took the arm away from him. Just then, another splash of color crashed down behind him, and Shiv turned—only to catch a heavy uppercut under his jaw. His head spun. Stars flashed through his eyes. He found himself launched skyward, only for the new *illustration* to follow him up into the air. What chased him was an *orc*. An orc whose skin was green instead of gray, and it sprouted wings as it aimed a Dynamancy-infused right fist at him. The large monster

frowned as it surged toward him, but Shiv took the orc back down to earth as he discharged his Momentum Core right into its chest.

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## 74 (II) Burn

74 (II)

Burn

A trail of devastation followed. A new chasm opened behind Shiv as he obliterated entire portions of the already destroyed city, using the orc as a prow. As he crashed through a dozen buildings, paint splattered over him. Paint from the orc. Shiv drove his kukri into its eye, and the orc just sighed.

“Just... stop,” the Educator’s voice came from the orc’s lips. “This is pointless. I have the others. They’re not—”

Shiv caught the orc by the jaw and drove his blade up under its chin before he channeled Conduit of Dawn out from inside its eye. The *illustration*’s every orifice lit up as burning radiance cooked the orc’s skull from the inside, and Shiv crushed the beast’s skull before he launched himself back at the Educators.

There were hundreds of them now, standing on buildings, staring at him with the same annoyed expressions on their faces. A few even had their arms folded or were tapping their shoes on the ground.

**Exposition: What a waste of good paint. Oh, well. When I include him among my illustrations, I’ll have something to replace the orc. I spent months illustrating that one.**

*“We cannot win this battle,”* Rose whispered. Despair consumed her. *“We are trapped. There is no way out—”*

“Shut up and *fight*,” Shiv growled. He didn’t care if the woman was Adam’s mother. If she wanted to break, that was up to her. Shiv intended to stain every page in this incomprehensible dimension using his own blood if that’s what victory demanded.

And there was something else beyond that. Despite Shiv’s all-consuming rage, despite the Educator taking *his people* from him, Shiv wanted to be here. Through everything,

he wanted this fight. He wanted to fight. Always. Forever. Eternally. Hopeless struggle or not, Shiv wasn't going to stop being himself.

He fell toward the city like a meteor—and then the Educators started vanishing. He growled as he realized they were jumping into his perception. Just then, the tall creature that attacked his mind earlier appeared as well. It launched a spell at him—but caught a bone drill in the throat. It went down in a spray of paint just as ten Educators emerged to strike at Shiv.

He shifted out of context. They struck nothing—and the dozens of remaining Educators hiding within his Awareness were knocked free as he sank into his own Vitae. The flames of his very existence sputtered once more, but Shiv took a moment to consider his actions. He observed his enemies, observed the terrain, and he *thought* about what to do next—if only for a second.

The Educators just kept coming. Whatever the god-like entity was, it seemed more than capable of spawning endless copies of the Educator. And more than that, it had other Pathbearers it could summon as well. *Illustrations*, it called them. What Rose conveyed to him was disturbing enough. He had no idea what kind of magic he was dealing with, but not even the Composer could just paint people into being.

*What's the limit?*

And then there was his ability. When he shifted out of context, the world remained, and he could still interact with it, but he couldn't be affected in turn.

*"Your self-existing nature is acausal in the eyes of the System,"* Rose breathed. She was weeping. Blood ran down from her pale, gleaming eyes. *"I am caged within an abomination."*

Shiv ignored her for now—even if she was starting to get on his nerves. Then, just as he found himself on the verge of performing a desperate ambush, he noticed something.

Adam's corrosive rift was still open. The Necromancy infusing the insides were still active. A *terrible* plan developed in his mind. It might literally be suicidal, but he wouldn't know for sure until he tried. And frankly, it was his best means to inflict as much damage as possible in as wide an area as possible.

**Exposition: Why... why am I still here? Who was I fighting? Why did I unleash 122 pages of active illustrations here? And why does my Exposition Skill feel so... lost?**

Shiv released himself from his armor and shot past the Educators falling from the air. He wanted Can Hu away from the blast radius, and he needed to directly clash against the Necromancy for this to work.

Confusion still creased the faces of all the Educators. And it was that very confusion that Shiv exploited a final time as he made a mad, instinctive gambit.

He exploded back across into reality in a blast of Vitae. He hatched out from a veil of crimson and white as he barreled into an unprepared Educator and accelerated down toward the Necromantic rift as he drained vitality through her. The others immediately chased after him, flicking strokes of paint and—

Shiv suddenly stopped dead in the air for seemingly no reason at all. Even as he accelerated, he couldn't go any further.

Then, he noticed on the ground below—a lone, thin pencil stroke marking a Border. Paint struck Shiv from every side as pain tore through his body. Without his armor, he was still adamantine, but there was no outer layering protecting him from the all-consuming pain. He immediately started losing sections of flesh, then muscle, then bone. Everything the paint touched, it *assimilated*.

Shiv tried feeding Adamantine Adaption with rage, but it didn't work. Another spray of color barely hit his head—and Silhouette saved him from an early death again.

## **Silhouette > 72**

He tried going around—only to be struck from above by a massive blow. Shiv grunted but held himself in place using his gravitic field, twisting and catching the limb that struck him. He found himself clutching the claw of a dragon. Unlike the Dragon-Knights, however, this one moved animalistically and operated without the aid of armor or equipment. It tried to channel a blast of flame into Shiv, but he twisted its neck at an angle and used it to burn some of the Educators nearby.

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A surging jet of paint blasted through the side of his hip and disintegrated most of his groin as well. Shiv vomited from the torturous pain, but he kept fighting—even as he felt both his legs fall off. He swung the dragon against the Border Sketch, but it went nowhere either. With a roar of frustration, he blasted forward and shifted out of context again.

This time, he did pass through, but at significant cost. He didn't manage to drain enough earlier, and so he found himself near-empty of vitality almost immediately. He cried out as he strained himself, but this wasn't a thing of effort, it was just a thing of *quantity*.

The skill burned his vitality and left his soul hollow. Right now, he was fast approaching the point of having no vitality to burn.

As Shiv surfaced back into the world, he reached for the slowly closing corrosive rifts where Adam and Uva once were. Darkness crept in around the corners of his eyes. He felt more exhausted than he ever had in his entire life. But he made himself continue. He had to continue, if out of battle-want and spite alone.

## **Momentum Core > 85**

### **Gravitic Wrestler > 118**

*“No more,”* Rose said in the back of his mind. *“Should you dive again, should you burn our life force once more, there will be nothing left of either of us!”*

He ignored her. Pulling on his gravity field one last time, he blasted toward the rift, wondering if he was absolutely mad for planning this, or if it would actually turn out well.

Adam, Uva, Valor, Can Hu, and Sigg were gone. Captured and painted out of... wherever this place was. He didn't know how this dimension worked, what kind of enemy he was facing, or how he was going to exactly stop them. All he had was previous experience to draw upon. Specifically, the experience of how his very being detonated when Confriga struck him with the whip.

The reaction of a Necromancy clashing against his soul was enough to trigger a massive blast. It burned Confriga. It burned a Heroic-Tier enemy. Maybe it could at least disrupt this place.

It was either that or die, resurrect, and hope the enemy didn't just spawn enough mind mages to obliterate his consciousness.

Just then, Rose called out. *“Another is riding your awareness! I can hear her—”*

An Educator appeared in the corner of Shiv's vision. He seized her with his gravitic field and drained her vitality. But not before she slashed his upper chest with a pencil. He lurched to a violent halt as a loud crack sounded from inside him. Something split within his flesh. He tried to breathe, but the damn Border Sketch had parted him from half his lungs.

Then the paint crashed into Shiv. It hurt *bad*, but after his beating at the hands of the dragons, this bad was only so-so. Still, he felt his lower body dissolve into blood as the paint ate at him. The Educator that had halted him with a pencil moved to take his head with a brush stroke. Rose called for Shiv to shift out of context. But he wanted as much vitality inside him as he could when he struck the rift.

So he did something else. He shaped a quick Biomancy and tore his head off his body. His tendons, tissues, bones, and blood vessels came asunder at his command, and with a final surge of effort and a howl of pain, he zipped through the air toward the rift, tumbling with his left cheek forward.



*This is going to hurt even worse*, Shiv thought with snarl.

Behind him, the Educators stared at his headless body with flabbergasted disbelief.

### **Exposition: What in the damnation is—**

Rose couldn't whisper the rest of the exposition to Shiv. He crashed face-first against the corrosive rift, a second before his consciousness would have faded.

The resulting pain was indescribable. For more chapters visit

His Vitae *recoiled* at the Necromancy. The corrosive mana splashed into the waters of his soul-vitality fusion, and it felt like he was being melted apart in a place far deeper than his flesh, but though the corrosion gnawed at the shape of his soul, it couldn't deform him. Rather, Shiv's infused vitality began pushing back like a cornered animal, started growing brighter and getting more volatile.

A considerable part of Shiv's soul *ruptured* open, but from that rupture came a flood of uncontrolled Vitae, like an ocean spilling out from a marble. A pulse of red swept through the painted city of Lost Angeles, and for a moment, the dimension broke. Buildings began to leak paint, and the sky crumbled like a piece of paper.

The Educators and other illustrations took a step back—

And then they started shrieking as a flash of white spread across the land, igniting *everything*.

It was like a star was being born. All colors faded into that devouring white tinged with red. Shiv howled silently through it all, and Rose screamed with him. The left side of her face burned and melted as if someone had poured acid over her as they received a wound upon life and soul. Her left arm and hand developed the very same wounds as well.

But as Shiv staggered away from his charred head as a Revenant, delirious from soul-scarring pain, he caught sight of the immense entity connected to the Educators—bound to them by channels of vitality—and he saw that they were burning as well. The world broke into discordant colors and burning paper. The dimension began to wilt and blacken. The horizon rushed over the city of Lost Angeles as he found himself in another illustration—a gentle farmland flanked by pristine rivers and grazing animals. But this *page* began to burn as well. The flames unleashed by Shiv's combusting soul had spread. They had spread to the unseen god, and they spread across whatever this place was as well.

More pages passed by, and Shiv saw settings and drawings of all styles and kinds. And he also saw them—the Educators. Drawn on page after page. And between them were other beings as well. Dragons. Orcs. Elves. The strange tall creature he faced earlier.

And more things he couldn't name. Most looked unfinished, and they remained still as they burned, but the ones that looked completed screamed with the voice of the Educator as they writhed and burned.

And when they burned, they didn't melt down to paint, but were charred of *flesh*. Shiv had hurt his enemy. He had *wounded* them. He had hurt the unseen god.

Through thought-rending pain, Shiv began to laugh, and Rose stared to him like he was utterly mad.

*I got you... bastard.*

**Vitality Drain > 45**

**Revenant > 39**

**Outside Context Problem > 54**

**Momentum Core > 87**

**Exposition: *BURNS! I'M BURNING! WHISPERER OF DUST AND ASH, I'M BURNING! I NEED—AGH! I RELEASE THIS TOME! I REVOKE MY BLESSING! I WITHDRAW MY POWER! I SEVER THIS SACRED PHYLACTERY!***

And then something snapped around Shiv. It was like all the power in the world was crashing inward, and through the haze, chaos, and his own anguish, Shiv lost all sense of coherence, and a chill washed through him. A chill that came when the flames within drew closer and closer to a final end.

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## 75 (I) Praise

### ***Ambient Mana Stability Threshold***

*The maximum amount of mana that a dimension or designated mana zone can stabilize and process before its localized environment collapses into a state of volatility and chaos.*

*Localized imbalances in Ambient Mana Stability usually result in **mana storms** or the creation of **gates**. The Ambient Mana Stability Threshold also determines the theoretical soft limit for an individual Pathbearer's Tier or a mana core's categorical capacity.*

*Beings that exceed a designated mana zone's Ambient Mana Stability Threshold will typically cause severe and drastic damage to their own skills and their local mana zone whenever they use a skill of an excessive Tier.*

*This will result in a rare instance of direct and extremely vulgar System intervention.*

*Advancing an Ambient Mana Stability Threshold requires years of accumulated conflict for a designated mana zone, or an incursion Quest between multiple dimensions or worlds that will see the defeated side's mana and history fully absorbed.*

*So far, Integrated Earth has prevailed in three separate Incursion Quests...*

-Encyclopedia Apocalyptia

75 (I)

Praise

Valor shuddered as every piece of his fragmented being was spat all over the floor of the teleportation anchor. His skull flared with flame and Necromancy as he felt his limbs again. An outline of his original body flashed, and he rose, manifesting a corrosive blade that he intended to ram into the one who ambushed him.

He had been painted into a book by the adversary—the *Educator*. Barely High Adept in power, he didn't even see the brush and the paint before he drowned, and then he found himself inscribed into a page—conscious but trapped in place. It wasn't the most existentially uncomfortable he had ever been, but it wasn't pleasant. It was like suffocation, but he didn't even get to choke.

While he was imprisoned, however, he deduced several things about his enemy.

The first was that he was fighting someone *godlike*. That was how potent the brush was, so absolute. The way the skill just ignored all his defenses and swallowed him in mind, vitality, and soul was staggering. And the book that she brought with her—before he was infused upon a page, he saw hundreds of animated illustrations pass before him. Entire landscapes that looked as vivid as their real counterparts. The power needed to create such an artifact was Legendary at the very least.

And finally, there was the *presence*. Even as a broken, diminished shadow of himself, he could still sense the jagged presence of an Ascendant by way of his near-crippled Animancy Skill. Where the souls of the Composer and other *true divines* sang with a steady pitch and offered a sense of solidity and stability, an Ascendant's soul felt like it

was filled with jutting shrapnel that constantly clashed together. Valor shook his head. *Gods*. Most of them weren't even Legends before their so-called *apotheosis*. And this Ascendant was especially damaged. A shell of herself, much like Valor was.

But for the undeath of him, Valor couldn't recall a goddess that painted and drew among the Ascendants. If it was because the information was lost with his other soul fragments, or if the Ascendants had inflicted another act of mutilation upon history, he couldn't tell. The part he did know was how dire the trouble they faced was, and that his disciples faced a hopeless struggle before them.

They were Masters and Heroes. System-favored. But gods existed beyond the bounds of the System and invested their powers upon champions for a reason. Gods—and *sufficiently powerful beings* in general—were disruptive for places that had lower mana stability thresholds. If one were to fully manifest and make use of one of their skills, sections of reality would likely collapse, and the System itself would intervene by Quest or vulgar incident to ensure the perpetrator was driven away.

This very well might be the reason as to why the Great One lay slumbering in perpetual half-death. At least that was Valor's hypothesis.

But even without unleashing their full power, a god could channel portions of their divine might through artifacts and individuals that bore their favor. And a portion of even a Legendary-Tier Skill was quite the potent thing.

But as Valor scanned his surroundings to discover just why his great adversary had released him, he was shocked to find himself still in the teleportation anchor. And that the Educator was a smoking pile of flesh at his feet. The woman's flesh bubbled and crackled, with only the white of her teeth still showing. Her robes were drenched in paint, and her brush and pencil were both cracked. The crystal badge on her shoulder had shattered as well.

Less than a meter away, the great tome that projected entire dimensions based on the illustrations contained within and had caged Valor, Siggy, and Can Hu was *ablaze*.

Why was it burning now? Why were they ejected?

The answer came to Valor intuitively. And he didn't like his conclusion at all. *Shiv. He must have deliberately or accidentally come into contact with Necromantic mana. But... To output so much energy that it destroys a Legendary artifact and incinerates the champion of god...*

But where was Shiv?

Uva was seated on the ground with her back against a wall, her eyes wide. Dried blood marred half her face, but there was also a copious amount of paint spilled over her. Behind, her shield drifted, its twitching movements resembling those of a nervous man.

Adam had a Veilpiercer knocked as he breathed hard and fast, one knee to the ground in exhaustion. His eyes were flaring, and Can Hu let out a mechanical groan against the wall beside the anchor's exit. Sigg, meanwhile, had curled into a ball in the corner, muttering to herself.

But—

And then Valor sensed him. He saw the faintest shimmer of a person's outline, but even that was fading fast. What's more, there was a deep, corrosive scar that ridged Shiv's *Vitae*.

"Shiv?" Uva cried out, recovering from her confusion. She looked around for a moment, and her strands immediately shot toward where Shiv's Revenant was. Her other strands reached out to most other members of their group. Can Hu, she simply called out to. As she knelt where Shiv was, her expression twisted from focus to worry, to open terror.

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"His mind is present but unresponsive," Uva said. She directed a strand of mana inward as she began modifying her own mental state—to enforce more control of her spiking dread. Adam looked at her with an equally worried look.

"What does that mean?" Adam asked. He reached out where Shiv supposedly was, but grasped only open air. "Just control him and have him drain our vitalities a bit." Adam paused. "That... won't be permanent, will it, Valor?" The source of this content is

"No," Valor said, willing to offer something of himself as well. "Vitality... It will recover in time. But why isn't he responding? Uva?"

The Umbral's expression hardened into one of pure focus. She sank several strands more into Shiv and pushed them deeper and deeper—

A wail tore out from her lungs. Uva's eyes widened as she bit back a torturous shriek of pain.

"Uva!" Adam reached out, but she pushed his hand aside.

Out of desperation or raw tenacity, the girl pushed herself further into the maelstrom of suffering. Valor could read the anguish on her face, but she kept going. Her fists were clenched so hard that blood was spilling out between the cracks of her fingers.

"Uva..." Adam said again. "Is he still—"

"He's there! He's just not responding!" the Psychomancer shouted. "I just... need..." She bit her lip. "I've never seen this before. I don't know what to do."

Valor approached them, and he drew on what little of his Animancy he could. Once, he was capable of rebuilding broken souls. Once, he could create new entities entirely with enough focus and dedication. Once, he was feared by gods and titans alike.

Once.

Now, as he cast a sliver of pale mana into his favored disciple, he poured it into the corroded soul-scar and... felt it practically do *nothing*.

"Great Valor," Uva gasped. "Please. What do we do? He is fading. I can feel him fading. I cannot—I cannot reach him through the pain. *What do we do?*"

Valor stared at the place where the Deathless was. The once translucent shroud of Shiv's Revenant was almost transparent now. And the Legendary Pathbearer felt more impotent than ever.

"I... don't know," Valor said.

\*\*\*

Existence was pain.

Pain. Every part of Shiv was consumed by pain. His body was a husk and nest of pain. His mind drowned in pain. His soul was lined with pain. At some point, he went beyond constant, silent screaming. He considered going mad from the searing agony, but that didn't help with the hurt, so he turned sane again. Through it all, a single thing kept him grounded, even as he felt himself grow colder.

Rose was crying. Crying from the pain. Crying from all she suffered. Crying from the stress of being *here* in this place—banished from the world and her family and bound to the child who was the cause of her and her unborn daughter's deaths in the first place.

Every time he tried to comfort her, his focus broke. He warred against the hurt as best he could, but this was beyond anything he could imagine. He was at the point where he was looking forward to true death and blissful nonexistence, if only—

*NO!*

Something combusted inside Shiv. He fed rage into his Revenant Skill for the first time, and the pace of the creeping coldness slowed. If the System wanted him to go away for good, then it needed to inflict more than torture on him, because he was going to fight it here too.

*Come on, Rose, Shiv gasped. Get up. We just... We need to...*

*"The pain..." she breathed. "So much... Why..."*

*Because the System's a bastard and... likes it when we writhe. But I can be a harder bastard still. And you too. Get up. Get—*

*“Shiv!”*

He froze. Someone was...

*“Please! Please reach back! Please! I’m right here—don’t... don’t fade—don’t leave—you made me a promise...”*

An echo of Uva’s voice sounded in his mind. And she sounded more terrified than Shiv could remember her ever being. And that was enough. Just enough to give him another push.

He felt... Through the ocean of suffering, he sensed Adam and the others. They were all there, gathered around him. He tried reaching out, but even with him fighting through the hurt, it felt like his body wouldn’t respond, that he just couldn’t move. He fought to reach them, to drain vitality from one of them, but he couldn’t even tell where his hands were.

The flame of his life dwindled. A hollow coldness touched his very core. And Shiv realized it might have been too late. Even with his Feat, even with all his skills, it might have been too late.

He thought about his life as he struggled, as true death closed in. He thought about everyone that hurt him. The War Priest. The people of Blackedge. Roland. Tran. And he thought of Georges, who was the closest thing he had to an actual parent. He thought of Adam, who went from someone that despised him to *whatever* the hell they were now. He thought of Uva, of her mind, her touch, her focus. He followed the strands of her Psychomancy still, even as he wondered if it was all for naught.

*“It’s okay,”* he managed to send to her. *“It was... I enjoyed it... All of it...”*

And he felt her pain. The pain she felt when her mother died. Like something inside her was being torn out slowly, despite her best attempts to stay composed, to endure the hurt. And it wasn’t just her pain, but Adam’s too. He blamed himself. Adam always blamed himself. For everything. And he would never forgive himself if Shiv perished. From Valor came the flavor of bitter impotence, of a man who remembered mending souls in far worse condition than Shiv’s as easily as stitching a wound, but who was now broken himself.

There was no loss like losing oneself, and a Legend among Legends had further to fall from the heights of who they were than most.

*“Pathbearer,”* Can Hu said. *“Endure. Persist. Climb.”*



Selfishly, Shiv found himself proud. He didn't realize his death could ever hurt someone so much. And that just made him try harder. He reached—

Someone took his hand.

But it wasn't Uva's vitality he felt. Nor was it Adam's. Or Valor's. Or Can Hu's.

This hand was *strong*, and the vitality that flooded Shiv was an inferno beyond comprehension. Shiv cried out as the hand grew—and closed tight around his entire body, his entire soul. The left side of Shiv's entire being radiated with hurt, but he forced himself to focus.

Stranger yet, he could feel the hand tightening so much that even time itself halted its flow. His friends froze, and they blurred into the background of his awareness.

He focused on the dense, thick hand that clutched all of him, that allowed him to drain its vitality. Shiv looked up, and he stared. He stared across dimensions. He stared beyond the veil of his world, his reality, to somewhere else entirely, at *something* else entirely, at a place unreachable. The being that held him was no person. For a moment, Shiv's heart dropped as he thought that 811 had found him, even beyond the grave.

But this wasn't 811. 811 was positively tiny compared to the titan that currently clutched Shiv. And 811 was an insect next to this being's vitality, this being's power. Its body consisted of *fire*. Constant, blooming, bursting fire.

It was the fire of Pyromancy, the fire of war, the fire of burning bodies. Beyond the pyre that composed the great beast's insides, its skin was a river of scars. The layered tissue snaked across its flesh, painting mass graves and brutal wounds that co-mingled into a grand canvas. A grand canvas that composed an orc unlike any other. Its eyes, however, were bright and clear. They were like gems in the sky. So pure that Shiv couldn't even look away.

**The Challenger wishes to offer you their congratulations.**

And then the orc smiled as it looked down upon him.

***“Come on, Deathless. IT’S JUST A LITTLE BURN. Nothing to be writhing around about.”***

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## 75 (II) Praise

75 (II)

Praise

***"Besides, you owe one of mine a war. An eternal war. And you owe me a lot more than just a war. You owe me more struggle. You owe me more defiance. You owe me more entertainment. Whom else am I supposed to watch, if not you, someone who spites death so deeply, so cruelly?"***

"You're the Challenger," Shiv managed, forcing the words through his agonized being.

***"That I am," the orc said. "The challenger of all things, myself, my people, other people, even you. And I especially look forward to challenging you. That little trick you do—the acausality skill you have... I look forward to being hit by that. Over and over."***

And with each exchange, Shiv felt more of the beast's vitality flood into him. It was more vitality than he'd ever drunk in before, and it combusted inside him, boiled inside him, and it settled somewhere deep.

***"I'm not one to really offer Blessings, but why not. Why not a Blessing in the form of a Curse? How about it, bruiser?"***

Shiv grunted with annoyance. "Didn't you already give me a Curse?"

The Challenger snorted. ***"That was just something to keep you motivated in life."***

"I think I'm already plenty motivated." Shiv laughed darkly. "And frankly, I hope I never see another orc again."

***"Ah. His casual killing bothered you that much, did it?"***

"He tore a child right out of my hands and murdered him in front of me," Shiv said, his tone hard. "He butchered the weak for fun. And if 812 makes it to me, I'll send him back to you in half the time."

The Challenger grinned. ***"And that's the only way a Pathbearer should be. Spiteful. Defiant. Even in the face of a god."*** He squeezed Shiv a bit tighter, and the Deathless roared with pain as the Challenger rubbed at his soul-wounds.

"Godsdammit," Shiv wheezed, battling to keep his pain under control. "I'm gonna... Someday, I'm going to break you in half for doing that, cruel bastard."

The orc god regarded him for a moment. ***"Is that what you really believe?"*** Shiv expected the orc to go on about some kind of cruel, might-makes-right philosophy. But the challenger just shrugged. ***"Well, if that is what you think, then enforce it. Make that the way of the world, if you can. Come find me, and we'll have our bloody moment, good and proper."***

Shiv eyed the orc god, and something inside him tremored. He could hear Rose speaking somewhere in the backdrop, saying that a *resonant bond* now connected him to the Challenger. "Sure. Just... give me a bit. But I'll come looking for you. Especially if you keep sending orcs after me."

***"Right."*** The orc began to laugh, but then his smile faded, and a mouthful of hard, jagged teeth showed. ***"Stay hard, then, little bruiser. Now. Would you like to hear what I'm going to give you?"***

Shiv shrugged—and nearly doubled over from the pain.

"I Curse you," the titanic orc said, raising Shiv in front of his face, "with the ability to Curse another."

Shiv paused. "What?"

***"You heard me. I give you my privilege of Orcish Bestowal, so that you can spread my skills and my power among those you despise, but only those you see as worthy."***

He considered the orc and blinked. "Is this going to give me another Orcish Skill?"

The orc shook his head. ***"No, I will not make things so easy for you. You've already overcome one skill. You've broken it and reforged yourself anew. You might grow a little too fast and take the struggle out of things. So, I want you to fling my Blessing, my one true Blessing, upon all other beings that you deem troublesome or worthy."***

"And what's the catch? You want me to recruit a certain number of orcs for you? You want me to infect a certain number of people?"

And the Challenger laughed. ***"Just use it as you will, or don't. Whatever you decide, I'm sure it will be interesting, bruiser. You get into too many bloody messes for things not to be."***

"Why do you call me that?" Shiv said. "Bruiser."

***"Because that's what you are. You are practically one of my orcs, except you won't give yourself fully to the delights of pain, cruelty, and violence. You endure as much as you deal. It is such a strange way you live."*** He rubbed Shiv's face with

a finger, nudging at the left side of his body. Shiv snarled, and his eyes rolled from how badly it hurt. He cursed at the Challenger. The damned orc god was just like his children. He saved Shiv, but just had to torture him. He couldn't help it. The cruelty was in his nature.

Slowly, the Challenger pulled his finger away.

"I'm going to get you for that when we have our moment too," Shiv growled, vicious anger burning in his eyes.

And the Challenger simply sighed. ***"And that's why you're a bruiser. Because when you get hit, your only response is to hit the damn thing back. What a righteous way to live. What a precious way to be. What a beautiful way to burn."***

Shiv laughed. He was about to tell the orc to go pound sand, but then he paused. He paused, and he considered something. They were still going to have to deal with Gate Lord Confriga before this was over, and Confriga was already out of control on a good day. With an Orcish Skill...

***"Ah, and there it is. He's thinking. He sees it. The comedy. I knew you would get there."***

"Why?" Shiv coughed. "Why do you want me to use it on Confriga?"

***"Because I have a vision of things. A vision of you beating other hard bastards, fists to fist, blade to blade." The Challenger snorted. "That fake excuse of a god you sent running just now was pathetic. Pathetic for not taking power for herself. Pathetic for running when she could have stayed and fought. Pathetic because a little pain bothered her. She's not like us. I would have gone down to the bone with you. I would have stayed and burned, just like you were willing to gouge your soul."***

The Challenger drew in a deep breath and sighed. ***"Because the System demands strife, and I absolutely love my life. I love the bad odds, the desperate gambits, and the vicious plays. I love the mighty challengers and nasty brawls. It's all wonderful to me. I love every day that I'm alive to fight and rage and war. Because what's the point if there's no tension? No struggle? Why change if you're not being pushed to the limit? Why even be?"***

"Some people just want to live quiet lives," Shiv said. "Might not be me, but some. They should get to do that without being forced into suffering or getting butchered." Fresh chapters posted on .net

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***“Why?”*** The Challenger snorted again. ***“The System doesn’t respect the soft. It doesn’t care for the weak. Why is anything up to them?”***

Shiv scowled. “I didn’t say anything about it being up to them. I’m just saying this is how I see things. I’m not a philosopher, either. But I will fight for the ones who can’t. Because there’s a lot of damned difference between liking the struggle and being a bastard. Like you. Like the other orcs. I’ve seen enough of your kind. It might make Confriga lose control, but I don’t need him sloppy to beat him. I’ll break him whatever state he’s in, however many deaths it takes, whatever he has to give. You can keep your bestowal, because I’m going to tell you right now, I intend to kill orcs, not make more of them.”

The Challenger threw its head back and laughed. It was louder, by far, than anything Shiv had ever endured. Marikos was practically a newborn kitten beside the orc. But Shiv didn’t flinch. He didn’t shake from whatever was about to come. If he were a concrete pillar on the inside before, all his tribulations and triumphs made his will adamant as well. He just got done dealing with one god’s bullshit; he wasn’t about to be made into the idiot aide to another.

***“You know what, I’ve changed my mind as well.”*** The Challenger lowered his huge face and smiled sweetly at Shiv. ***“True bruisers like you should get something even more special than just a Curse-bestowal Blessing. Something suited to them. Well. I got just the thing. What you did with the Jealousy was inspired. And I think more people should enjoy the pain and damage you drink up so willingly. So, here. Give them a taste.”***

And then the Challenger pressed his massive thumb into Shiv’s chest. The Deathless cried out as something was branded upon him. But he wasn’t the only one who burned. The Challenger’s chest seared as well, and the orc laughed as Shiv fought with all his might not to scream. The pain he suffered before became *unspeakable*. It was so much greater than before, and the effect felt like it lasted a lifetime. But slowly, Shiv fought his way out through that haze of torment as well. By the end, he coughed and gasped, but he was more annoyed at the Challenger’s continuous chortling than anything.

“What was that supposed to—”

**Blessing Gained: Icon of the Painrinker - Allows the Pathbearer to manifest the icon from their body. The icon will magnify the damage and pain Pathbearers and all nearby enemies and objects suffer.**

***“Here,”*** the Challenger breathed. Shiv looked down at his chest, and he saw a glowing mark there. A glowing mark that resembled an orc’s claw reaching into an open flame. ***“Suits you more, bruiser. I really look forward to seeing you use it on me.”***

Shiv chuckled. “You’re a real masochist, aren’t you?”

***“Just someone that likes to cultivate a proper challenge in time. Keep fighting. Keep defying. Keep surviving.”*** Then, the Challenger paused as he got close. ***“And watch out for the Ascendant rats. All of them. They’re not proper gods. They’re barely proper Pathbearers, and they’ll do anything to avoid a real war. But you can break them. They’re afraid to lose. They’re afraid to die and to hurt. So keep going. Use yourself as kindling. Make yourself a bomb. Go where they refuse to go and drag their fucking mongrel hides to the deep waters and watch them drown.”***

The orc god had so much passion in his voice that Shiv was taken aback. He had also stopped squeezing Shiv, which was a welcome change. “What do you know about them?” Shiv asked. Despite everything, the Challenger was pretty aware of things, and Shiv thought—

***“I’ll let you discover that for yourself,”*** the god grunted. ***“I’m not going to take your struggle away from you. But here’s something that might give you a taste of things. Twelve of the shits are about to go to war with one of their own, and the Starhawk’s going to need a godsdamned fucking miracle if he wants to succeed in his little noble crusade.”***

The Challenger paused for emphasis, then smiled. ***“Or maybe just a hard kid who doesn’t stay dead. But you watch out for the coward you just fought. She is still weak. Just weak enough that she can descend upon existence without cracking the fragile little egg that is your world, and she’ll be coming at you again from directions you won’t even be able to imagine. And the same trick won’t work twice.”***

“Then I’ll figure out new ones,” Shiv replied. “Or maybe I’ll just get powerful enough to break her for good.”

The icon on his chest faded, and the Challenger nodded approvingly. ***“Maybe you will. And maybe I’ll be watching. Now. Resurrect. Get out there and rip this gate apart. Break everyone in your way, and make the survivors wake howling your name, forsaking sleep evermore just to avoid the presence of you even in their minds. And most of all... Have fun, and remember that you are loved.”***

“Yeah, about that,” Shiv said with a scowl. “You and 812 are going to regret ever doing that.”

***“Loving you? Not unless you go soft on us, bruiser. I’ll be leaving you now, but I’ll be here, watching. Can’t wait to see whatever you do next.”***

With a detonation of immense force and an echoing chuckle, the Challenger faded out of sight, and Shiv could hear Uva screaming into his mind. Shiv could feel his vitality surging through him, but he still needed a bit more to recompose. He reached out and



took Uva's hand—took Adam's hand—and with a final cry, he rose out from death and broke free of his resurrective cocoon.

As he tore free from the embrace of death, however, a blast of white and crimson came with him as his Outside Context Problem Skill tremored inside him. Just before his soul stabilized, the distorted shape of a woman emerged. Rose Van Erren extended out from Shiv to reach for her son.

***“ADAM!”*** she cried, drowning the room with her wail. ***“MY CHILD! MY HEART! I—”***

And then she crashed back into Shiv's Vitae with a cry of despair.

But tragically, only Shiv could sense her presence. Uva couldn't see her. Adam didn't even react. Valor tilted his head slightly, but aside from that, he didn't do anything.

Inside Shiv, he heard Rose begin to weep, and he felt bad for her in a way he never knew he could for another person.

*Why... Why... What did I do to suffer this? He was right there. And I couldn't touch him. I couldn't even hold him. Why...* She alone sobbed inside Shiv, his very existence her prison.

At the same time, her suffering was juxtaposed with Uva desperately wrapping her arms tight around Shiv's neck and planting a quick kiss on his lips. Meanwhile, Adam awkwardly reached out and placed a hand on the Deathless's shoulder, while Can Hu nudged him with a few rocks.

Shiv smiled. It was good to be among people who loved you. Who truly, desperately wanted you to stay with them. And Shiv realized just then what kind of hell it would be if he were to be banished from these people, if he were forced to watch them through a layer of separation as if a specter. As if he were Rose Van Erren.

*Rose, listen, I'll do what I can to get you out, Shiv promised. And I'll tell Adam. I'll show him my memories as soon as I can.*

*It will not work, she sniffled. So long as I remain within you, they will not be able to sense me. I am beyond the context of outer reality, and I am fused to this skill. We will need an Animancer to have any hope at all. One without peer.*

And just then, Shiv's attention turned to Valor. But before he could do that, he hissed and nearly doubled over from agony. The left side of his body felt seared and flayed. As he looked down at his flesh, he groaned in disgust. He was badly burned—the skin so corroded it was beyond the point of disfigurement. Pulses of intense pain washed through his entire left side, and Shiv fought not to double over.



Uva cupped the right side of his face, and he saw the concern in her eyes. “Composer, Shiv, you...” As he pulled his armor away, she saw his burns and stepped away in horror.

“Yeah, so...” Shiv swallowed, trying not to reveal just how bad he felt at that moment. “I did a Necromancy field test on myself.” He stared at the Educator’s great tome, still burning nearby. “The blast was pretty big, and I got a useful piece of data. When I touch a Necromancy spell, I can blow up hard enough to burn a god.”

“A god,” Adam said, breathing quickly. “Was that what we just fought? Was that who that was? And how did she know so much about us? Why was she talking about my mother? And your parents?”

Valor’s apparition walked over to the tome and, with a mutter of effort, picked it up. Holding the badly charred book in his hands, he turned to look at Shiv’s mutilated state as he flipped through the pages. Then, Valor paused and suddenly flipped back to a specific page. “I... Well. This is... I recognize some of these people... Thaen is here too...”

“What?” Adam asked, stepping closer to Valor, apprehension straining his body language. “Valor. What is happening?”

“I think our enemy left us a ruined Legendary item,” Valor said. “A ruined Legendary item that belonged to an Ascendant that should no longer exist.” Slowly, he turned the book and showed the others an illustration. He showed them a picture of twenty people standing before the great Abyssal Chasm at Lost Angeles.

And one among them looked familiar. One among them wore the robes of a certain scholar.

“Shiv,” Valor breathed. “You might have just recovered a piece of *true* history relating to the Ascendants.”

“Yeah.” Shiv winced. “And all I needed to do was destroy half my soul to get it.”

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