

Deathless 76

Chapter 76 (I) Tome [I]

There are few powers more vaunted across Integrated Earth, and indeed all Integrated dimensions, than Chronomancy.

For this lore allows one to manipulate the flow of time, to twist and bend the very fabric of history, or so it would seem.

In reality, most times, Chronomancers simply do light adjustments to time, mostly affecting themselves, allowing them to transpose themselves back to a certain point in time that relates to space, or perhaps accelerating their movements while slowing others to a crawl. More commonly, they also skip ahead seconds in the future.

But Chronomancy is an immensely difficult power to wield, and even those with incredible amounts of power in multiple Skill Evolutions within Chronomancy find themselves exhausted, spent, and ultimately unable to reshape the past should they attempt to do so.

Reaching back in time incurs the System's wrath, but it does not trigger punishment directly. Rather, changing the past requires more mana than even the greatest gods possess.

Additionally, altering the past inevitably leads you to go against a dimension's Mana Stability Threshold. Because changing the past attacks the very foundations of the history that shapes a skill, the skills of countless people. Or the history that shapes a mana core or world...

As such, attempting to change the past in a vulgar manner leads to the catastrophic collapse and inevitably the destruction of whatever you're attempting to change.

No, if the past and history are to be changed, they are to be changed in more subtle ways, such as the mass rewriting of culture and mind. This, by far, is the more effective way of altering history.

Maybe... maybe that's my way back home. Maybe if everyone forgets about me first, I can finally attempt another jump...

-[Notes of a Retconned Chronomancer]

Shiv sealed away the left side of his body in a thin layer of bone. He coated his arm and leg, poured the malleable adamantine down along the hand he used to hold the Magebreaker, and finally made a mask to shield the left side of his face. By this point, it looked and felt like someone had spent the better part of a year cooking on one side of his body.

Uva gave him a brief glance at what he looked like from her perspective, and it was bad enough to nauseate Shiv himself. "Well, now at least I don't look like a half-melted plastic doll anymore."

He did his best to hide how much pain he was in with the joke, but Uva bit her lip as she looked at him. He could feel how miserable she was at not being able to do enough. She blamed herself on some level for not being there at the end, for not being strong enough to spare him from performing that act of Necromantic self-mutilation. Shiv, comparatively, was pretty glad she and Adam weren't there at all.

“Uva,” Shiv said, biting back a mental groan. He also gently prodded her with his weak Psychomancy, keeping her away from the deeper sections of his mind. He could feel her strands reaching for his pain. He didn’t want her to suffer any more of that. “There was no chance we could have won that fight. It was good that you and Adam got painted and taken away. The blast was huge, and the only ones who needed to burn were me and whatever the hell was controlling the Educator. I don’t regret it. I’d do it again—I’d light my entire soul on fire if it meant the damned Ascendant would burn.”

“And to save all of us again,” she said. She briefly reached out and squeezed his right hand. “You give too much. There is no hiding your pain from me. I am in your mind. I can feel how much it hurts.”

“I can take it,” Shiv spoke into her mind with a shrug. Because that was the truth of it. Pain was just a feeling, but hurting a god—even a forgotten one—was the prize. And keeping Adam, Uva, and everyone else safe was his responsibility. He was Deathless. He could and would take the hits. He would bleed with the enemy so they didn’t have to.

That thought turned Uva’s insides to jelly. As she looked at him with an intense expression on her face, she let out a shuddering breath. “I know.” Something smoldered inside her, then. It yearned to burn more and lose control, but she contained it for now. “I saw some other things as well. Things I—” She briefly eyed Adam as Valor pointed out a page in the tome to the Young Lord. “Shiv, what happened during that fight? For entire stretches of time, I couldn’t remember you at all. It was like you were a blank in my mind. What was that?”

“A new bullshit skill,” Shiv muttered. He turned his attention inward, but felt Rose just sigh. Despair emanated from her every fiber.

She cannot notice me, Rose said. I am no longer a thing that lives in the true world. I am only a fragment that exists within you. And here, things are... entirely separated. Distorted. Lost.

True to Rose's words, Uva didn't even notice the woman's presence. But she did notice Shiv was thinking about her. "This is... I've never been this confused looking into someone's mind before; it's like entire parts of you are blank." Uva's eyes flashed with a spark of mana, and her frown deepened. "I cannot see your skill status anymore either."

"Yeah," Shiv grunted. "Also a result of the new skill. I got a lot of things to tell all you guys. But we should wait for Valor to finish explaining what he just discovered first—" A sudden jolt of searing pain nearly made him double over again. Uva caught him by the arm, and her presence was motivation enough for Shiv to stay upright. "It's okay... I'm okay." He noticed the rest of the group staring at him. Adam's expression was positively wretched. "I'm okay. Just... keep talking, Valor."

The Young Lord licked his lips. "Shiv, maybe you should—"

"The Woundeaters don't work. Not on these wounds. Nothing works on these wounds. They'll get better. I just need to face it right now. But I'll be fine. In time." He reached out and slightly punched Adam in the shoulder with his left hand. Pain exploded through his body, but Shiv just gritted his teeth. He knew that was coming. He did it anyway. Shiv wasn't going to change how he acted just because of a little pain. "And wipe that sad puppy look off your face. It's not your fault."

"I should have done better," Adam muttered. "I should have kept my hand on the rapier. I should have—"

"Adam," Shiv said, gripping the man by his neck and shaking him playfully. "Shut up. No self-pity. And don't pity me, either. Way I see it, I just lit a god on fire thanks to you."

Adam just stared at Shiv for a long moment. His eyes were wide, and his hair—dammit, he looked so much like Rose from this angle. There wasn't a single doubt about her being his mother.

Adam... Rose said, her voice hoarse with sorrow. I love you. My son... My dear boy. I didn't get long enough to...I wish you could hear me.

He will, Shiv thought. I'll find a way to fix this. I'll find a way to get you out. Or I'll find someone that can fix this. He eyed Valor, who was now looking back at him with curiosity as well. The flames within the Pathbearer's sockets were glowing intensely. Or maybe I just need to put that someone else back together first.

"Are you well enough to listen?" Valor asked.

"Yeah," Shiv said. "Keep going."

Valor nodded. And that was all that needed to be exchanged between them. Something told Shiv that Valor had done more than just burn his own soul to attain victory in the past. You didn't become a Legendary Pathbearer by fleeing from discomfort or pain.

"Very well," Valor said. He held the book high and gestured to the illustrated page he had shown them earlier. The edges were badly burned, and there were traces of corrosion at certain places, but Shiv found himself looking at a life-like recreation of twenty people standing before the Abyssal chasm, with one among the twenty being the Educator. Or at least someone dressed just like her.

Then Shiv noticed another thing about the twenty: they were all chained to each other. The material of the bindings appeared to be mithril, and the surrounding ruins of Lost Angeles looked different. In fact, while the city was clearly an old ruin at its core, parts of it looked... rebuilt. Shiv had delved into the remains of the old city, and he knew a good part of it by heart. It was a broken and dead place like no other. A place of echoes and old history—the ghost of what mankind was before the System's arrival.

And this wasn't that Lost Angeles. Not even close. What the illustration showed was a place slowly coming back to life. What happened here?

"Many of my memories were scattered along with my soul," Valor began as he traced a crystalline, skeletal finger across the page. But rather than stopping at the Educator, Valor pointed to someone far to her right. Shiv couldn't see any of their faces, as the drawing's perspective was back-facing, but the one Valor pointed at was clearly a man. A man with a longbow slung around his chest. "But I recognize this one. I think I fought him at least once. And I believe we had a conversation at some point. The exact details escape me now, but I am sure this is Thaen. The Starhawk

."

Adam's jaw tightened. Valor had clearly told him about this earlier in their discussion, but the Young Lord still had an expression of disbelief on his face. "I—the church said that before his ascension, he had long and flowing hair. Like a curtain of midnight." He hesitated. "I asked my father about him once, but he never described our patron god in detail. Only his deeds."

"That is because he likely never knew the Ascendant as a mortal," Valor replied. "But I did. This is him. And this book... It is likely something similar to Starhawk's Perch. A Sacred Phylactery that is meant to serve as a stable outlet for their power and keep them bound to this dimension."

The Young Lord's expression only grew more severe. "Explain."

"The Ascendants are not true gods. Not in the sense of the Challenger, or even a demigod like the Composer." Valor deliberately looked at Shiv when he mentioned the former. The Deathless realized the Legendary Pathbearer likely knew about his Blessing. "Their Ascension came suddenly and with an announcement from the System. And the System rarely declares someone to be a god. The only times I remember this happening were when I was traveling across other worlds. Worlds with far higher mana

thresholds than ours, ruled by entities that can impose their power on the System itself to make decrees and changes for entire dimensions or worlds.”

“You are saying someone else made the Ascendants gods?” Adam asked.

“I outright suspect the Great One anointed your Ascendants with the status and power of divinity,” Valor replied with a dark chuckle.

“But how—that’s not what the church said.” Adam’s eyes darted about the room as he struggled to process what the Legendary Pathbearer was saying. “They said that the thirteen each proved themselves to the System and ascended in a grand Quest to save our world. To save Integrated Earth itself. Even Father has never denied this.”

Valor hummed. “And it might be a partial truth. There must be some pattern of consistency to follow for a faith, after all. But look at this page. Look at their number. Twenty. Twenty, rather than thirteen. With one among their number being the god that attacked us. One you and even I have never heard of.”

“Yeah,” Shiv grunted, bracing himself to reveal some very uncomfortable details. “About that. I tried draining the Educator’s vitality, and... Well, she was hollow. She isn’t a real person. Frankly, she’s more of an animated illustration than anything. When I drained her, I just ended up siphoning vitality from that massive, shrouded god. The one we briefly saw in the children’s painting.” He drew in a breath. “Uva. Can you show everyone my memories from the fight?”

She nodded, but as she delved into him, she paused. “There are... pieces missing here as well. Like stretches where you do not exist.”

“Yeah,” Shiv said with a sigh. “I kind of expected that. It has to do with my new skill.” There was nothing for it. Adam needed to know, and Shiv wasn’t the kind to keep hiding things from people if he could help it. “Adam. My Foreshadowing Skill came from your mother. I don’t know how, but the Educator said it was from her soul and somehow ended up inside me.”

The Young Lord looked like someone had just slapped him across the face, but he nodded. “I heard what the Educator said, but I thought she was just trying to break my focus.”

“She was probably trying to do that too, but she also wasn’t lying. And she kept attacking me with visions.”

“That’s how she stunned you at the start?” Uva asked. She blinked rapidly. “I thought she was simply using a subtler form of Psychomancy than I could perceive.”

“No. But she did attack me with a Psychomancer who was of a race I couldn’t recognize. It was tall and thin. Maybe Master-Tier. Not nearly as powerful as you or the Jealousy. It was an illustration as well. After you both were painted away, I was attacked by hundreds of illustrations. Most of them were other Educators, but there were dragons and orcs, and they all had their own skills.”

“That is likely a Legendary Skill. At the least.” Valor’s words came as a whisper. “To recreate another Pathbearer as a living painting is power beyond what most can fathom.”

“Yeah, but there were limits. She needed to finish the painting.” Shiv paused. “She also could designate boundaries to the world with strokes of a pencil. It was pretty damn strange. And real annoying.”

“How did you even survive long enough to cast yourself against my rift?” Adam murmured.

“That’s partially the Educator’s fault,” Shiv said. “She tried to make me develop Exposition by hitting me with so many visions at once. Foreshadowing leveled pretty quick, and I killed myself to try and break free. But when I did, and I reached the Skill Evolution, the System gave me an Error notification, and I failed to evolve Foreshadowing into Exposition.”

“What? Why?” Uva asked. “You failed? I—failing a Skill Evolution... It’s practically unheard of.”

Valor let out a breath. “It failed because of Shiv’s soul... His soul and vitality cannot be separated.” Seeing the confusion on the group’s faces, Valor continued. “This is a skill that accesses the collective history of an entire dimension with your own. It feeds you details from the deeds others have performed—and allows you to tap into it at will. But the shape of the skill leaves one’s soul with a jutting edge, so to speak. An edge that extends beyond their vitality and mana field. It must remain connected to the surrounding dimension to constantly receive more details. But you do not have a pure soul or vitality. Yours is Vitae, one fused to another.”

“Yeah, something like that.” Shiv grimaced as he remembered how bad it hurt when the skill hatched inside him. “It felt like my soul was breaking...”

“Like your insides were being remolded, and your bones were shifting and slicing you from deep within?” Valor asked.

Shiv raised an eyebrow at the aptness of the description. “Exactly.”

“That is the feeling of a skill shattering,” Valor said.

“Well, it didn’t stay shattered,” Shiv replied. “It adjusted itself and ended up becoming Outside Context Problem.”

Chapter 76 (II) Tome [I]

“What kind of skill is that?” Adam asked.

“I have... no idea,” Valor said. “I have never heard of such a skill before. At least, I cannot remember.”

“Me neither,” Uva muttered, but she was looking at Shiv with deeper concern now. “And this skill is the reason behind those missing patches of time? Your lost memories?”

“They’re not lost to me,” Shiv said. “And the skill, it... uh...” He looked at Adam and grimaced. “I don’t know how to describe this without sounding insane or hurtful, but I think it ended up resurrecting part of your mother, Adam. Rose Van Erren is attached to the skill and trapped inside me.”

The room fell silent. Adam’s jaw opened slightly as his face started contorting. Before the Young Lord could say anything, Shiv kept going.

“Before you ask me if this is a joke or if I’m just trying to mock you, no. That’s—it’s what I have experienced. But none of you can see her, because the skill is... It’s... it’s acausal? Like it makes me not exist for a while in the real world. I slip into my own Vitae and basically leave the context of—dammit, I’ll just show you.”

“Shiv, wait—” Uva began.

But Shiv didn't. He shifted into his Vitae for just a beat. The world went gray. Adam was still staring blankly, a stunned expression on his face that became one of absolute confusion as Shiv vanished. His expression spread to everyone else as they stared off into the space where Shiv used to be.

"What... What were we doing just now?" Adam asked.

Uva's strands twitched in the air, and they curved back at her, as if she were lost. "I think I was just linked to someone."

Valor said nothing.

Shiv felt a bit colder, and so he moved to return. But before he did, a cry came from behind him. "Wait!"

Shiv paused as he turned to look at Rose. It was unnerving how detailed she looked, despite being entirely shaped by his Vitae. It was like the skill remembered how she dressed, the way she preferred her hair, and it even managed to portray how she cried. But its colors were only white and red, and so her tears ran like blood instead of water. "Tell him that I read him 'Hark! Little Sparrow' every night. He was young, but he should remember. Tell him that it was my favorite thing to say 'bark bark bark' and make him correct me. Tell him he used to get so mad and that I love him and that I—I—"

"I'll tell him," Shiv promised. And just as it started getting too cold, he resurfaced into the real world.

Everyone flinched back at his reappearance. Off by the side, Siggy cried out in terror. Shiv felt a stone crack into the back of his head as Can Hu launched something at him. Uva pierced into his mind while Adam prepared an arrow—only to freeze as his eyes widened in recognition of who he was aiming at.

“Stop!” Valor cried out. “Stop! That’s—Shiv! Shiv? How did you... What did you do?”

“I left reality,” Shiv said, fully honest. “I don’t really know how it works, but it does. It leaves me unaffected by things. It makes people forget I ever existed—like how it’s all affecting you just now. But it also burns my vitality. It burns it badly. Right now, it’s taking me some focus to just stay upright.”

He finished, and he realized he was wheezing. Outside Context Problem was powerful. But damn did it come at a steep cost. “I think I can kill myself for good if I overuse this skill. And I think... I think I can feel my vitality slowly coming back, but I need to drain something if I want to recover faster.”

“And that’s how you avoided the god for so long,” Valor deduced. He sounded more excited than ever before. “That’s how you survived. You left the context of reality. You are capable of acausality. The Necrotechs—no, any of the Five Faiths would kill to possess someone like you right now. I—if only my Animancy was better... I need to examine your very nature when I am more restored. This...” Valor trailed off. “I remember... I remember my son was trying to build something like this. A self-referential soul. Someone that could pull themselves out of the world while still moving within its confines.”

And there was something else Shiv needed to talk about. “Rose intercepted some of the god’s Exposition. She... The Educator mentioned your son by name. Udraal Thann. She’s working with him. She wanted to give you all to him for System-knows what reason. And she wanted to modify my soul directly for some purpose. Or something. She was definitely trying to get me to develop Exposition for a reason.”

Now, it was Valor’s turn to react like someone just slapped him. And Shiv still wasn’t done. “Adam. Look at me.” The Young Lord did. With wide eyes, a shaken expression, and dilated pupils. “I don’t know why this happened. I don’t know how your mother ended up inside my Vitae. But I’ll do everything I can to

get her out. When I shifted out of context, she said that she used to read you Hark! Little Sparrow every night, and she would say—”

“Bark, bark, bark...” Adam swallowed. “I... I remember... It is one of the few things I remember.” His nostrils flared. He looked to Uva. “Did—did you ever—”

“No,” she responded summarily, firmly, but gently. “I told you. I would never reach into your mind like that against your will. And you are responding in a state of shock. I can feel it radiating from you. Shiv could not have learned this from me. I would not know where to look. And he does not have the skill to delve so deep...”

“I’m not lying,” Shiv continued. “I wish I was, but I’m not. I’m sorry. She wants you to know that she loves you, and she wishes she could hold you.”

A single tear dropped from Adam’s left eye. He failed to catch it in time. “I need... I need...”

“Adam,” Shiv stepped forward, but he stopped as Adam’s face twisted into an expression of pure heartbreak and torment.

“Please, just... give me... some space... a moment...” Adam barely croaked out the words as he hurried out of the teleportation anchor, stumbling along the way.

Shiv wanted to go after him. Rose screamed for him to go after Adam from the inside. But then Valor put a hand on his shoulder. Shiv turned around, and Valor handed him the tome. “Put this into your cloak for now. We will need to investigate it more thoroughly. I will make sure he does not do anything truly foolish in the meantime. For now, keep your distance. He will need some time to adjust to this truth. As will I, with the knowledge of my son’s involvement.”

"It's ugly, but it's the truth," Shiv said. "I don't think we have time to put this off. And you all deserved to know."

Valor paused, looked at him, and nodded. "Yes. And I approve of the honesty. But this is a wound his heart struggles to endure. Space. Time. Kindness. Give those things to him. He will come back when he has had a moment to mend."

Shiv thought back to how Adam went out to hunt weeks back after their argument in the umbral wilderness. "Yeah. Okay. Just... keep him safe."

Valor hummed and went off into the dark after the Young Lord.

Shiv was about to say something else when he snarled as terrible pain flared across the left side of his body. "Shit. Okay. Come, Shiv. This is nothing. Just a little sting. Just a little..." But it wasn't. He had to actively fight the hurt, because there was another special quality to this pain: It was constant. Unceasing. It only had two modes: searing or flaring, with things usually as searing.

I'm going to need to stay busy, Shiv thought. Distract myself from the hurt. Dammit, this is going to make casting spells hard. Can barely focus...

"Maybe I can help," Uva said. Her mind slipped over his again, and he felt her reaching for the part of him that experienced pain. But he caught her Psychomancy with his own, weak as his field was.

“No,” Shiv said. “Don’t. Don’t reach in. Don’t bind yourself to that. There's no reason for you to feel it too. I don't want to see you hurt.”

“Then the feeling is very much mutual,” she said. Her stare was hard and unflinching. She wasn’t going to budge on this. “Let me help. Let me in.”

Something inside Shiv melted at the look she was giving him. “It hurts pretty bad.”

“Pain is not something I fear,” she replied.

“I know,” Shiv breathed. “I, uh, didn’t really get to the part about getting a second Blessing before everything broke down. Maybe I should have started with that.”

“Second Blessing?” Uva’s brow furrowed.

“Yeah, the Challenger—the orc god... He might be the only reason I’m not dead. He let me drain him, gave me a Blessing, and said that he expects us to get bloody at some point.”

Uva just gave a slight, disbelieving scoff. “Unbelievable. You... you really are favored. With the benefits and torments that entails.”

Shiv just shrugged. “He branded me with something called the Icon of the Paindrinker. It makes the damage and pain I experience worse, but everyone around me suffers the same effects too. I think he

expects me to use it on him at some point. Godsdamned orcs. He's probably watching us now. Just chuckling and clapping. See how much he does that when I eventually split his skull open."

Uva's mouth opened slightly. "Well. That's... I suppose I should start versing myself in the psychology of an orcish mind."

"What? Why?" Shiv asked.

"Because we will probably be fighting a great many orcs down the line," she said. "I'm not letting you go to war against the orc god alone if that's what's in our future."

We. Our. The way she immediately said those words, casually accepting the binding of their fates... Something inside Shiv burned hot, and it wasn't the searing pain eating at the left side of his body.

And his thoughts caused a chain reaction inside her. It drove her wild that she could provoke this in him, and they both went past a certain precipice of self-control just then. But while he was distracted, she reached into his mind and burrowed deeper. She tied part of herself to his pain, and immediately, it didn't feel so bad anymore. But his Biomancy let him feel how Uva's body tensed, how tightly she clenched her teeth. She was fighting to keep herself from screaming.

"Too much," Shiv said, reaching out to take her hand. "Less. Pull back a bit more." She met his gaze, and he saw her reluctance. "We still need you. We're not taking this gate without you. And you're not going to be casting well while barely coherent from pain. It's enough. The fact that you're willing to reach in is enough..."

Slowly, reluctantly, she withdrew, and the bulk of the pain crashed back into him. There was just a bit that she siphoned off. He didn't know how she did that, but she completely directed it into her, and it was still enough to make her shiver from the muscle strain. But still, she forced a cool, composed look and cocked her head. "I don't know what you were complaining about earlier. You had worse. Six out of ten."

Shiv laughed. And his want for her became unbearable. And across the link, he felt a similar raging desire inside her as well. They looked at each other. Uva's gaze darkened. Shiv swallowed. "Can Hu. Me and Uva are gonna... We're going to scout the building. Make sure that no one heard anything, and... Yeah."

Can Hu's optical lenses flickered at Uva, then at Shiv. Something of a mechanical chuckle sounded from the Penitent. "Leave the tome here, Pathbearer. It will be most helpful if one of us reviews its contents while the rest of us are recovering. I will watch our undefined prisoner of war-unwilling conspirator in the meantime as well."

Siggy's eyes were wide, and the goblin was beyond terrified at all that she had experienced. She was still shaking in the corner of the room, not having said a single coherent word since the Educator's attack.

Shiv took Uva by the wrist, and they departed the anchor too. Somehow, he managed to fight through his pain and shape a spell. He found a place in the levels above that lacked any bugs and rodents, and as soon as he did, his patience shattered. He swept Uva off her feet and grunted as he ignored the exploding patches of torment rushing down his left arm. "Taking too long."

She gasped but wrapped her arms around his neck as they accelerated along the excavated pathway leading to the hidden teleportation anchor. As they slipped out from Shiv's tarp, he liquefied the bone coverings he used to coat his corroded flesh. Then, he tore away his mask and gave up on avoiding pain altogether. "The hells with this thing too." It hurt worse than hell when he snaked his arm behind her back, but the pain could go eat shit. Feeling her lips against his was more than worth it.

“Shiv,” she rasped. “Your wounds...”

“Aren’t going to keep me from doing anything.” He blasted through a set of doors, and dust rose into the air in a swirling dance as they jolted around a corner with another pulse of his field. Soon, they found themselves in a dark, cool monitoring room overlooking stacks of rusted containers through a dirty, cracked window.

The setting was far from romantic. Frankly, it was even kind of creepy, but neither Uva nor Shiv cared. Her hands snaked under his shirt, nails raking down the good side of his back, her palm resting against his chest. He growled as he fumbled against her armor. He didn’t want to just tear it off of her—even though every fiber of his being screamed for him to hurry so he could feel her bare skin on his sooner. His frustrated growl turned into a hoarse cry of pain as his arm flared again. Uva briefly pulled away from him with concern in her eyes, and she looked at his injuries with a disturbed expression. “Your wounds...”

“They hurt. They hurt constantly. But they don’t hurt anywhere near bad enough compared to how much I want you.”

Uva’s breath hitched, and her gaze turned ravenous. She helped him with the shedding of her armor. Whatever dominion pain held over Shiv’s mind was usurped by burning desire as he and Uva savored each other.

And between instances of intimate heat, gasping breaths, and sweet-nothings exchanged, a faint presence called out from inside Shiv, trying to get his attention.

But he was too far gone. As was Uva. For a while, all they knew was each other. All they felt was each other. And if incredible, unceasing pain couldn't distract them from their urges, what hope did the ghost of a long-dead Diviner have?

Chapter 77 (I) Tome [II]

Necromancy deals merely in the echoes of what is lost. It deals in the twisting and corroding of concepts and matter. A wandering scholar I traded notes with once theorized that Necromancy was simply the System's way of replacing entropy with something it could wield. Because the System does not want us to die or dissolve, but to endure, if only as shadows of who we were. And this results in the Necromancer becoming the shaper of ruins, and it is why most Necromantic constructs are filled with such violence, such depravity.

Because the best parts of the being are eroded and gone. Because the strongest layer of the soul is shattered and disintegrated. Perhaps the more accurate term for Necromancy, then, is Entromancy. But even that might not be going far enough.

Beyond this, Animancy is a truly complete art. Once I achieved my final epiphany and created my Theory of Evolving Loss, my Necromancy evolved. Because that deduction allowed me to finally cross the threshold between understanding not only loss, but grasping the vagueness of what a soul truly is. For—and understand this—even the Risen accumulate feats and history within their broken soul. Their skills might be shattered as a whole and their beings warped, but they are still capable of evolving and changing, as any Necromancer might attest.

And because loss can evolve, then there is no true, pure loss. There is only the destruction of a stable, structured state. But what is this state, structured? And how is it constructed? I fear I might need to map out a dynamic architecture for someone's soul before I can answer any of these questions.

I leave my Great City of Fealty today and embark to seek out another specialist. This undertaking will require more than just me, and I have heard of another who has achieved an evolution into becoming an Animancer.

Her name is Kyn the Wisest, and she now resides deep within the body of the Great One herself. If she is still alive amidst all that instability and chaos, I will find her, and then I will find others.

I believe that if we can master Animancy, then all our woes will turn to dust. We can immediately modify someone's active skills—or transform them. Perhaps we can even change someone's Path or give them skills they should be able to possess. After all, everything should just be an expression of the soul, a modification made by the System or a sufficiently powerful being.

Once we learn how to shape ourselves, then what fear will we have for suffering or strife? We will be able to determine who we are. We will become as if gods unto ourselves.

And what harm, then, can the System inflict upon us?

-Valor Thann's Journal: Early Animancy Notes

Shiv's Hydromancy wasn't that advanced, but it was still good enough to manifest a makeshift shower. And a shower was something both he and Uva desperately needed.

Hydromancy > 2

They returned to the anchor somewhat cleaner and in far higher spirits than before. Despite the constant searing pain and the near-death experience, Shiv and Uva both sported barely-suppressed

smiles as they re-entered the anchor. Shiv felt that they hadn't been away for too long, but still... they must have been lost in each other for some time, since everyone else was already back before them.

As soon as they walked in, he saw Can Hu and Valor both pointing at different details within the open tome. They were flipping back and forth and debating about something. Siggy, meanwhile, was standing right next to them on one of the metal chairs Can Hu made, peeking between them while raising herself up on the automaton's shoulder. Adam stood a few steps away beside the anchor's doorway, but his attention wasn't on the book. Rather, his arms were folded, and he seemed deep in thought.

At least he was, until Shiv and Uva strode into the room. A beat of unease passed between the Deathless and the Young Lord, but then Adam's expression turned to one of utter incredulity as his radiant gaze snapped between Uva and Shiv. The Young Lord shook his head in utter astonishment. "Really? Here? Just now? In this rat and bug infested place?"

"We had to make sure the building was safe," Shiv said, trying to play things off. "I just wanted to make sure our battle against the Educator didn't draw any unwanted attention."

Adam narrowed his eyes. "Uh-huh. Four bloody hours of surveillance. And you remember what Tier my Awareness is at, right?"

Uva huffed a slight laugh at Adam's reaction and pecked Shiv on the chin. Then, she strode past the Young Lord—but gripped him by the shoulder and all but commanded him to speak with Shiv. After that, she left the slack-jawed Adam staring as she joined Valor and Can Hu in examining the tome.

Slowly, Adam's eyes fell on Shiv again, and they both regarded each other in a moment of awkward silence.

"So you want to talk about this here or outside?" Shiv said.

"Does it matter? Everyone already—" Adam hesitated for a moment, and then he let out a suffering sigh as he pinched the bridge of his nose. "And I know you said a lot to me before I stormed off," the Young Lord forced out. "But please tell me again that you're not lying. Tell me again that my mother—that my dead mother—is inside your soul. I need to hear it from you again so I know that I wasn't hallucinating."

"Your dead mother is inside my soul, and she's calling out for you right now."

Adam... Rose breathed. She was still trying to reach for him.

"Good godsdamned hells. Shiv, it never ends. It just never ends." The Young Lord let out a barking laugh—the kind of laugh let out by a man at the end of his patience. "It's unbelievable. I don't know if it's because I'm stuck with you all the time now, or if the System just has it out for me."

"Probably both," Shiv replied. "I'm favored, and your family is being targeted. The Inquisition is going after your father, your fiancée's father wants him dead for some reason too, and the Ascendants are also going after the Starhawk according to the Educator. You're trapped under a mountain of building shit, Adam."

"Thank you Shiv, that's very good for my morale." Adam let out another weary breath. "So, my mother is trapped inside of your strange vitality-infused soul. She evolved out of the Foreshadowing skill you had. Which... was technically always her skill?"

"Yeah," Shiv said, "at least that's what the Educator told me. And, well, apparently she knew a lot about us. Her Foreshadowing revealed a lot of information." And Shiv realized something just then, something he'd neglected to think about this entire time. "I think I know my parents' names now," Shiv said, a little bit startled.

"You do?" Adam asked, looking unnerved. "My father—he struck them from all the records. He even had his court Psychomancer erase their faces from his own mind."

"Yeah, the Educator mentioned them during the fight. Harlon and Vera Lowe... She even called me Tanner and the 'Lowe boy' a few times. Didn't much like that."

"The Lowe boy?" Adam said the words, but a look of distaste crossed over his features. "No. That's a real mouthful. I think I'll stick to Shiv."

And something about that made Shiv smile warmly. "Thanks. Listen, I'm gonna do everything I can to help get her out, or whatever. It's just a lot of shit I don't understand, either. I don't know how she got in there, I don't know if it has to do with the ritual. I don't know what other madness is about to happen, or anything about this whole Ascendant business." Shiv sighed. "It seems that every step we take that brings us closer to Blackedge, the more chaotic everything gets. Like we're moving deeper and deeper into a burning house."

"I know what you mean," Adam said. "I feel a strange sense of foreboding. It's like we're crawling through multiple webs at once for me. And these webs are growing tighter and tighter, as if they're going to snap. Before they snap, they might crash together first. And we're right in the middle of it. We're right in the middle of everything. And there's too much happening for this all to be a coincidence. At least, that's how it feels to me. A forgotten Ascendant just happens to stumble over us? A supposed civil war between Ascendants? My father's patron god being hunted by the other Ascendants? And there's what's happening down here in the Abyss... Aviary agents going around, stealing fragments of Legendary Pathbearers and trying to bomb a city's teleportation network. It all feels connected to me somehow. But I just can't quite put my finger on it."

A look of focus came over him. His arms were folded, and his finger tapped against his armor. The young lord had a particular look to him, a gleam to his bright eyes while he worked his mind. However, working his mind also came with deleterious side effects sometimes. Adam blinked at Shiv. "When you use the skill, does my mother speak to you?"

"She speaks to me even when I'm not using the skill sometimes," Shiv said. "It's just when I use the skill and I shift out of the real world, back into my Vitae, basically it's just me and her, and she's composed out of my soul." Shiv shrugged. "Yeah, it's kind of awkward. She wants me to tell you that she loves you deeply and a lot of things. But she's also... not all there. She just cries sometimes. And I don't think she likes me very much." He grimaced. "I don't know if I can blame her there."

Adam flinched for a moment, struggling to take the news. "I miss her, I miss her badly, even if I barely remember her. But I do remember the story. That's how I knew you weren't lying to me. That book, the Hark a Sparrow or whatever it was called... 'Bark, Bark, Bark,' it's practically the first memory I have." Another quiver ran through the Young Lord's lip, but he closed himself up like a fan before the grief overcame him.

And Shiv felt like absolute shit. He could empathize with Adam before, but there was too much distance between them, and Shiv had his own misery to handle. Now, he just hated seeing his asshole this low.

"I'm sorry," Shiv muttered. "I wish I could change things for you."

"What for?" Adam sighed. "It's not your bloody fault. It's not. It's not your fault." He repeated the words three times as if trying to convince himself. "It is your parents'," Adam growled. "But how did they do this? Why did they do this? This—there's more to the picture we're both missing, and I can't help but feel that's connected to what's happening now as well. At least somewhat..." Then, Adam trailed off again. He blinked twice as he narrowed his eyes. He'd just realized something else. "Wait. You said my mother can always talk to you."

"Yeah," Shiv said, unsure where Adam was going with this.

"So can she see out of you?"

"Uh, yeah, kind of?"

"And hear what you hear."

"Yeah. She emerged during the Foreshadowing Skill Evolution, and now she's basically the embodiment of my Outside Context Problem Skill."

"So, then... while you and Uva were," Adam coughed, "protecting the premises..."

And suddenly it hit Shiv. He hadn't even thought about this that entire time. Shiv grunted. "Uh, well, you know..."

"I can't believe you," Adam breathed. A look of utter incredulity washed over him and broke the building melancholy gripping him. "I cannot believe you. You two couldn't control yourself for one moment."

Shiv looked at Uva, and her eyes glinted as she returned a faint smirk. It was enough to make Shiv's stomach do a flip.

"Not a chance," Shiv breathed. But it did feel kind of awkward. This was practically the second situation like this he and Uva inflicted on someone else. The first was with Valor, when the Legendary Pathbearer was still nothing more than a dagger. Now, Adam's mother got front row seats to the most intimate part of Shiv's love life.

That made this whole thing twice as awkward as before.

"Yeah, okay," Shiv coughed. "I do feel a little bit bad."

"A little bit bad?" Adam nearly shouted. He sounded like he didn't know whether to be outraged, furious, or somewhat amused. "I can't believe this. You bastard. You—you m-made my mother some—some kind of soul-chained cuck."

Shiv cracked. He couldn't hold the laughter back. The left side of his body detonated with pain as he struggled to stop cackling. "S-soul-chained cuck."

"It's not funny, you bastard," Adam said through clenched teeth. But the absurdity was getting to him too. He was shaking, trying to keep from cracking up.

To make the moment perfect, Rose decided to reveal just how open-minded she was about the whole thing. It is... common for Pathbearers to indulge in lust and love after battle. The intensity of combat often turns the flames of desire when the blood remains hot. I remember... I... Roland...Where are you... Why are you so far from me... I miss your embrace...

“She’s so understanding,” Shiv wheezed. “She says it’s normal for Pathbearers.”

“No, she didn’t,” Adam hissed. He jabbed a finger in Shiv’s face. “You’re making that up.”

“I felling wish, man.” Adam was on the verge of crumbling. Shiv gave him a final push. “In fact, she’s talking about how she misses your dad’s—”

Adam let out a snarl halfway between rage and maddened laughter as he shoved Shiv. Shiv’s laugh broke into a ragged shout of pain as he tripped and nearly collapsed.

“Shit, Shiv,” Adam cursed as he helped Shiv stay upright. Suddenly, the expression on his face was grave. The others were looking at them with concern. Uva was halfway across, but she stopped as Shiv held out a hand.

“I’m fine,” Shiv said, laughing again. “Just... some of my body’s a bit more sensitive than I remember it being.”

Adam looked at Shiv’s burns and squeezed his eyes shut. “I have no idea how you’re standing, let alone joking or laughing.”

“I wasn’t joking,” Shiv grunted, trying to get his breathing under control. He straightened his body, and a slight sheen of cold sweat painted his forehead in a glossy shine. “That’s why I fully broke. Your mother does miss you. And your father. And it’s all just so ridiculous. I couldn’t help it. I had to laugh.”

Adam bit his lip and nodded. "Ridiculous is right. My life is ridiculous. What's happened to my mother is ridiculous. And you are ridiculous. These burns—"

"They'll go away," Shiv said, swallowing back a sudden rush of nausea. "Like the whip scar from Confriga. Just give it time. I'll heal. I'll deal with it. It just... hurts like hell. That's all. Maybe... I can get a Pain Resistance skill from this."

"Mad bastard," Adam chuckled. Then, his expression softened into one of shame. "I should have done more. It shouldn't have been just you against a god. I should have been there guarding you instead of the other way around. I just—I made too many mistakes, and you had to save me. Again. Again."

"Shut up, Adam," Shiv snorted. "If you didn't fire that Necromancy arrow, I don't think I would have ever been able to finish that fight. We would all be in the book now. Well. I don't know what would have happened to me. The brush just cut me up pretty bad, it couldn't swallow me like it did you."

"And because I fired that arrow, you are half-burned," Adam said, looking disgusted with the way things turned out. "If I could have been more accurate—"

Shiv grunted, and he placed his left hand on Adam's shoulder. He ignored the extreme pain flaring through him as he made the Young Lord meet his eyes. "I told Uva this, and I'm going to tell it to you too. I'd burn myself to the bone if it meant killing the god. I'd burn down to the marrow if it meant keeping you guys safe. The responsibility you feel is not one way. So. Stop blaming yourself, stop feeling like shit. We'll kick her ass together next time."

For a beat, Adam just stared at Shiv. Then, he let out a quiet laugh. “Right. Next time.” He licked his lips. “Mother. If you’re there, I—I miss you and—” He hissed and looked away. “Sorry, Shiv. But your half-melted face doesn’t really conjure memories of my mother.”

Shiv laughed, and he lightly clapped the Young Lord behind the head. “We’ll find a way to get her out. Or something. Now. Let’s go talk with the rest of the group. Oh, and before I forget, I need to tell you guys about my Blessing.”

Adam blinked. “Blessing?”

“Yeah. The orc god decided to save my ass and brand me with something that makes me and everyone around me suffer more pain and damage. I’ll probably use it on him at some point, so... Looking forward to that.”

“W-what?” Adam stuttered. “Y-you got another B-blessing?”

A massive, shit-eating grin spread across Shiv’s face. “If you hate that, you might be impressed to learn that a fragment of your mother amounts to a Unique Skill. My congratulations to your father, by the way.”

Adam’s nostrils flared. “SHIV! YOU BAS—”

Chapter 77 (II) Tome [II]

After Adam got tired of trying to strangle Shiv, everyone resumed their study of the tome.

"Most of the pages are badly burned, but we have confirmed that this is a Legendary item." Valor offered the tome to Shiv, and as he placed his hands on it, a notification appeared, informing him of the tome's critical details.

Equipment Obtained: [Tome of the Forgotten Artist]

Tier: Legendary

Condition: Destroyed

Composition: [Error]

Enchantments > [Error]; [Error]; [Error]; Record of Absolute and Unforgotten Truth; [Error]; [Error]; [Error]; [Error]; [Error]

But he didn't even need the notification to feel how powerful the tome was. There was a trembling presence residing within it. More than attuned magic, more than anything Shiv had ever felt. It simply was heavy in the way that nothing else was, like it had been touched by something immense. By a god.

As he looked through the Enchantments, most only displayed themselves as Error. But there was one still left. "What the hells is this one?"

Valor hummed with curiosity. "I suspect it is a means to deny the influence of the other Ascendants' revisionist powers. Your people believed that there were only 13 Ascendants. They also believed that the surface and Abyss war ended during the Battle of the Eclipse, that no true expedition into the Abyss ever took place; an entire military campaign missing from the collective consciousness of your Republic. A campaign in which the surfacers descended and pushed down into our homes, raiding our territories. I have gone through some pages, and we discovered portraits recording scenes from the war. The burning of Submission—Vicar Sullain's precious City of Conjoined Faith."

Can Hu shaped hands of stone and turned the tome directly to the moment that Valor described. There, a small patch of an illustration was preserved. It showed a great city lined with crystalline spires burning, people writhing in the flames, and from on-high, a host of flying Pathbearers looked down at the pyre. Shiv recognized one of them—and so did Adam.

Roland, Rose breathed within Shiv.

At the head of the warhost was Roland Arrow. His armor was basked in flame, and from his back sprouted colossal wings. But looming over him and glaring down at the burning city of Submission was a hawk that was the light of dawn itself, and its very essence trailed off into Roland's bow as he prepared to release a shot.

"This..." Adam paused as he considered things. "I think I need to speak with my father when I get back home. About a great many things."

"We might have to, considering the Starhawk is at the heart of all this," Shiv said. He looked at the blazing hawk behind Roland, and a feeling crashed over him. The beginnings of Foreshadowing reached to claim his being, but it failed to seize him. Rather, it clutched Rose instead. She experienced the vision in his stead and began muttering wildly. From her eyes spilled out a stream of light, and it formed a screen before Shiv's eyes.

Outside Context Problem: The Starhawk gazes down upon the world from his place beyond earth's dimension. He can feel the noose tightening. He senses the determination spilling over from his chosen champion. Starhawk's Perch burns over Lost Angeles like a second sun. Arrows formed from the very power of fusion crash down across the land, glassing entire armies. But it is within expectations. Sullain spent years preparing for this. He was aided by traitors of the Republic; a rival Ascendant to the Starhawk; and someone else...

Shiv saw Blackedge coated in a layer of divine radiance, but at its very apex, Roland Arrow soared. A burning hawk was fused into his back, becoming his armor and wings. Wings that embraced all of Blackedge, that turned away countless attacks. And every time Roland fired a shot, the sun above would flare. First, Roland's arrow would strike. Then, a beam of unmatched radiance would crash down from above, utterly disintegrating an entire portion of the landscape.

And this was constant. Skills and spells zipped out all around Roland. His arrows snapped back in counter immediately. Then came the sun. Then came a brief silence.

For now, Vicar Sullain licks his wounds. But Roland is tiring. After over two weeks of constant combat and over one hundred million Necromantic constructs and enemy Pathbearers slain, his soul is withering from the sheer amount of power he has been channeling. The Starhawk's mana might be immense, but Roland is still only a Master—his three Unique Skills notwithstanding.

"His what?!" Shiv shouted.

Everyone flinched back from his outburst, and he violently gestured at his own head. Uva blinked and connected to his mind. Immediately, she blinked. "You... What is this? Why do you have a notification screen?"

“Outside Context Problem,” Shiv said again. “Seems like it’s a better version of Foreshadowing too, since the vision is projected out from Rose, rather than me just suffering it myself and getting my cognition put on hold.”

As Uva filtered the memories across to the group, Can Hu awkwardly eyed Shiv, and he winced. “Sorry. We’ll fill you in afterward.”

“I’ll try to learn Binaric Theory at some point,” Uva said.

“It is well.” Can Hu sighed. “I could receive Psychomancy signals from organics before I was shattered.”

The scenes played through everyone’s mind, and Adam’s jaw dropped as Shiv recounted Rose’s words, since no one could hear what she was saying. “T-three Unique Skills?”

“Ah,” Valor said with a low chuckle. “I suspected something like this. A mere Master could not have done what your father did, Adam. Even a True Master is rarely chosen as divine champion.”

The Young Lord just kept gawking. His eyes grew wider and wider at the naked power his father unleashed. The very horizon was ablaze from Roland’s arrows. It made Adam’s Veilpiercers look pitiful altogether.

And still he fights on, trying to locate Vicar Sullain, hoping to strike the great Necromancer down. He knows that if Sullain falls, the army will shatter. But even should he succeed, he would need to quickly recover and prepare. For the vicar to attack him so openly could only mean one thing—that his master’s rivals intended to strike first, and that the war of the Ascendants is soon to arrive.

The enemy thinks the Starhawk is alone. They think that he is about to embark on a hopeless cause.

They are wrong. There were once twenty Ascendants. Twenty who rose to godhood after descending to the deepest depths of the Abyss.

Roland has managed to locate the broken, Sacred Phylacteries of all the Ascendants struck from history, aside from the Forgotten Artist. And even her Phylactery might soon find its way to Starhawk's Perch...

As Rose returned to silence, Shiv stopped narrating on her behalf.

"I am curious why we can see the scenes the System offers you, but not hear the woman herself." Valor hummed.

"I think it's because of Foreshadowing," Shiv said. "The skill evolved, and the visions come from the System. It might not fully tap into the Evolved Skill. Or something. I don't really know."

"You might be right," Valor said. "Your intuition led you there for a reason. Do not be so quick to turn away from your instincts. The visions do not need you to tap into your acausality. Rather, like what you said with the Educator, you are now insulated—so you are not the one that has to experience the visions firsthand."

Shiv grunted. "Useful."

“And my father might need this tome as well,” Adam whispered to himself. He gritted his teeth. “The System is playing its game again. Setting everything up for its perfect little collisions. We’re all just bloody figures on a board to it.”

“These are the conditions to continue escalating strife,” Uva commented. But a look of unease came over her as well. “We don’t know what the Starhawk’s plan is fully, but if he is collecting these Sacred Phylacteries, then isn’t the strongest likelihood of him summoning his lost allies?”

“Perhaps,” Valor said. “Or finding where they actually are; to break them and take their power in case they refuse to aid him.”

“No,” Adam almost snapped. “That’s not something the Starhawk would do. He—he holds to virtue and honor and truth with every breath.”

“Yet, we face a web of endless lies,” Valor retorted.

“Actually, I got a question,” Shiv said. “How does a god get forgotten by everyone? I don’t think they all have a power like mine, right? Could they be reaching back in time to alter things across history? Can you even do that?”

Valor shook his head. “The amount of power it would take for even a god to rewrite even recent history on such a level would completely collapse the local Mana Stability Threshold and shatter this meager world entirely. There have been entities that turned time back for a second. But even that is a feat that most cannot dream of. Not even a Legendary Pathbearer.”

Shiv stared at Valor, surprised at the old Pathbearer's admission. "Not even?"

"Not even close," Valor said. "The Legendary Tier... It reshapes your relationship with the System in the world. It makes you powerful in a way that allows you to defy gods. But there are still Tiers beyond that. And there are powers even greater by far. I told you, I've been to worlds where the ceiling is so high and the beings there are so powerful that I felt like little more than an ant. Yet I was a particularly clever and evolved ant, at that. So I managed to avoid being squished. Still, traveling in such planes and dimensions was always humbling."

Valor trailed off for a moment and sighed. "I just wish I could remember more. And, no, if the Ascendants are changing history, they will not be doing it physically, but through the rewriting of people's minds."

Then, another piece of the Republic's laws clicked into place for both Shiv and Adam.

"The Psychomancers," Adam breathed. "The monitoring Curse. They're supposed to be working for the government. They're supposed to reach out and reshape the minds of people around them. The only people who likely know are of the Inquisition, or... or..."

Adam's brow furrowed. "Or Lords, like my father. If things like this were happening, he would know." The Young Lord considered that, and the implications of his words weighed heavily on him. "But why would he allow it, and why wouldn't he tell me?"

"Perhaps he couldn't let anyone know what he was planning," Shiv replied. "This Ascendant rebellion thing... seems like a secret you keep from everyone because you don't know who the Inquisition's Psychomancers might steal memories from."

“Just how long has this been going on?” Adam muttered.

“Considering the war between the surface and the Abyss,” Valor said. “Much longer than we think.”

“Well, I think we also know why Starhawk’s Perch is so important,” Shiv said. “It’s a Sacred Phylactery too. It connects a god to the world, just like this tome did for the... Forgotten Artist. That’s why Stormhalt wants it intact—wants the place captured. And I have a feeling he might have an Ascendant behind him as well.”

“City Lord Stormhalt exalts Halsur the Endbreaker,” Adam said. “But... Halsur is a guardian. A pacifist sworn to bear burdens. And what’s more, I don’t understand the point of these Phylacteries. The Auroral Council exists. They are the divine manifestations of the Ascendants upon this world. They don’t need to be bound to this dimension to do anything.”

“And so perhaps it is not a binding,” Valor said. “Perhaps it is parting. Like the partitioning of one’s soul. Much like... the Undying.” And an epiphany seemed to light up in Valor’s sockets. “Like me and my fellow Undying. We part our souls. We pour our skills and split our beings into multiple bodies that are still connected by thinnest tethers... A collective, severed, fragmented form of shared divinity...”

“What do you mean?” Adam asked.

“I cannot be sure yet,” Valor said. “I cannot be certain. But we know that they found their godhood in the Abyss. We need... I need more time with this tome. I need to—”

And just then, a flash of Dimensionality mana crackled at the center of the teleportation anchor. Everyone snapped to alertness. Uva's shield glided in front of her as Shiv stepped into Can Hu. A spatial pocket expanded at the center of the room, and a shape plopped out from within.

A shape that was the badly mauled form of Guardshead Leu. The Vulteg was bleeding from multiple wounds. Most of her head tentacles had been shredded, and even her eye was missing entirely. A moan of pain escaped her vertical mouth as she pawed at the ground. Black blood bubbled beneath her, and she called out with a hoarse cry.

"Away," she hissed. "Away from me..."

Shiv shook off his shock and cast a wyrm into her. At once, the Woundeater swallowed her injuries and grew bright with crystallized wounds. Leu stopped writhing. Her eye was back. Her tentacles twitched. She felt at her body and shot up to a sitting position, staring at the group.

"M—master Shiv," she managed, breathing hard.

"What happened?" Shiv asked, kneeling beside Leu. "Did Confriga do this to you?"

"No," she rasped. "It's—"

And just then, the entire building above them shook violently as what sounded like a massive mana bomb went off.

Quest Gained: Repel the vampiric invasion and eliminate all infiltrating Aviary agents in Gate Theborn before they overcome the defenses and slay Gate Lord Confriga first.

Success: Evolve an [Existing Skill] to Master-Tier

Failure: The Court of the First Blood claims the mana core and begins to corrupt the gate. The Animancy Core is sent across dimensions and is lost to all parties. A detachment of the First Blood joins Vicar Sullain's crusade. The First Blood launches a retaliatory offensive against Weave from the gate's position within a span of two weeks.

A deep, suffering sigh escaped Adam. He looked up at the ceiling, as if glaring at the System itself, and scowled. "We just don't get a bloody break."

Chapter 78 (I) Favored

System-favored...

Well, I really wouldn't call myself that. See, I actually met someone who was System-favored, and that poor bastard was always suffering through either end of some kind of Quest or trying to survive a desperate fight. He also grew faster than anyone I've ever met in my life. His skills shot up to Master within the span of months. And that usually takes other people decades...

But I wouldn't call him lucky. Not even close. Being System-favored means you're always in deep shit. Guy I talked about got pretty strong pretty fast. And then, approximately a year later, he was dead. Because that's what it means to be System-favored. Keep surviving, you'll turn into an absolute monster. But more likely than not, the System will end up murdering you.

In fact, there is nothing the System enjoys more than throwing one favored at another. It especially loves twisting people who have relationships against each other. So, as favored, you best keep your distance from people too. Otherwise, most of those you like will end up dead, or if they survive, facing you down some day.

Here's the deal with being System-favored. It doesn't mean that you're just talented. It doesn't mean that you have some kind of special insight in a specific area, or a special predilection for some skill. System-favored means that you have probably all those things, some more, and the willingness to throw yourself into the most brutal battles over and over again. And eventually it all sticks to you. The constant struggle. The endless war. The violence.

Make no mistake, the System wants us to struggle, to fight. All Pathbearers have to do a little bit of that in their life, martial or non-martial. But the ultimate thing that makes one person favored and another person just your run-of-the-mill Pathbearer is that sheer concentration of conflict, and the sheer unlikeliness of their survival.

I am a soldier. For most of my campaigns, it was a hell of a lot of boring marching, training, trying to survive command screwing you over. Then, suddenly, more action and violence than you can possibly imagine for a few minutes to a day, and back to the boring shit: After that, more marching. Paperwork. Presentations and plans drawn on a board. There's a period of peace. To be people. To live.

Pathbearers who are favored don't get that peace. Because there's always another war coming, and the System will make sure its favorite monsters are a part of it.

-Memoirs of a Master-Tier War Mage

Favored

“P-please, wait... You— don’t have to... I can bless you with my bloodlin—” That was all the high vampire got to say before Shiv pasted the creature’s head with a descending stomp. A satisfying crunch was followed by a bit of twitching. Shiv harvested the high vampire’s lineage core before the body even stilled.

“Got the last high vampire,” he muttered. His Biomancy field couldn’t sense anything other than corpses and allies in Leu’s building, but he kept his guard high just in case. He wasn’t the one with the Heroic-Tier Awareness. When Adam said they were cleared and Uva backed him up on it, then that’s when Shiv would relax. Until then, his Silhouette stayed active, and his Rememberer remained drawn.

They returned with the Guardshead through the waste chutes to retake her building. But by the time they arrived, things were already well and truly out of hand. Most of the tower had been crawling with the invading vampires, and there was no one left to save. But that just made things simple for Shiv in the sense that he didn’t need to worry about collateral damage anymore.

A thought from Adam passed through the group. “Uva, we have a final victim hiding inside a corpse on the eighth topside floor. Master-Tier Stealth and Biomancy Skill Fusion, I think.”

Shiv paused and fully tapped into Adam’s perspective. True to the Young Lord’s words, there was the body of a Vulteg on the ground, but Shiv couldn’t tell that there was a high vampire inside at all. “Are you sure? I can’t sense anything with my Biomancy.”

“Absolutely,” Adam said. “I think the high vampire dove into the blood. That might be the ability of her Skill Fusion.”

“And you know it’s a she?” Shiv asked, genuinely impressed. He focused his Biomancy on the body, and he still couldn’t tell anything was out of the ordinary.

“Look at the blood, Shiv. It keeps moving back and forth. Puddles don’t act like waves crashing on a shore. That, and if you listen very carefully, you can hear a voice carried by the vibrations in the blood. Our hidden foe is begging the Great One to preserve her.”

One of Uva’s mana strands speared into the blood without warning. Suddenly, a body exploded out of the corpse as viscera repainted the walls. For a moment, the high vampire struggled and wailed, but a dozen more of Uva’s Psychomancy strands tore into the Bloodspawn. The high vampire let out a wordless scream and splashed down into a gory puddle, her eyes vacant. “There,” Uva muttered. “She can dictate her prayers to the Great One in person now. If she can still remember the words.”

Adam winced at the casual coldness of Uva’s remarks. Shiv just grinned. Hunting vampires was a hell of a lot more fun when you had your friends with you.

“Now, the building’s clear,” Adam declared. “But stay alert. I briefly scouted our surroundings, and they’re spreading from building to building, infecting or slaughtering anyone they can get their hands on.” He sighed. “Damned good timing on their part too. A good number of Adept guards are still down with the super-dysentery they got from Shiv. And a good number of those are lurking in the dark as lesser vampires now.”

Another distant blast shook the building. A second later, Adam provided another update. “And someone just detonated a Pyromancy mana bomb inside one of the mercenary barracks. It’s absolute, bloody pandemonium out there.”

“They’re conducting this invasion strategically,” Uva added. A snapshot of perspectives followed over from her mind, showing a gate in turmoil. Confriga and his available forces were constantly bombarding the bridge leading to the Abyssal Gateway, but across the city, hidden dangers festered like an infected wound. Lesser vampires were spreading, high vampires sank their teeth into unaware victims from the dark, Aviary agents primed mana bombs at critical and lightly defended locations. “I’ve reached out across the city and scanned a few memories. The forces flooding through the Abyssal Gateway are a

diversion. Confriga and his elites are driving them back slowly, but the true threat is already inside. I sensed another Master-Tier Psychomancer earlier, but they withdrew and evaded me. The vampires are also focusing on capturing buildings and infecting the local population. Even if Confriga manages to push the enemy back out through the gateway, he will have to contend with the infection festering within.”

A rush of loathing came from the Umbral. “This is the way the First Blood wage their wars. They throw tides of twisted monstrosities they deem worthless or expendable at you, while their true elites slip deep and poison your heart. And with Aviary aiding them, we are facing quite the potent poison at that.”

“It’s also damned clever and effective in a vile bastard sort of way,” Adam added. “If they focus on capturing most of the structures, they will force Confriga into a series of brutal close-quarters engagements in an enclosed environment. That, or he will just destroy the buildings outright, but that will just see him killing his own people as well, and eventually desynchronizing from the gate’s mana core as he loses his authority from the escalating chaos.”

Shiv took all that in as he stomped back into Leu’s apartment. The ground was covered in butchered monsters. Bobbing up and down in the pool of blood were also two dead crows, three high vampires with holes where their hearts used to be, and the pulped remains of what used to be a raven.

Standing ankle-deep in the blood was Guardshead Leu, now staring out the large, central window of her home. Part of the room was coated in reinforced titanium after she detonated a mana bomb inside when faking her own attempted assassination just days ago. Now, more bombs were going off outside, and bodies rained down from the districts above, splashing down into the molten rivers as a desperate and sudden battle for Gate Theborn raged.

But despite her near-death experience, Leu seemed thrilled at the turn of events. “Look at it,” she whispered, gazing upon the destruction. “Look at what Confriga’s incompetence has delivered upon us. A hostile army in our very home.”

Shiv came to a stop next to her as he noticed an entire building toppling over from above. Due to the room's wards, the entire display was utterly silent, which made the sight of the structure tearing through multiple bridges before ultimately crashing into a river of lava below strangely surreal. Adam and Uva were right. While Confriga was busy fighting the First Blood's apparent army, their true Pathbearers were ripping this place apart from the inside. And part of why they were so successful was because of the instability and terror caused by Shiv and his group on both the outside and inside of the gate.

"I wouldn't give Confriga all the credit," Shiv muttered. "Hells. I wouldn't give him any credit. The only reason the vampires and Aviary are ripping through this place is because of the beating we already gave it from all angles."

"I suspect you are correct, Master Shiv," Leu replied. Her eye fell on the third gateway, and she scoffed. "Look." She pointed at the churning portal leading to Vulketh. "He still has not called for aid. He still refuses to surrender his pride. This is why he is damned. He is so desperate to reclaim his honor and retake what he believes to be his rightful place in Lord Scorn's Fist that he will damn this entire gate to a slow and torturous death. Why, with a little more time, all the local elites of Compact will lose faith in Confriga. And then the core will be lost to him for good as well."

"Yeah, that's useful and all, but I'm not a fan of just waiting around for the vampires and Aviary to take this place. I think my preferred outcome is if they all lose." And then, Shiv paused as he regarded Leu. An idea occurred to him—something that might just be to their benefit down the line. "And maybe have someone more capable replace Confriga."

"Me?" Leu said. She sounded surprised. "I—I do not hold enough sway with the city."

"You might if you save it," Shiv said. "If you manage to stop the vampires when Confriga couldn't. Or if he mysteriously dies in the process of defending the city."

Adam cut into the conversation. "Well, before we consider who to anoint as the next Gate Lord, we have many other problems to resolve first. And openings to take advantage of."

The Young Lord offered Shiv a bird's eye view of the gate. The bulk of the fighting was concentrated around the Abyssal Gateway. There, Shiv saw waves of misshapen abominations rushing through. Adam Analyzed a particular monster that had mouths and teeth spreading around its body like some kind of nightmarish rash.

Name: Thing of Enamel Born

Age: 3 Months

Race: Blood Horror

Path:

Horror

Feat [0/0]:

None

Ski—

A concentrated beam of frost promptly blasted out from the gate's mana core and smashed into the Thing of Enamel Born. It, along with a few hundred other Blood Horrors, froze and shattered into fragments of ice. But as soon as they fell, another tide of horrors surged through the gate, prompting the defenders to unleash their skills and spells in response.

Confriga loomed in the air above, launching screaming specters composed of Necromantic corrosion at the enemies. His petal-like wings also caused the weaker among the invading forces to spontaneously combust. As he fought, he roared commands, demanding that his warriors strike harder and drive the First Blood back.

But while Confriga was focused on the problem at his front door, he failed to notice the blood-drenched bat-humanoids darting across his plazas, carrying pieces of the dead in their mouths.

"So, our previous plans are now completely in the shit," Adam said. "All the groundwork we did basically made infiltrating and capturing the insides of the gate easier for Aviary. Also, their strongest Pathbearers are being teleported. I cast my Awareness through the gateway while the waves of Blood Horrors were rushing through. There's also an Aviary Owl Dimensionalist that's actively shuttling high vampires off to System-knows where inside this gate. I'm guessing they have more than a few of their own teleportation anchors active somewhere inside, but considering how many forces they're dropping across the districts, they either have anchors hidden inside every bloody building or a giant one."

A gut feeling tugged at Shiv. "I might know where they're coming from. The Jealousy's den. It's functionally a colossal teleportation anchor. It also teleported the Jealousy directly as soon as it made contact with the gate."

Adam hummed. "Good guess. I think we might just have discovered one of our first major objectives. You still remember the way there?"

"Of course."

"Good. I think you should go there first. At the same time, Valor and I will prepare to seize the Animancy Core. I took a glance at its defenses, and there is still a contingent of guardians there. Mostly dimensionals, a few Master-Tier Vultegs, and two elemental golems."

Shiv frowned. "Just the two of you?" He looked behind him and saw Valor hovering within the slug enclosure, dragging the Graven Cage behind him using a corrosive leash.

"It will have to do. I'm not waiting for Confriga's caution to finally win over his arrogance as he sends the core over to his home dimension and calls for reinforcements. I'm also not looking forward to the felling New Albion birds getting to the core before us somehow. It will be a tight window to intercept the core once we sever the adamantine elevator shaft leading through the third gateway, but we should be able to do it. We must. Uva—"

"I am going to ensure both sides in this fight suffer as much attrition and damage as they possibly can." Uva's mind was ice-cold with focused hate. Vampires were her enemies of choice—were practically every Umbral's enemy of choice. "I am going to slip into vulnerable minds on the battlefield to make Confriga and his elites exhaust themselves. I will slay him if I can and leave him diminished if I cannot. I will also steal what memories I can to get a clearer picture of the situation outside." Uva paused. A slight trickle of worry escaped her mind. "My team and Still Water's should have seen an attack of this scale coming... Once the battle at the gateway reaches a point of conclusion, I will start locating and culling the vampiric outbreak."

“Right,” Adam said. “That’s... better than what I was going to suggest. Once me and Valor have the core handled, I’ll come and assist you. I suspect that some of the more hidden Aviary assets will require a keen eye to root them out.”

As Adam and Uva declared their intentions, Shiv relayed the details to Can Hu, and the Penitent gave a high-pitched chime. “Shiv. My drones also have an opening. I will dispatch new orders to have them free the automaton slaves. I will then instruct them to free the organics and begin an uprising.”

Shiv paused. “Right now? The city’s under siege. The guards might slaughter them all if this goes wrong.”

“And once the vampires find them, they will be used as subjects for experimentation or consumed as prey on the spot,” Can Hu retorted. “Or they will be sold again or kept as slaves. Some will always die. But should they struggle now and further inflict instability upon the gate, they might yet live. And more, they might regain their freedom. When this moment passes, should we fail, their fates lie between a slow death under a cruel tyrant or a faster, more brutal end between the jaws of human-skinned monsters.”

“Yeah. I see your point. Adam. Uva. You hear that?”

“We did,” Uva said. “I will target the slavers after I am finished exhausting both armies as well. The more things and essential personnel we can break within the gate, the better. The vampires might have taken us by surprise, but it seems the System has given us more of an opportunity than an impediment.”

“So let’s go make this count, get this damned Quest done, kill Confriga, and secure the gate for ourselves,” Adam finished.

Chapter 78 (II) Favored

Then, with Adam's consent, Leu's mind slid into the conversation. "And when we are all done with that, when the gate is broken from within, when the First Blood and the Lesser Marshal's forces are spent against each other... When the Lesser Marshal finally loses the core's favor entirely and begins the desynchronization, we will finally... finally have him. And I will finally whisper to him the truth of my hate as I watch him die."

Leu was really looking forward to this. So was Shiv, for that matter. "Yeah. Personally, I'm kind of curious to discover just how deep that oversized sword of his can cut."

"Alright," Adam sighed. "Our plans are in ashes, but the preparations we did are still in place. Let's go turn this damned war to our advantage and hopefully get the System to piss off for a little while longer this time."

"I don't think that's likely, Adam," Shiv grunted. "I think it likes us a bit too much now."

"Let me have something to look forward to, Shiv," the Young Lord groaned.

Just then, Shiv remembered there was someone else in their group. Someone else he brought back to the gate because she knew the underworld here. Considering how things were going now, however, the extended subterfuge plan was dead in the water. But that didn't mean he couldn't still get a bit more use out of the goblin.

"Siggy," Shiv said.

The Adept-Tier mercenary jolted in shock. She was staring at all the mangled vampire remains, and her dread was high. When she saw Shiv staring at her, she shuddered and took a step back. “Oh, ah, shit... You’re finally gonna do it, aren’t you? You’re finally gonna kill me because you know I’m useless now that the vampires are invading. That—”

“You’re going to Little Gomorrah,” Shiv started. “You’re going there, and you’re going to find every mercenary Pathbearer you can. You tell them that Gate Theborn is done—that it’s going to fall. Tell them that Gate Lord Confriga is dead, and that you all need to make a run for the surface or Abyssal Gateways soon if they want to live. If they don’t run, then the Corpse Shedder is coming for them after he finishes with the vampires. You got that?”

Siggy blinked. And then she began to nod vigorously. “I—yeah. Yeah! Confriga dead, gate fucked, Corpse-Shedder coming, and we need to go to the gateway.” Then, she frowned. “Wait, what about the Light-Cursed mercs? They can’t go up.”

“Then tell them to dive through the Vulketh Gateway or hunker in place.” He lowered his voice. “Tell them to stay out of the fighting, because if they do, they’re going to die. One way or another.”

“And... after?” Siggy asked.

Shiv shrugged. “See if we’re still alive first. Then we talk about after.”

Part of the goblin’s courage collapsed. But there was something else in her as well. Hope. Hope that she might just live through this mess yet.

“A-alright,” Siggy said. “I-I’m going to get going.”

But Shiv strode past her first. He had things to do: a teleportation anchor to secure, vampires and spies to butcher, and a Gate Lord to kill.

"Shiv," Valor called out.

Shiv paused briefly. The skulls lining the Graven Cage were practically alight with corrosive energy, and the chain of Necromantic mana extending from Valor's right arm crackled brighter than ever. "When you go seek the Gate Lord, make sure I am there with you."

"Sure," Shiv said, but he didn't get why Valor sounded so severe. "Why?"

"Because I want to instruct him on the proper way to perform Necromancy. And I look forward to explaining everything he did wrong to what remains of him within his Risen corpse."

That earned a feral grin from Shiv. "Then consider that his fate." The Deathless continued on. He shot out of the room and immediately began picking up speed. "I'll head to either the Abyssal Gateway or Confriga's descending tower when I'm done with the anchor. I'll make this quick."

"Don't worry, I'll see you coming," Adam said. "The moment Valor and I secure the core, I'll be on immediate overwatch."

"I'll try to compile an intelligence update from the memories of my sleeves if I can," Uva said. "The Composer warned us that the gate might be attacked. But I want to know why the First Blood is so brazen—and how they managed to pierce so deep so fast."

Adam paused. "Uva, did you seriously just call the people you puppet with your strings 'sleeves'?"

"Yes. It's fitting. And no, I'm not interested in second opinions."

"It's disturbing, is what it is." Adam paused. "But don't overextend while trying to cause chaos. And don't strain your mana."

"And you keep your distance from the enemy," Uva replied. "And Shiv—"

"I'll be fine," Shiv grunted. With a yank on his gravitic field, he blasted through several floors and walls before he emerged outside. The mana core was unleashing so much Cryomancy on the world that Shiv could barely see a few meters away due to all the rushing snow. The cold briefly flooded his limbs with a pounding ache before his body adapted. Another benefit of the invasion: He could fly freely through the air without ever being noticed. "Worst case, I die."

"You mean best case for you," Adam grumbled.

"Sure. I'll try my best to avoid getting another Unique Skill. Maybe if you're lucky, I'll just skip straight to Legendary after killing some vampires."

"I hope they hit the left side of your body and only the left side of your body," Adam spat.

Uva muttered something about them never changing, but then her mind softened. "Mind yourselves, boys. Neither of you has my permission to perish."

So the team split four ways, toward four different objectives, and with that, a third force entered the battle for Gate Theborn, utterly unnoticed by the other two.

"She said she was going to be here! That the Gate Lord would be dead. That we would sweep through and take this place with minimal resistance!" Elder Novor Kraid roared in the owl's face. The spy barely reacted at all, which only incensed the high vampire further. "Understand that if we are driven back here today, you will find yourself not as a useful ally but a wailing, screaming sack of flesh that we will abuse to shape new horrors for our hordes."

"Calm yourself, Master Kraid," the owl sighed. "You understand how these things are. The circumstances of a Quest always change. We simply have to accept and adapt accordingly."

"Adapt?" Kraid snarled. Light flashed over both him and the owl-masked man as the teleportation anchor's spells activated. Another eight high vampires and a blood golem emerged from a spatial bubble. The gore-forged monstrosity crashed down on the ground with a wet impact before it began gliding across the massive chamber. It headed off and was directed into a formation with the other five blood, flesh, and wound golems they were massing. "Adapt! Your Educator promised she would deliver this place to us. That we need only come with a heavy contingent of forces to overwhelm the feeble vermin that remain. Now, we are preparing to butcher half the population just to force the Gate Lord to desynchronize."

"And it will work," the owl said calmly. "They are not prepared for us. They do not know we are behind their lines. That, and this place is clearly frail. Whatever the Educator did here, it softened the defenders

considerably. Such is why they are still struggling to push your forces out. We merely need to take this a step further. We merely need to see the Quest completed. We are close, Elder Kraid. And even if the Educator has failed, we can still succeed. We must still succeed, for an opportunity at the divine prize.”

Kraid growled down at the owl. He wanted to rip the man in half. It would be so easy. The flesh was just clay to Kraid. And it was clay he could pull asunder with his mind at that. As another flash of dimensional mana painted the owl’s mask and revealed his dead, hazel eyes, Kraid scoffed and turned away.

“Fledglings! Neonates. Truebloods. Agents. Heed me!” The elder vampire extended a hand, and all the seventy vampires, six golems, and twenty Aviary agents turned to regard him. Outside the lair of the now-dead Jealousy, ten Blood Horrors stood on guard, their bodies painted by the remains of the slavers they tore through to seize this place. “Our objectives require a slight adjustment. The Gate Lord remains alive—but that will not last. Before we begin our pincer upon his forces, we should first indulge. Arrange yourselves by seniority. Infect those you can. Drink when you need. Destroy what you cannot hold. Drown this place in its own blood. We came for two cores! Mana and Animancy! The cattle present are secondary and can be replenished with ease.”

Kraid spiked his Dread Aura and tested the courage of his collective forces. The golems were like blank canvases, but the high vampires—especially the ones he personally sired—were like alloyed ingots besides the feeble agents of Aviary. But the owl bothered him. That one seemed to have no fear at all. Not of Kraid. Not of anyone. The owl’s calmness was unnatural, and it bothered the elder vampire that he couldn’t shake the spy no matter what he did.

“For now,” Kraid continued. “We muster ourselves. Bite deep and drink your fill. For a hard fight stands ahead. But know that you are with me, and we will prevail! Know that you stand with me! Elder Novor Kraid! System-favored Hero! And before this day is done, you will all taste the flavor of what flows through the Gate Lord’s veins!”

A collective cheer went up among the gathered forces, but just as Kraid was about to dismiss them, a heavy

weight crashed against his Biomancy field. Kraid grunted. Several of the other vampires wailed in agony.

Then, for no apparent reason at all, the cavernous ceiling burst outside their anchor. Massive chunks of stone came crumbling down. The Blood Horrors on guard were buried beneath the heavy rocks in an instant. Dust flooded into the anchor.

“Cave in!” one of the Aviary agents cried. He extended a hand and shaped a gray-colored spell as he began to work his Geomancy.

He didn’t get very far.

A flash of white and red tore out from the tumbling smoke that swept through the room. The blur punched clean through the Aviary Geomancer’s skull, and he fell over dead. But the blur kept going. It punched through the heart of a vampire and beheaded another before Kraid seized it with his own mana.

The projectile trembled in the air. A drill shaped from... was that bone? Why did it gleam like adamantite? And why could he still control it? Bone adamantite was something only harvested from the bodies of colossal monsters. This was barely the length of Kraid’s arm.

A struggle ensued. Kraid growled with effort, but soon began to overpower his adversary’s spell. The enemy was strong, but merely a Low Master in Biomancy. And they recognized Kraid’s superiority as well, as they destroyed the bone drill and focused on hardening their field against him.

Then, a terrible grinding noise sounded, the sound of a heavy stone being dragged over jagged rocks. Through the shivering fingers of the smoke emerged a pale shape. For a moment, Kraid thought he was

looking upon a Necrotech war construct, but as more of the strange adversary came into view, the elder vampire realized his guess was wrong.

A figure clad in dense bone-shaped adamantine armor came to a stop before the teleportation anchor's entrance. As the dust settled, Kraid also saw how the man was somehow holding onto what looked like an entire wall. The enemy promptly yanked the wall hard and its edges broke apart. The intact portion of wall was promptly lodged to block the teleportation anchor's entrance.

"That should keep this place blocked up for a bit," the bone-armored stranger muttered.

Kraid felt a shiver of slight fear rush through some of his forces. It broke within his vampires, but it lingered within the spies. The golems groaned and staggered forward, forming a frontline against the unknown threat. Kraid growled and tried to liquefy them with his Biomancy. His enemy pushed back with his own field. Kraid found himself struggling again. He was still stronger, but though he slowly drove the stranger's mana back, they didn't react.

And as Kraid unleashed his Dread Aura on them, they simply responded in kind, driving skill against skill.

He has Dread Aura too, Kraid realized.

"Who are you?" Kraid snarled. He unleashed more of his power, but the stranger didn't even flinch.

The bone-armored stranger just laughed. "You know, after the pain I experienced a few hours ago—and the pain I constantly feel right now—you squeezing my mana field feels like a rough massage."

Outrage and disbelief warred within Kraid. “You wear the vestiges of death. You are not of Compact. You cannot be.”

“You’re right, I’m not,” the stranger replied. There was a low bite to the man’s voice. It was the same kind of noise a guard dog made before it tore into someone’s leg. Everything about the stranger screamed impending violence. And that’s when Kraid noticed the owl had gone completely still as well.

For the first time, the damned spy seemed uneasy—and it wasn’t even because of Kraid.

“Then, pray tell, stranger,” the owl spoke. “Who might you be? Are you... an illustration, perhaps?”

The stranger cocked his head in turn. “Are you asking me if I’m one of the Educator’s creations?”

“Indeed,” the owl said. “We understand that the Forgotten Artist might be diminished, but—”

The owl’s words were promptly interrupted as the stranger let out a bark of vicious laughter. “I can’t believe this shit. Ah. But I guess it makes sense. It was too convenient. Damn System’s just playing games with us.” The stranger let out an annoyed breath. “Well. Suppose I’ll be getting some answers from you. Congratulations, owl. I’m gonna try and keep you alive. There’s a certain lady I need to introduce you to later. The rest of you... Well, this is going to feel just like old times for me.”

“Enough of this,” Kraid said, stomping forward. For the first time, the bone-armored stranger seemed to notice him, and that just infuriated Kraid more. “I care not for who you are. We are here for the gate, and you have just condemned your flesh to my palate.”

“And you weren’t listening to me,” the enemy said with a chuckle. He pointed his kukri at Kraid. “This isn’t your gate to conquer.”

Then, he slammed the hilt of his knife into his chest. A shockwave spread over his body. For a split-second, Kraid saw how the very air around the stranger’s body trembled like he was about to explode—

Then, the bone-armored stranger reappeared, blade-deep in Kraid's right eye. A howling scream escaped the elder vampire's jaws.

Chapter 79 (I) Battle

...And should you encounter an adversary beyond your ability to escape, defeat, or persuade, then the final act you should perform is one of absolute service to New Albion. And to yourself.

There is nothing good that comes from being taken captive. It is a failure above all other failures, and to allow your mind or body to be turned against the Stolen Throne is treason.

We have trained you well. But sometimes not even that is enough to succeed.

Still, you can render your failure incomplete.

Still, you have a final choice. To remove yourself from the equation.

-The Ways of the Unseen: Aviary Training Manual

Battle

Uva's favorite enemy was another mage. After all, other magi usually didn't develop Magical Resistance and had to rely on their armor. And, as Confriga's magi were busy exchanging spells with the vampiric hordes, a lot of armor was being shattered, and a lot of minds were being made available for the taking.

She used her mana strands to bind herself to a vulnerable fire dimensional first. She took in the battlefield from some distance away. At the Abyssal Gateway, a clash between order and chaos was taking place. Even diminished, sabotaged, mauled, and compromised by everything Uva's team had done over the past several days, Confriga's forces still formed orderly lines to hold back the Blood Horror menace.

The general composition of Confriga's army took on a semicircular configuration at the front, and they hovered just over the customs and processing building that Shiv barely left standing during his diversionary rampage. The vanguard of Confriga's army was composed entirely of flight-capable lancers, warriors, or mounted chevaliers. They held back the surging Blood Horror tide from reaching the back line, pressing against creatures of claw, bone, blood, flesh, and wing.

Behind the vanguard were small pockets of elite Pathbearers—specialized teams meant to plug any gaps or eliminate any powerful adversaries. Behind them still were concentrated and heavily armored contingents of all-Vulteg troopers. These were likely Confriga's Master-Slayer Corps: the Gate Lord's most dedicated hard-hitters sent out to bring down dangerous foes that shattered the frontliners.

And finally, at the very back were the Gate Lord's most powerful assets: the magi formations. No army was complete without magic, for magic gave you options, reshaped the battlefield, and, for some, even allowed you to compromise your enemy's very minds.

But Uva could see a critical flaw in Confriga's magi formations. There were missing multiple members in critical spots. A good amount of the missing were Adept-Tier, she suspected. A number probably died while Shiv was rampaging, and some more were still affected by the dysentery that had been spreading through the gate over the past few days.

Even so, Confriga managed to compose fourteen columns numbering approximately 100 mages each. Some of them clearly didn't fit in and were probably recently drafted from a mercenary company or some other position within the gate.

The most potent of all the magi formations were probably the automata purifiers—all of them highly powerful Pyromancers. They were also beyond the reach of Uva's Heroic-Tier Psychomancy, due to being automata. However, that didn't mean she was helpless against them. After all, Psychomancy allowed you to seize another's mind, and even if she couldn't take the mind of an automaton, she could still take one of their allies and strike the bots down that way.

Hovering high above the group, with his long, black sword drifting just beside him, Gate Lord Confriga glared down at the adversaries. His massive, petal-like wings flared bright and practically engulfed the entire sky when viewed from below. The petals unleashed waves of coruscating fire at the charging hordes of the First Blood, and juxtaposed to the intense heat, the mana core cast down avalanches of frost from the sky above. It hammered the invaders with spontaneous blizzards, and summoned more dimensionals to aid the gate's defending Pathbearers.

Meanwhile, despite being a horde composed primarily of inhuman monsters, the First Blood's army did not simply throw their lives blindly at the opposition.

The vampire had their own magi, though they did not come in organized corps. Rather, most of their Blood Horrors possessed their own magic, just more primal, more instinctive. Their spells usually did terrible things to a body or let the creatures themselves shape-shift in certain ways. Shielded by the

dense flesh and the constantly regenerating forms of the Blood Horrors were the actual high vampires, who then were flanked by a personal guard of lesser vampires meant to further soak up damage on their behalf.

Unlike Confriga's army, the First Blood fought as a tide of flesh. Most of their army could be described as little more than chaff, just something to serve as meat shields and bury proper Pathbearers under the sheer weight of numbers. Yet within that ocean of flesh were true dangers, high vampires who had powerful skills of their own.

As the Blood Horrors practically poured free from the compromised gateway, they moved as a swarm, spreading out, their bodies bursting upon death, releasing thick, vaporous clouds of blood to further obscure the ones behind them. And it was through these vapors that the vampires of the first blood unleashed their spells.

They did not fight using the same tactics or strategies as the Gate Lord's magi. Rather, they focused on breaking the Gate Lord's front line using their formidable Biomancy most of all. And that was something the great lord was critically lacking: Biomancers.

Biomancers, because Shiv, Adam, and Uva had dedicated some of their time to eradicating the gate of the most effective Biomancers, just to make sure Shiv's Bowel-Breaker dysentery modification spread easier and couldn't be cured quickly. As such, while the Blood Horror hordes were taking constant losses, theirs seemed to be replenishable. But every death on Confriga's side was another heavy loss weighing down the combat effectiveness of his army.

So far, however, the Gate Lord himself did not join in directly in physical combat. He was simply glaring down, unleashing spells, and directing the mana core to fight on his behalf. Every now and again, he would roar, declaring to his forces that if they took one step back, he would take their skulls from them and use them as effigies. His foul temper and his cruel nature remained even now, in the most dire of circumstances.

But as Uva observed the Gate Lord, she quickly made a correction. He wasn't just being idle. Rather, he was doing something very, very subtle. Crackles of corrosive energy pulsed between his hands, and the three skulls planted upon his chest plate flashed intermittently, leaking out necromantic energy. Far below, as corpses fell from the sky and tumbled off the bridge like a constant downpour of death, she saw the many bodies crackling with that corrosive energy as well.

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

Necromancy jumped between the corpses, sparking like bolts of electricity. And Uva was more than glad she saw that. If she had simply reached out and burrowed herself into a Pathbearer's body, she might very well have suffered some Necromantic damage. She didn't know exactly if Necromancy could damage her upon contacting her mana strands, but she didn't intend to find out. For now, however, she wanted attrition, and so Gate Lord Confriga needed to be distracted.

First, she would break his Magi corps and force a true battle of bone to bone, blade to blade, and flesh to flesh. She directed the fire dimensional she currently puppeted down toward one of the magi formations. She extended a few of her Psychomancy threads and began scouring the battlefield.

Uva struck at numerous bodies using her strands, briefly tapping them and pulling away before they could figure out what just happened. She gauged the strongest Magical Resistances within a group and proceeded to create a general map she could follow of minds to seize and potential powerful adversaries to avoid.

There were a few Master-Tier Psychomancers present as well, but they were too focused on contending with each other to notice her, and she specifically avoided them, at least for now. She would remove them when she had the chance as the battle progressed, but she had a few magi columns to collapse first.

It was an elven mercenary Pathbearer who became her second victim that day. His armor was already cracked, part of his chest plate shattered by a heavy length of glistening enamel. The jagged tooth had been launched into the mercenary's armor, but it didn't punch all the way through, sparing his life. Unfortunately, it did break the armor, and that meant he had no more Magical Resistance, which in turn meant that it took little effort for Uva to slowly push her threads into his mind and stitch her very ego over his.

He gave a brief jerk before she assumed full control. Within her mind, she heard him yell, What, what just happened? What—what the fuck?

She ignored him. He didn't matter anymore.

He and the other Cryomancers were hovering in place. Below them, the customs and processing building lingered, but it was badly damaged, and the insides were also festering with Blood Horrors, fighting jump teams of Pathbearers. The mercenary and the other mages with him stayed aloft in the air thanks to a Wind-Walking Enchantment on their boots, and it was that same Enchantment that Uva intended to make their downfall when she made her next move.

"Magi, condense spell!" a cry sounded from the front of the formation. Just then, several spells and projectiles whistled by, and a few less experienced magi flinched out of place. They were quickly stabilized by the veterans as order asserted itself in the form of non-contracted officers.

As one, the magi corps lifted their focus crystals, some bearing staves, others adjusting helmets. They directed their mana into a common point, their fields co-mingling as one as they all supported each other, building spells that were bigger than any one of them could shape individually. But it also made the spell vulnerable.

Uva knew a little bit about Cryomancy, not nearly as much as the mercenary she currently controlled. That wasn't a problem because she had access to his will and memories now, and she commanded him to reach into the spell and disrupt it as violently as he could.

No, no, that'll kill us all! No, stop, stop, my brother's in this group! She ignored him. She forced him to continue. He didn't have a choice in the matter. Stop! Stop!

It was very common now to hear these voices screaming inside of her. Uva silenced the mercenary. She needed to focus.

"Phase one!" the commander of their column cried, but they weren't going to get to stage two, let alone stage three. As the mercenary Uva controlled poured his mana field into the group spell, he suddenly pushed it outward, driving his mana against everyone else's at an awkward, brutal angle.

Several mages lost control of their spells, interrupted and stunned by Uva's puppet slamming his field into theirs. They cried out, and then Uva's puppet completed his disruption. He pulled back his hands, making a gesture that resembled someone trying to rip something apart. He detonated his own spell inside the larger formation. The disruption caused a catastrophic chain reaction, and the entire group spell collapsed inward.

A colossal slab of ice infused with the collective coldness of a blizzard promptly exploded outwards. A good portion of the entire group froze and then ceased to be as they shattered apart. Uva felt the mercenary she controlled take a shard of ice through the slight rent in his armor left by the enamel spike. It ripped through his body, and blood began to flood into his lungs.

As he gargled and gasped, he tumbled from the sky, losing balance and failing to activate the Enchantment on his boots. Other magi fell with him, most of them missing parts of their body, some of

them only stunned. The mercenary wailed within Uva. She directed her strands outwards, searching for her next sleeve.

She saw some of Confriga's Master-Slayer contingents turn in surprise, looking at the falling mages. She considered them, but guessed that they would have rather impressive Magical Resistances, as dedicated warriors, and elite ones at that.

Then, a flood of blood-red magic sailed through the air, detonating all around her section of the airspace. At once, festering spores twisted through the air. Some of the Gate Lord's men began to choke, and others convulsed as foul, festering fogs swept over them, melting their flesh and driving the blood from their pores.

Her active sabotage worked. The vampires had spotted the moment of weakness in Confriga's defenders, and they targeted the collapsing section with brutality. Horde or not, there was an instinctive animal cunning to the First Blood's forces. They knew weakness when they saw it. Blood Horrors began to surge towards the space in the sky that the Cryomancers used to occupy.

The vanguard protecting the Cryomancers pushed back. The semicircle that composed Confriga's front line began to fold. His second layer of elite response teams surged forward. Skills shook the air. Hundreds of Blood Horrors began to die, coating the air in the thick mist of blood and bile. But they did their job, for a few hundred of the Gate Lord's soldiers simply disintegrated into sprays of gore as Biomancy spells swept through them.

The first of the high vampires smashed through Confriga's outer line and was briefly locked in a melee against the Gate Lord's elite forces. And then one of Confriga's petal-like wings blurred. The high vampire didn't even get to scream. She simply dissolved, both sections of her body tumbling through the air and splashing apart like ash.

More importantly, Uva didn't even see what Confriga did. That's how superior his Reflexes were.

I will need to keep my distance far, far away from him, Uva thought, examining the Gate Lord. And she also felt a strange sense of foreboding about his long, thin sword. It was so black that it sucked in the surrounding light, but there was also something else about the weapon. She sensed there was a presence of a mind inside that sword.

An awakened weapon? Was the sword like her shield? She turned away from that thought as she noticed the Blood Horrors now pushing through the gaps left by Confriga's vanguard. And that was her next opportunity.

She cast her strands forward and immediately seized the mind of a Blood Horror. The benefit to these monsters was how easy they were to create. The First Blood used them in all situations, unleashing them in mass, using them to support their lesser brethren. However, there was a limitation to low quality soldiers. When it came to a Heroic-Tier Pathbearer like Uva, they were just opportunities for her to move across the battlefield. Moreover, since they were so simple of thought, she could direct the Horrors with a few meager strands.

She shifted her mind from Horror to Horror, hunting for a high vampire to use as her next body. But she also moved with caution. She moved with care. She moved constantly and stayed away from any of the dying Blood Horrors. Confriga was still charging up his Necromancy spell, and she didn't want to discover what it was like to be inside a Horror when the corrosion consumed them.

As she moved through the many bodies, she also took the opportunity to stab at Confriga's defenders using her mana strands. Most of them had at least Adept-Tier Magical Resistance. They broke quickly. She shattered them, but before she usually had a chance to assume their bodies, the Blood Horrors would take advantage of their stunned states and tear them apart. A growing collapse began to extend along that section of Confriga's army.

She heard the Gate Lord cry out, "Useless!"

Chapter 79 (II) Battle

Then he released his spell, and she quickly discovered what it was meant to do. From the many, many bodies descending to the rivers below came streams of howling corrosion. The heads of these streams transformed into a swarm of ghostly faces, faces of the fallen, faces screaming and begging to be put back to rest. They surged towards Confriga, but they also shot toward the Blood Horror Uva used as a sleeve and even the Gate Lord's own men.

She avoided the oncoming Necromancy by jumping to a few different bodies further away and abandoning those that were too close, but most were not that fortunate. The Necromancy smashed through them, ripping their souls asunder. She heard them howl in ways that went beyond pain. It was the howl one made when they lost a limb or something essential to their being. That was the sound of skills shattering, of souls being wounded, and Uva knew that pain. She had reached into Shiv and felt how much it hurt.

But unlike Shiv, most of them broke immediately, their eyes rolling as they blacked out, their bodies spasming as they fell from the sky. Through the chaos, she spotted a new opening. A screaming wyvern tore through the air, its black, insectile body glistening with the blood of its rider. Only the lower half of the man still remained, but she could still make do with the beast itself.

She jumped into its mind and immediately began to push her way through the Blood Horrors. She used her strands to strike at them, to drive them away and fill them with the urge to avoid her. And then she flew towards the second column of magi, a small elite group of Dynamancers who were beginning to summon the beginnings of what seemed to be a colossal force-spell. Her controlled wyvern crashed into them before the force-spell could ever fully form.

Their commander proved hardier than she expected and endured the blow, pushing back on the wyvern. But even so, his Physicality lagged behind his Toughness. He was driven into the rest of the column, and several of them broke focus. The Dynamancy spell died, and a wave of heavy force exploded everywhere. The wyvern she used splattered apart. The soldiers casting the spell crumpled

and turned into cooked flesh within their armor. In a sudden instant, ten percent of the elemental magi formation was dead, and far more were wounded, falling from the air.

The Blood Horrors surged through the gaps, attacking all the disorganized magi. But they were intercepted by the elite Pathbearer teams and the final barrier of Master-Slayer contingents.

"What are you doing?" Confriga roared. "Hold, vanguard, hold! Hold, or I will have your heads!" He swept his wings through the oncoming Blood Horrors, uncaring if he hit his own men in the process. Everything burned. Confriga's own forces, the Blood Horrors, the high vampires, everything. His wings unleashed tides of flame so hot, so severe, that just being in the vicinity caused flesh to melt. It was then that Uva realized the Gate Lord likely wasn't limited to one or two Heroic-Tier Skills, but that he was something more akin to a true Hero.

She was going to need to grind him down as much as she could.

But to do that, she needed to compromise his army even more. And so she sought out a third contingent of mages, her strands already reaching, and she found another opportune victim. The third formation of magi was a large group of specialized Aeromancers. They were especially useful because she wanted to inflict disorder on Confriga's forces and make this a direct break. That would force Confriga to confront the enemy directly.

This time, she pried her way into the body of another Umbral. A mercenary. Uva scorned mercenaries. No faith, no loyalty, no higher cause, merely wealth, and she wore them with the same casual cruelty that they treated slaves with. The mercenary cried out, but it was worthless. As the Aeromancer formation began to shape a spell, Uva drove the mercenary to control and twist the spell into something unstable. Rather than unleashing a hurricane upon the Blood Horrors, a blast of wind rippled through the air, knocking most of the mercenaries out of position, but also scattering every surrounding formation within Confriga's army.

The disorganization became too much. As lines broke, Blood Horrors spilled through, and it quickly became "every man for himself." Whatever coherence the vanguards had was gone now. They were surrounded on all sides by teeth, fang, and flesh. Biomancers reached out and liquefied who they could. Armors shattered while Magical Resistances cracked and broke. Death reigned in the air, and Confriga let out a roar.

"Worthless vermin!" he declared. "All of you, pathetic! I do not need you. I do not need your whimpering ways." And the Gate Lord descended for the first time.

Uva felt a twist of anticipation in her gut. She prepared to jump to another body, but then the Gate Lord did something unexpected. He reached out slowly and grasped his blade.

"Absence!" he declared. "It is time for you to feed. It is time to nourish your depths with the lives of the unworthy!"

And as Confriga split the sky behind him with a single stroke, Uva's mind reeled as she tried to process what she was seeing. There, through the gap Confriga left on the surface of the world, emerged a shadowy shape. It was a colossal monster, perhaps half the size of the Jealousy. It had far too many eyes, far too many mouths, and from its body extended far too many clawed limbs. The thing chittered, it sang, and it plunged forth, reaching out and snatching anything it could out of the air. It consumed some of Confriga's own forces, but it mainly devoured the vampiric forces.

Flashing spells of crimson crashed against the creature's body, but it simply cackled in response.

"Tasty."

And from its eyes surged beams of darkness, beams that swept across the first blood hordes, and slowly she saw the creature, once nothing but quivering blackness, lined with maw, eye, limb, and claw, fill. The beings it ate and consumed with its rays of darkness filled its interior. As it unleashed its power, she felt several mana fields spreading out from its body. Cryomancy. Psychomancy. Neither at anything higher than Master...

Uva took a chance and jabbed it lightly with one of her mana strands. The monster grunted and launched a lashing limb in the direction of her strand but failed to notice her.

Magical Resistance, likely at Master Tier... Uva considered.

Master-Tier. She could break Master-Tier with enough focus. And suddenly a new, wonderful opportunity opened for Uva. She extended her tendrils from all over the battlefield as she began to jab at Confriga's summoned monster. If he thought this creature was going to be his salvation, he was wrong.

She was going to turn this creature against its summoner. In fact, she looked forward to discovering just where the Gate Lord's capabilities truly lay.

"Alright, Valor, let's... try to make sure this works," Adam said. He did his best to maintain his concentration as he formed a large spatial barrier around the adamantine elevator shaft connecting Confriga's obsidian tower to the third gateway. Adam and Valor hovered just a few meters away from the shaft, and behind them bobbed the colossal bulk of the Graven Cage.

So far, they were unnoticed. Mainly thanks to Adam's Veilpiercer. He shot a patrolling dimensional, and a second later, they appeared right beside the obsidian tower without exposing themselves to any danger. Sporadically, though, a mana bomb would go off somewhere, and Adam would flinch as he felt

an invisible tension grow. Still, he and Valor were in position. All they needed to do was burn through the shaft with Necromancy and intercept the falling elevator.

It was going to need every bit of timing Adam could muster, but he could do this. He and Valor could both do this. It was practically an easy job compared to what Shiv and Uva were probably going through right now.

"Alright. Ready, Valor?" Adam said. He activated his vambrace and immediately nocked a Veilpiercer arrow. The corrosion spread from the small Necromantic fissure he left in the air, and he aimed his shot at the spatial bubble he formed around the elevator shaft.

"Let your mind go blank," Valor intoned. "Your muscle memory will be enough."

"I got it," Adam said, annoyed.

"Do not focus too much."

"I said I got it!" Adam snapped.

The Legendary Pathbearer grunted and slowly drifted back, ceding the moment to Adam. He was close, the Graven Cage was right there, he had enough mana, he could melt right through that adamantine. Or maybe, maybe he'd pour a bit more dimensionality... A little bit more, yes. He paused as he unleashed some more of his mana. The spatial sphere around the elevator shaft thickened, turning into a shroud of darkness coated with distortions.

Once more, he prepared to fire his corroded Veilpiercer—

Something smashed into his back. It launched him out of the air as he went tumbling. His corroded Veilpiercer went off to the side and tore a hole through another building.

Valor snarled and barely avoided a hit himself. Something crackled through the air, something Adam couldn't perceive because it was either invisible or too fast. The Young Lord coughed as he adjusted his position. He flexed his burning wings and dashed to the right, only to take another blow in the chest. This time the wind was fully knocked out from his lungs, and his eyes rolled.

"What the hell is—"

"Sniper!" Valor shouted.

But just then a shot cracked into the back of Valor's skull, and the Legendary Pathbearer went reeling off into the air. The outline of Necromancy that traced his body vanished as every separate fragment comprising his current form dropped, descending toward the molten rivers below.

"Valor!" Adam cried. Then two more shots hit him. One hit him right at the ankle, tearing something. The Young Lord cursed. The other crashed into his collar and made him twist backward. But as Adam reeled, he activated his vambrace on instinct or reflex, and it was good that he did. For the moment he created another corrosive fissure, two pulses of pressure spread through the air before him.

His corrosive fissure expanded into a small realm that drew all Dimensionality and spatial mana into it like a micro-anchor.

Two sets of screams filled the air as the twin teleportation spheres of enemy Jump Mages were drawn into Adam's corroded domain

The insides of the realm lit up with an eerie, acidic green. What emerged from the fissure in the end within were two badly withered corpses—both of them wearing crow masks.

For a second Adam thought he had dealt with the people who were ambushing him. Then another heavy shot smashed into his back and he went tumbling forward across the open air.

"Shit!" he growled to himself. His Repulsion Shroud managed to launch him off a bit further, and the next shot hissed by him. He focused his Seer of Horizons, allowing his Legendary armor to take a shot for him. He searched and then directed his senses out to observe himself from a third person perspective. The next shot came and impacted his lower rib. He felt something click, but nothing tore or broke. It just hurt to breathe a little.

He didn't see the projectile, but he did spot a flashing glint far in the horizon from the window of a distant descending building. Immediately, Adam cast his senses there and found himself looking at a raven-helmed bastard.

The Young Lord sneered. He formed a Veilpiercer arrow, and he infused it with the corrosive mana of his vambrace. His senses were locked on the raven even as they cycled what seemed to be some kind of long-barreled ballistae. It let out a brief whine, and he had a feeling that once it finished making that noise, it would fire again.

But the Young Lord didn't give them that chance. He knew where they were, and even if he couldn't see what they were shooting at him, that didn't matter. He just needed to kill the shooter first.

Adam fired his Veilpiercer. A splash of corrosive mana tore open a rift in front of him, and it continued down, creating a dimensional pathway all the way to where the raven lay in wait. They didn't even see the arrow that killed them.

They were shooting at him from over two kilometers away, and in the span of a single second, Adam spotted them and fired back.

The Necromancy-charged Veilpiercer smashed into their skull at immense speed, fast enough to render the raven-helmed stranger a function of physics rather than biology. The Necromancy, then, was a final dishonor. It shattered their soul just as their body dissolved into nothing but ash and paste.

The Young Lord laughed. "Let's see you shoot me now, you bastard."

And then, Seer of Horizons alerted him to something else. There was another glint from a building three kilometers away, and another from a building one kilometer away, and a glint from a bridge just a few hundred meters away. Then three shots hit him at once, and this time Adam felt his left shoulder dislocate.

"Godsdammit!" the Young Lord roared, the frustration far greater than his pain. "System! You bastard! Just give me a moment! Just one!"

More shots came from all around. Every impact rattled the Young Lord, and a few chipped off pieces from the Graven Cage. Adam's eyes widened as he adapted. He formed a Hydrokinetic limb and fired a

shot back at the nearest enemy. A crow atop a nearby bridge burst apart as a dense Veilpiercer crashed into them.

But Adam wasn't done. He flexed his wings and arced through the air. He slammed his left shoulder into the Graven Cage and did two things at once. First, he relocated his shoulder. Next, he pushed the construct through the new dimensional pathway he just made and left it stashed there to hide it from further risk of damage. When that was done, he dove out onto the bridge and splashed down against the hot blood of the crow he just killed. Adam cast his Awareness out again while prone, recalling where his enemies were as he shaped a few more arrows.

They lost track of him now, but he could still find them. And he was very, very unhappy that they shot him. And even more unhappy that they shot his mentor in the back of the head.

A second later, he found another raven staring down the barrel of another strange weapon. They looked confused. And they died confused as Adam released a trans-dimensional arrow into their throat, decapitating them.

"One," Adam growled. "I counted at least one more." He prepared another arrow. Paused. And then prepared four more in each of his newly shaped arms.

Chapter 80 (I) Heartstopper

"I must confess that I'm not too fond of your Great London overall, or even New Albion as a whole. Your people wear masks, hiding themselves. But then again, it also allows them to be who they are... Regardless, here, before the rushing currents of the River Thames, the sight of Great London in autumn dispels some of my distaste. Come. Sit by me, owl. What do you think of this composition?"

"It looks immaculate, but... unnatural."

"Unnatural?"

"Yes, there are no imperfections. It is like a recreation. A too-perfect recreation."

"Oh, and that is a failure, is it?"

"No. Imperfections are failure. But failure is how you signal humanity sometimes. And you, with your skill, have gone too far beyond. It shakes the eyes of most, and when they are shaken, they are easily turned aside. They proclaim that imperfection and slight idiosyncrasies are at the heart of artwork. Mortal expression, if you will."

"Ah, but what worth are they? What matter do they bear in the grand scheme of things?"

"For us? Not much. The minds of the masses are easy to direct even without magic. For you? Everything, I suspect. After all, that is how you were forgotten and fell so far, isn't it? No more faithful. No more people to enforce your story. Only you and a select few cultists alone bear your Sacred Phylacteries, keeping you held, barely, within the realm of divinity."

"My, aren't you straight and bold. I thought you owls were supposed to be master spies. Where is the diplomacy?"

"Sometimes diplomacy runs counter to tradecraft, especially with you. We know why you are here. You've come to make us an offer."

"I've come to strike a deal with you. First, here, keep the drawing. It will allow me to contact your people easier. I suppose you know about the civil war that is fated to unfold within the Yellowstone Republic."

"Yes, a war of your so-called Ascendants. A rebellion of one god against another twelve. It seems hopeless for the Starhawk."

"It does seem that way, doesn't it? But then again, there were more than just the Starhawk. And should he fall, he wouldn't be the first god to be forgotten."

"Oh? Are you implying that he isn't alone?"

"I'm not implying anything. I am, however, going to tell you about a wonderful opportunity. How would the Stolen Throne like to possess a few Sacred Phylacteries? Or even have a stake in another government? An influential stake, if you will."

"It would fascinate us. But why would you, even as a god forgotten, betray some of your old comrades so easily?"

"Comrades? As if there were ever such a thing. Let me tell you, dear girl, the first thing you learn about being a god is that all the world becomes an enemy."

"But isn't that mostly accurate for a god like you? You are no true god, after all. Just someone who ascended through the skill of another."

"Ah, mock me as you will, but you understand the truth. Now, the offer. You Albionites will accept, of course, but we need to discuss what Sacred Phylactery I will offer to you in exchange for an army to claim it... Starhawk's Perch."

"What?"

"I will give you Starhawk's Perch, and you will hold dominion over the sun and the sky. Or at least, a substantial portion of the sun and sky. It will spare you from more of the Legacy Empire's stealth bombers, at the very least."

"But the Starhawk is not yet dead. How can you promise something you do not even possess?"

"Without my intervention, I suspect he may just be able to endure, or even wage a partially successful rebellion. This, I do not want. This is going to be troublesome for me, especially since his desire is to tear it all down and bring an end to our so-called unjust godhood. But the other Ascendants, they are as greedy as they are cowardly. They will seek to destroy the Perch, or potentially subsume it into their own mythology. I would see it donated to one of your faceless nobles, perhaps. They seem to at least have some desire to make use of things great and powerful."

"And what do you get out of this bargain?"

"The other Phylacteries. I will have need of them. This tome is deeply underfed, and there are some 'old associates' I desire to contact."

"Ah, I see. And so you are going to wage your own rebellion?"

"No, no, no. I am simply going to tell a new story. My own story. I've grown tired of being a god elevated by another. A god born of someone else's whims, as you said. I wish to go beyond this. I wish to become something greater, even if that means burning my own false divinity in the short run. But to ensure my rise to true divinity... I need more power. So, do we have an arrangement?"

"We do. But we trust you understand that we will not agree idly. There is a contract we require—"

"Of course. I am no fool. Prepare the ritual. I will be here, painting. And keep the drawing close to you. I will not illustrate another, unless you ask very, very nicely. And it will cost you a fee, next time."

-Conversation between "The Educator" and an owl of Aviary

The Momentum Core discharge probably hurt Shiv more than his knife did the high vampire.

The massive Bloodspawn was screaming, and the screams only grew louder as Shiv channeled his Conduit of Dawn inside the man's eye socket. As they sailed through the air, it felt like the left side of Shiv's body was being flayed off, and that someone was pouring acid on the exposed tissue underneath before setting it ablaze.

Darkness crept along the corners of Shiv's vision as he gritted his teeth against the pain.

For a moment, delirium took him, and he thought he was back in the Passage teleportation anchor with Uva and her team, enduring the flames of purification once more. Can Hu's call pulled him out from his stupor. "Shiv, to your right."

The Deathless reacted instinctively. He pulled himself back using his gravitic field, and he blasted off from the high vampire with a stomp. Still, he kept his beam focused on the Bloodspawn's face. Smoke and bubbling tissue swelled free from the high vampire's mangled eye. But its expression was one of pure outrage and surprise rather than fear.

Shiv realized he was faster than it, but he was about even with the owl present in the room. And that's where the first attack came from. A thread sliced through the space where Shiv once was. It was a fine thread, so thin that he almost mistook it for one of Uva's mana strands. But it only glistened rather than glowed, and it cleaved across the air at such speeds that Shiv saw a whip-crack shudder right in front of him before a shockwave followed. His gravity field let him muscle through the shockwave, but it still slammed against him slightly, and even that light jostle was enough to make him bite back a whimper.

Fighting with a soul wound was pure hell. But Shiv wasn't going to let pure hell hold him back from being in a fight.

He immediately went for the owl next, only for them to disappear before his very eyes. The last thing he saw of the bird was of them reeling a thin, glistening wire under their sleeve. Then, a gust of wind swept over the owl, and they were gone, with only a quiet gale hinting at their possible location.

Shiv reactivated his Silhouette in response. Just in time, a tendril of blood shot through the air, but it misjudged his exact position. Shiv turned, sweeping his kukri across the room, his Conduit of Dawn constantly flaring. A beam slashed through several groups of high vampires. The weaker ones were split in half, and he guided the stream of light through their chests. A few detonated their lineage cores, the things they had for hearts, exploding in small oceans of gore.

Most of the others, though, survived.

Even split in half, Shiv could see them rapidly healing, rebuilding their bodies, and once again, he was offended by the very fact that vampires could do this. His Woundeater allowed him immediate reconstitution, but the vampires could ignore cancer, could shape their own bodies like clay, just because of the unique nature of their hearts. Shiv was going to rip out their hearts out of spite, if nothing else.

Warning indicators and icons lit up as he scanned the room through Can Hu's sensors. "There are still at least sixty-five vampires. I counted twenty Avia agents and six unknown dimensional entities."

Shiv blasted upward into the air as a series of spells smashed into the ground where he used to be. Massive pustules of blood erupted. Sections of the floor turned from solid matter into jagged clumps of teeth that rose up to bite at nothing but air, and from a withering wind thick with sickness and decay came a swarm of horrific, winged maggots. Comparatively, Shiv's Biomancy was practically plain—very effective, but plain, focused on transferring or removing damage.

I can see why Ekkihurst is such a disturbed individual now, Shiv thought, and once more his evolved stealth skill proved its worth.

It took a few moments for the first vampire to trace his exact position, but even then, they had to move their mana field until they finally sensed him.

"There! He's up—" The vampire didn't manage to finish his words as a bone drill punched through his chest, pinning his heart to the ground below. Three other high vampires were staked the exact same way, and Shiv tested a new technique. Ignoring the searing pain that burst across the left side of his body, he chucked out pieces of skull and shattered them with his Biomancy, using them as fragmentation grenades.

Immediately, he started dividing the enemies in the room into separate groups. The ones that endured and remained unharmed were Master-Tier for Toughness or well armored. The ones that took minor wounds were High Adepts at least. The ones that fell apart and died in pieces were inconsequential.

Before he could chuck a few more bone grenades out, however, another warning came from Can Hu. Shiv spotted the problem a half-second before Can Hu even said anything. The Penitent had kept up a thin shroud of hovering debris to use as a proximity field against unseen or hidden threats for Shiv. That field was pierced. A small gap formed in the orbiting pebbles.

Shiv twisted right with a redirection of his gravitic field. Something scraped across his armor. His bones adapted, but not before it left a particularly deep cut along his chest. Then a shockwave spread out, and it impacted him. This time the blast was close and heavy enough that it broke Shiv's focus. His next spell shattered. Pain erupted across the left side of his body, and he clenched his arm with a scream.

"Shiv!" Can Hu said, but the Deathless didn't need to be warned; he reacted. He pulled himself backward, just not nearly fast enough. Something caught his leg, and he felt an immense impact smash into his body, but also his Biomancy at the same time. He was taken off his feet and slammed into the ground. The room shook from the sheer force of the impact. The floor cracked as many of the lesser vampires and Aviary agents were flung into the air.

Clutching Shiv by the chest was the high vampire he stabbed in the eye just before. The damned Bloodspawn was leaning over him, drooling with malice. The high vampire's expression was a mask of absolute rage, his mouth lined in rows of twisting, gleaming teeth.

Through the haze of immense pain, Shiv briefly observed his adversary, feeling them reach into his armor, cracking the front of his adamantine chest plate with contemptuous ease. But the high vampire didn't do it with just strength. No, it was like his Physicality was fused with his Biomancy. Everything he did twisted and warped biology. His very body ground against Shiv's mana field, and the high vampire itself felt like an enduring spell made solid.

Shiv triggered the Song of the Vigilant as his focus immediately reasserted itself. At the same time, he clutched his adversary's arm and pushed back. He pushed back with his Biomancy as well, ignoring the pain flaring across his entire left hemisphere. A brutal struggle ensued. His adversary was strong and far larger than any other high vampire he'd seen before. More than that, the high vampire was covered by dense, armored scabs, scar tissue forming something akin to disgusting organic plating.

"You will pay for my eye," the Bloodspawn growled. By this point, he had already regrown the organ. There wasn't even a hint that Shiv had boiled the socket from the inside. Damn vampires and their regeneration. Most other enemies would have died from Deepest Edge, Momentum Core, and Gravitic Wrestler working together.

Can Hu cried another warning. Shiv felt the Penitent cast a Geomancy spell. It condensed a layer of stone that intercepted the whistling whip used by the owl. The string punched through Can Hu's stones with contemptuous ease. An Adept had no chance against a Master or above. However, it was just long enough for Shiv to sense what was coming.

Shiv used his field to drag the high vampire into the place where he used to be. The whip struck the beast in the temple. The high vampire let out a furious cry. And while he was distracted, Shiv activated his Chrono-Anchored Strike. Immediately, he rematerialized within the high vampire's eye socket, driving his blade deep, triggering Conduit of Dawn again. Blood exploded out from the back of the high vampire's skull as he roared in agony once more.

His blade dimmed and flickered. He would need to feed it more light before he could use that again. But for a final burst of brightness, it did its work. It set the insides of the high vampire's skull on fire. It cried out in genuine pain this time, and Shiv promptly kned him in the throat. As his enemy gagged, Shiv seized him by the head and flung him like a missile at his nearby allies. He was strong, but really not that fast. Yet there was a sense of tension building inside Shiv.

Something told him the high vampire hadn't truly begun to fight yet—was holding something back.

"Focus on the weaker enemies," Can Hu said. "Remove them from the equation, then concentrate on bringing down the elites."

"Got it." Shiv pointed his field at another portion of the room. He crashed down against the ground. A shockwave exploded around him, pain flashed through his left side, but his Composer-blessed song kept his focus, kept him centered even as he nearly blacked out.

Spells went wide as the vampires lost track of him again. Shiv's kukri flared out, its glinting edge flickering through flesh, slicing and cutting at arteries, tendons, eyes, and wrists. Blood sprayed out, splashing against Shiv, but his silhouette remained active, leaving only his outline stained red. Adam was right, a skill that focused on concealment rather than outright evasion was perfect for him.

Deepest Edge > 61

As he advanced on the group, he drew out three bone drills and fused them together. He turned them into a curved length and sent them spinning through the room as if an adamantite boomerang. It crashed into several groups of enemies, and Shiv pushed it hard with his Biomancy, its spin dismembering, decapitating, ripping open armor, and lifting even hardier foes off their feet.

And then he decided to add to the confusion. He launched another set of his bone armor, flinging it to the other side of the room. Suddenly, a series of spells crashed against it, and immediately the bone armor disintegrated into maggots, into spraying mist, into tumorous pustules that burst and popped.

And that was the annoying thing about fighting other Biomancers. They could manipulate his armor as easily as he could, sometimes more.

Shiv smashed through a group of unprepared, distracted vampires, and when he got to his first Aviary agent, he drove his elbow into the crow's face. Its helmet shattered, and its skull burst apart on the inside. Yet, as he drank in momentum, something shot through the space mere centimeters to his left. It whisked by his head, and Shiv thought he dodged another strike from the owl.

But this time, instead of the string simply sailing forward and detonating in a shockwave, it twisted unnaturally, zigzagging in his general vicinity until it ended up crashing under his left rib.

Shiv grunted. The blow barely affected him. It didn't even fracture his armor at all. The shockwave, he shrugged off with his gravity field. But the Necromantic corrosion on his badly burned flesh, that made him scream. It hurt so bad that Shiv folded over to clutch at his side.

The interruption lasted just long enough for the scar-armored high vampire to smash into him again.

Chapter 80 (II) Heartstopper

This time, however, the high vampire didn't just strike Shiv's flesh. The Bloodspawn shifted his own. His clawed hand exploded forward, lengthening strips of uncoiling tissue. The high vampire's skin tore, and from below hatched new scabs, new layers to his organic armor. Shiv felt himself crash against the opposite wall, and a howl of absolute agony escaped him as his soul-wound was exacerbated.

He managed to shape a spell of his own, pushing back against the high vampire's intent, stopping it from flaying his body apart. But he could feel his bone armor shuddering and cracking. They were a stronger Biomancer than he was. The high vampire's Skill Fusion was pressing him hard, and before he could react, the owl was back, the zipping, hissing string striking him over and over again on the left side of his body. And then came a sea of other spells. Every vampire in the room pitted their Biomancy against his,

and he felt his mana field crack and bend inwards. He was Master-Tier, but he needed a lot more levels—perhaps even another Evolution if he wanted to sustain this type of combat for long.

Can Hu responded by shattering all the stones around Shiv, spreading dust into the air and forming a protective cloud. Just then, a gale pushed through the dust, flinging it aside as the owl emerged. They swiped at Shiv, not with their string this time, but a blade, a blade covered in dimensional mana. The blade phased through his armor and then rematerialized halfway against Shiv's ribs.

But to the owl's surprise, the blade shattered after only inflicting the slightest of nicks against Shiv's torso.

Raw Instinct took hold of the Deathless. He pulled himself in the direction of the owl. He slammed into their chest just as they turned to air. The impact was brief, but Shiv definitely felt something crack. But the high vampire was still clinging to him, and it pulled him back. It twisted his Biomancy mana, and Shiv cried out more spiritually than physically. Some of his armor shattered apart, the bones fracturing before the high vampire's will. Mana strain was setting in faster than ever before for Shiv, and then he activated his Chrono-Anchored Strike again, and once more buried his knife into the vampire's eye.

"I'm getting real sick of you," Shiv said, driving the knife in. He picked the high vampire up, tearing him off the ground using his gravitic field. Surprised, the vampire didn't respond in time. Not for when he lifted him with a twist of his knife, not for when he spiked the vampire headfirst against the ground, slamming the bloodsucker over and over again in a series of violent choke slams.

Every blow sent pain blasting through Shiv's body. "To hell with this," he growled. With so many vampires trying to rip him apart using their own Biomancy, he wasn't going to be able to focus on complex spellcasting at all.

And so Shiv stopped his Song of the Vigilant, and he triggered his second Blessing for the first time. Incredible pain exploded through Shiv as the Icon of the Painrinker ignited on his chest, a brand of an orc's claw reaching into an open flame. But instead of being a static image, it flickered, it moved, and the claw clenched into a fist. Shiv stopped being capable of coherent thought then. Pain drowned out his deeper thoughts, so he let his instincts take hold. He slashed the scab-armored vampire twice across the face and practically beheaded the blood-drinker. The high vampire screamed and choked as his skull came apart in pieces—but he still didn't die, even as Shiv took his head off completely.

Before the headless high vampire could respond, Shiv tore the bastard from the ground and began using him as a club. He splattered one of the high vampire's soldiers with the scabbed bloodsucker's body.

And even through the incoherence of his all-consuming pain, Shiv realized something. The high vampire couldn't easily pit its strength against his without proper leverage. And that was another major benefit offered by his Gravitic Wrestler Skill. Shiv was his own leverage. And with the gravitic field, he could effectively pit his strength against anything, no matter what size, so long as he had contact.

The vampire could shapeshift, perhaps, but he still needed something to push off of to resist Shiv. And that was why it was so easy for him to fling the high vampire into a horde of his minions. Most of them were knocked over. The high vampire let out a growl of frustration as his arms shapeshifted again. Instead of simply extending, his fingers twisted into hooks that allowed him to grind himself to a halt.

But Shiv didn't get to focus on the high vampire for long, for the first of the golems unleashed a spell on him. A blast of blood erupted out toward Shiv. He tried to dodge it, but he was too focused on the high vampire, and it struck him dead-on. He pushed back using his Biomancy, but for a moment he felt every bit of fluid within his veins quiver and twist.

The blood-made golem was vaguely humanoid, and as it reached out using its mana to connect with Shiv, he briefly saw it morph into his form—a distorted, disgusting parody of him that twitched and writhed. Shiv briefly reacted the same way as the spell almost set in, but he pushed past it, and he slammed into the blood-golem. It staggered back, but it was composed mostly of fluid, and thus his blow was merely stunning rather than wounding.

Without warning, the blood golem splashed apart, only for a beast composed of nothing but jagged teeth to clamp itself down on him, driving thick, heavy fangs against his body. Thick heavy fangs that promptly burst and broke against Shiv's adamantine armor.

He had adapted from multiple impacts. He wasn't going to be bitten in half by some high-tier golem. He reached inside and ripped the damn thing in half. A small pulsating heart, disfigured and lined with enamel, crashed down at Shiv's feet. He stomped on it, and off by his sides, the rising remnants of the fanged golem went still and died.

He felt the blood golem reach out for him again, but he shot high up into the air. He only made it approximately a meter before something pulled at the left side of his body. Shiv almost shrieked in anguish as what looked to be a very brutalized, battered mass of flesh reached out to him, extending a mutilated hand. As he was halted in midair, he saw the wounds dancing across the golem's body. It vaguely resembled a bunch of corpses stitched together, arms, legs, all sticking out at odd angles, but on its chest were a collection of faces, faces trapped in eternal torment, a voiceless scream etched on their visages, their tongues all missing.

And it was then that Shiv decided he was going to kill every vampire he saw, until they persuaded him otherwise. The pointless cruelty, the silly levels of sadism, the endless blood, gore, carnage, and the horrible felling smell.

He was fed up with it all, and he was fed up with them.

Shiv fed his gravitic wrestler with rage as he exploded through the air. His gravitic field was thundering around him, shaking his very outline, as if he were framed by a set of vibrating strings. The wound golem tried to take a step back, but it was too late, for Shiv didn't care about pain anymore. He would hurt as much as he could endure before passing out, if it meant killing every single vampire in this room.

When he struck the ground, he hit it with such force that the wound golem disintegrated outright. But not just the wound Golem. Two nearby high vampires turned to mist from the shockwave alone, and Shiv speared both of their hearts using his kukri. They still beat along the length of the blade, but he turned to address the rest of the room as he growled. "All right, I'm kind of tired of this. Stake yourselves. Or I'll do worse to you." His Dread Aura crashed against them, and he felt all of them shudder, all of them, including someone he couldn't see.

Dread Aura > 74

Deepest Edge > 61

And that's how he tracked the owl. A drifting section in the air came sailing above him, curling and twisting as if an invisible snake.

"Shiv," Can Hu said, marking the strangely moving air current.

"I see him," Shiv said. His Momentum Core was almost entirely full again, but he was going to keep this. Keep this until he absolutely had to use it. He shot upward without warning, but as he did, he launched another one of his expendable bodies out from his cloak. The diversion worked.

A string twisted out from the strange gale that hid the owl, just as the scabbed high vampire crashed down on Shiv's decoy corpse, ripping it in half. But the owl was unprepared for Shiv to blast by exactly where they were.

The Deathless slammed his fists together, creating a massive shockwave. The winds were disrupted. The owl was flung out, launched back into the air, but he didn't make it far. Shiv caught him by the ankle, and he drove an elbow into the owl's knee. The Aviary agent screamed. The entire limb folded inward, and then Shiv twisted it sideways, breaking the bones and mangling the tissue so bad it was little more than a bloodied, dripping clump of flesh.

"You should work more on your Toughness," Shiv growled.

And he took the owl by the throat and ripped off their mask. He saw a man, a man perhaps not much older than he was. His eyes were wide, and inside, his courage shattered. Shiv wanted to crush the owl's neck or rip them in half. But even through the rage, Shiv knew this one was valuable alive. Uva could get plenty of information from the owl's mind.

And so Shiv decided to be a disciplined monster. He hit the owl, not hard enough to break the man's neck or cave in their skull, but just enough to give them a concussion and temporarily knock them out. Then, he folded three skin decoys over the owl as they lurched through the air, avoiding attacks and spells. Shiv bundled the owl tight, leaving only room around his mouth so that the man wouldn't suffocate.

Then, Shiv promptly tossed the owl down into his cloak.

This wouldn't typically work. The way Shiv's cloak functioned made it easy for someone inside to escape. It was more spatially wide than it was truly deep, and it didn't stop people from wiggling out from the spatial distortion. He found out when he'd put a few living crickets inside for storage later while exploring the umbral wilderness. For now, though, he just had to hope that the owl didn't hop out.

Just then, a few more Biomancy spells crashed against Shiv. He grunted as he felt his mana field begin to tear.

A few more of that and I'll be beyond strained. They'll just pull me apart after that, Shiv realized.

But he had an opening now, without the owl constantly striking him. He could rip through the rest of the room while avoiding the scabbed high vampire for now. That one he had to save for last. And so Shiv worked through a priority chain of vulnerable targets. The first people he struck were the surviving agents of Aviary. They weren't like the vampires, they died when their bodies broke. He didn't need to rip out their hearts.

He crashed into them in a frenzy of pain and violence. And as he tore, ripping bodies asunder, constantly moving, using his pain to fuel his primal violence, he could actually hear the Challenger chuckling. And that just annoyed Shiv even more. He poured a little bit of rage into his Momentum Core, and even the fastest of the Aviary agents began to slow before his eyes. His knife flashed out, and he cut them. He cut them with no more skill, no more dexterity. He hewed and cleaved at them like a butcher. Even the ones with durable armor perished as his Deepest Edge caused his slashes to pass through their bodies. As such, many were mutilated within their armored shells, blood welling out from behind their helmets and masks.

His focus on attacking the Aviary agents also paid off in another way. The vampires didn't much care for their Aviary allies, and began indiscriminately unleashing Biomancy spells in their direction. A good few of the agents burst apart, turning into viscous pustules or died howling as winged maggots crawled out from inside their flesh.

Shiv's Silhouette jumped multiple levels in that moment. It was the main reason why most of the spells didn't strike into him. The other was from just how fast he was moving, and for a single moment, during a brief lull in the pain, something occurred to Shiv. Something about the sublime beauty of having multiple Master-Tier skills working in tandem.

Adamantine Adaption made him hard to kill directly. The Magebreaker allowed him to parry spells, but his Biomancy allowed that lore to be outright resisted. His Gravitic Wrestler granted him unsurpassed

control, and pairing that with Deepest Edge, even a titanic monster could be cleaved in half as his gravity-amplified blows passed through them. And then there was Silhouette; a mere Adept-Tier skill, perhaps, but when granted to someone with multiple Master-Tier skills, Shiv wasn't just fast, he wasn't just strong, he wasn't just resistant, he was also hard to track.

And it was this combination that collapsed the collective morale of every lesser fighter in that chamber.

Chapter 80 (III) Heartstopper

As the last raven of Aviary died beneath the tip of Shiv's blade, he flung them, launching them so hard that they bifurcated one of the vampires along the middle. Just then, a dimensional rift pulsed as the spellwork surrounding the dead Jealousy's teleportation anchor triggered. Shiv exploded across the room, his blade slicing in wide arcs. Bodies split in half, and with them lineage cores dropped in pieces as well. A spreading spatial bubble popped, unleashing another group of vampires along with a new tooth golem, or whatever it was called, into the teleportation anchor. They died in an instant, unprepared for Shiv's onslaught.

"Shiv, multiple spellcasters, creating a spell to your left." Shiv didn't think, he just followed Can Hu's direction. He shot into them, and the spell broke. But just then, Shiv felt a sting, and a spreading, vaporous cloud of hissing, dissolving blood splashed over him, seeping under and through the cracks in his armor. He pushed back with his Biomancy, but not before it melted some of his skin and disintegrated all of the surrounding vampires.

As he shot free from the deadly cloud, Shiv twisted to a halt on the other side of the room and slammed against the wall. The teleportation anchor dented and deformed from the inside. Some spell patterns began to flicker and fail. And at that, a loud roar came from the other side of the room. Shiv saw the scab-armored vampire rising into the air with his head regrown. And now he had wings now too. Jagged wings that were lined with thick tissues and edged with jutting teeth.

"What the hell is wrong with you people? Why is everything gore and blood and teeth?" Through labored breaths of pain, he spat his incredulity. "You have any idea how bad you all smell?" Shiv chuckled. "You know the worst thing about fighting you? It's the smell. Years of my life spent slaving away in a kitchen, and now you attack my sense of taste. Bastards."

Dread Aura > 75

His Dread Aura leveled again as he felt several vampires take a step back. He looked at them. There was only a small group left now. Twenty-seven, two blood golems, and the scab-armored high vampire glaring down at Shiv. He was shaking with frustration and fury.

Damn, Shiv thought. I didn't realize I killed so many people already.

"You will regret these mocking words," their leader growled. "I am Hero Novor Kraid. I am System-favored. And I will show you the meaning of pain." Kraid clenched a fist as blood began to twist around his arm. "I will show you—"

Shiv fired a bone drill into the vampire's face. The man swatted it aside. Then Shiv dropped his Silhouette and charged the vampire recklessly.

Or at least that was how it appeared.

A body clad in dense bone armor soared through the sky, arms reared back as if preparing a punch. But "Shiv" was slower than before, and the texture of the armor was wrong, more like glossy crystal than metallic shine. The high vampire snarled and backhanded what he thought to be Shiv. The body splattered apart with ease, and it left him open for a kukri stab straight into his heart, or at least what Shiv thought his heart should be.

Then it was Shiv's turn to be surprised. His Deepest Edge went all the way through. Blood burst out from the back of the high vampire, but he merely reared his head back with a shout and then seized Shiv with his long, hooking claws.

Shiv blinked. He was pretty sure the heart was there. He stabbed the vampire twice more, all across its chest. More blood ruptured, but the vampire squeezed inwards, trading damage with Shiv. Shiv's bones began to creak, and his mana strained. He cursed as he slashed at both the vampire's arms. Things split within the limb; ligaments, tissues, and bone, but the vampire healed as fast as he was cut.

Then, a series of spells soared through the air—Biomancy spells that were certain to send Shiv beyond the point of sustaining his mana field. And so he made a choice. He shifted out of context. Once more, he splashed back into his own Vitae. The world turned grey, and the spells impacted nothing but open air, and in one case the high vampire. The beast blinked. Shiv felt a coldness rush through him, and he descended first, rushing down as Rose whispered behind him.

“They are all, they are all being used, they are all being used against the Republic, against, against Sullain. They are, they are just chess pieces for the Educator. But she doesn’t see... there is another... she doesn’t see...”

Her words came like the mutterings of a mad oracle. Shiv breathed in before he rematerialized in a burst of white and red as he beheaded another vampire below the scabbed one. He pulled them in half, he crushed their core, and then he tore through several of the others.

A shine returned to his kukri. He activated Conduit of Dawn again, and he slashed through the two blood golems. They split in half, blood hissing as it turned to steam, and there, as they were momentarily discombobulated, he saw the cores within them, and he blasted through, slicing both. The blood golems collapsed into puddles thereafter, and with a final, contemptuous backhand, he obliterated the entire body of the last surviving Adept vampire.

Now it was only Shiv and the scabbed vampire. Shiv looked at the remains of the vampire's forces and just shrugged. "Your soldiers..." Shiv licked his lips. "They need a lot more Toughness."

Shiv drove his Dread Aura against the high vampire, but the vampire sneered as he sent a stronger spike back.

"Pathetic," Kraid said, looking at the mangled, blood-splattered remains of his own forces, and especially those of Aviary. And slowly, the anger fled from the high vampire's eyes, replaced by curiosity, and for the first time, caution. "What is your name? Tell me. You are System-favored too. I can feel it. No one else could give me such a fight. No one else."

Shiv simply snorted. "Well, Confriga calls me the Corpse Shedder."

"Corpse Shedder?" the high vampire muttered.

"Yeah, it's a stupid name, but I'm not telling you my real one. I don't tell people I'm going to kill who I am. It's a waste."

The vampire snorted. "Very well. Then Corpse Shedder it is. I want you to know that it will please me to rip you asunder. To tear another champion in the System's eyes down to feed my own glory."

Shiv scoffed. "You didn't do so well in our previous rounds. I don't think this is going to go your way."

"Before? Before this room was filled with pathetic, weak, and vulnerable vermin. I agree with you. They should have made themselves stronger. Armor," Kraid spat. "Their pathetic reliance on armor was their undoing. We are Pathbearers. We should need not rely on anything but our own strength, our own body, our own scars."

At this point, the Vampire's body began to transform. A nest of bloody strings erupted from him, spearing out at all angles.

"What the hells," Shiv muttered tiredly. The smell got even worse somehow. It was like an endless sea of offal concentrated in a single place.

Some strings crashed down on the ground before Shiv, and they began to spread. Slowly, the entire chamber was filled, swallowed by the twisting, growing mass of writhing flesh. The scabbed vampire hovered in the air. His body was more tattered than ever. It was like everything inside him had been drawn out. But now, he was swallowing everything. His skin was spreading everywhere, lining every inch of space with new lattices of tendon and other tissue, firing pieces of scab-lined bone through the air.

And Shiv suddenly realized his adversary wasn't lying. This wasn't something you could casually do in an enclosed space with all your allies, especially with vulnerable human allies. Shiv didn't care from the start and, and now the vampire had no more reason to, either.

Shiv accelerated towards him, preparing to smash through some lattices, but as soon as he crashed into them, he immediately felt something impact him, striking his body and his frayed mana field. Shiv cried out, and the pain made him rattle backwards. Agony spread through his left side, and more strands began to spear into him from all sides.

More blades of bone, teeth, and claws erupted from the twisting mass of shape-shifting tissue. And swimming through the insides of his very own spreading body, the scabbed vampire emerged, thin cords of muscle connecting him to the greater mass. He punched Shiv across the face, and the blow was both physical and magical. It shattered Shiv's outer helmet, and he went twisting back, spitting blood and fragments of broken teeth. It usually wouldn't have been enough to stun Shiv for long, but then the vampire caught Shiv by the left section of his neck with a jagged hand. And that, that brought about a pain that Shiv wasn't in any condition to deal with, especially with the Icon active.

Shiv killed the Icon then, desperate to regain some measure of composure. But then he was slammed against the wall, and more of the tissue swept around him, coating him, holding him in place. Shiv went Outside Context for a moment, stepped around the high vampire—who was momentarily confused—and then Shiv drove his blade into his back. Kraid roared. Shiv slashed and sliced, splitting through sinew around him, his Deepest Edge working to free him from this Biomantic jungle of ever-swelling flesh.

But even as he speared and staked the high vampire over and over, the Bloodspawn refused to die. Shiv struck no heart. He split no vital organs. Kraid turned, swiping a clawed hand across Shiv's left shoulder. Shiv twisted back and barely avoided the blow. He didn't want to take any more hits against his mana field, but that didn't matter, because several more tendrils speared into his back a fraction of a second later.

Pain exploded inside Shiv, and he felt his field hit a point of no return. Something inside Shiv ripped. He cried out, and then the vampire seized him by the skull. Shiv sighed. He knew what was coming next. The vampire sneered. Shiv disintegrated into bloody mist in an instant.

Gravitic Wrestler > 119

Striking Proficiency > 36

The high vampire laughed as he mangled Shiv's remains into a smeared ball, crushing him more and more as Can Hu cried out. The armor was getting damaged too.

"Can Hu!" Shiv growled. Shiv's friend was still in the outer armor, but Shiv had other means to fight, even if he was dead. He took the high vampire by the neck. Shiv drained Kraid's vitality. And this affected the high vampire more than anything else. The beast cried out, reeling back in surprise and momentarily dropping Shiv's badly mangled armor.

And because Shiv's blade was bound to him, as was his Magebreaker, he struck the Bloodspawn across the back of the head, and then he drove his blade into the high vampire's back in a frantic blur. Kraid cried out, twisting and swiping at nothing. What remained of his tissue splashed over everything, choking the entire room within a dense mash of flesh. And there Shiv found himself briefly encased, still draining the high vampire.

The enemy dove back into the thick nest of flesh, swimming through his own twisted tissue as if it was water. Shiv pushed out with his strained mana. He cried out silently as he went after the high vampire, and he barely clutched Kraid's ankle. With a final surge, he drained more vitality, and the vampire briefly halted, stunned by his sudden and inexplicable enervation.

Shiv's shadowy cocoon formed over his body. But he thought about what he was going to do next. He was still in a lot of pain. And then Shiv realized something: He was within the dead Jealousy's den. How did the fight end last time? With him hollowing out a monster's mind with his pain. Shiv felt himself inspired to repeat the deed for old time's sake.

He reactivated his Icon of the Paindrinker. The symbol flared on his chest, and the vampire briefly let out a shout of surprise as Shiv pulled himself closer to the beast. The shadowy cocoon burst around Shiv, and he dropped his Silhouette. Not because he wanted to break concealment, but because he wanted the vampire to see who was about to kill him, who was about to break him utterly and completely, starting with his mind.

Shiv reached out with his paltry Psychomancy, and he found himself glad that the vampire was still stunned. But he wasn't stunned enough for Shiv to immediately pierce through. Rather, Shiv found himself smashing against High Adept Tier Magical Resistance.

And for just a moment, Shiv's mind reeled. He hadn't thought about this through all the pain. But then he noticed his gauntlet, and he realized what he had to do. He planted the Magebreaker around the vampire's face, and the gauntlet began to rattle and shake. Soon its vibrations grew to violent levels, and something inside the high vampire shattered.

This was another benefit to the Magebreaker. Magical Resistance was still magical in nature, and the Magebreaker didn't discriminate when it came to its hate for magic. Once more, Shiv drove his mind mana into the vampire, just as its tendrils and its nest of flesh bit down on him.

At the instant he was pulled apart, he transferred every bit of pain he felt into Kraid, and the high vampire's head reeled back as he let out a world-shaking roar of agony.

Momentum Core > 90

Shiv died again, but the high vampire slumped over, unconscious. He crashed down on the ground. The nest broke, receding into his body like reeling cords of tissue. The skin lining the wall splashed against him, as did the cords of muscle, tendon, and other sinews. As he fell, Shiv continued to drain him.

His shadowy cocoon burst apart, and he stepped out over the vampire.

For a moment, he thought about letting Kraid wake to see a final flash of fear in his eyes. But the pain Kraid suffered was enough to incapacitate him, enough to leave him a groaning, whimpering mass on the ground. And Shiv still hadn't discovered the mystery of where his heart was. He descended and used his kukri to split the vampire open. He vivisected him in seconds, using his field to pry free the dense tissues and bones protecting the vampire's insides. He looked and, to his surprise, he found nothing. It was just a gory mess. There was no heart there.

But how could that be? The high vampire... And then he noticed something. Lines. Lines, no, not lines, but veins

. Very thin, very finely refined veins leading like wire-thin strands inside the vampire, running down to its pelvis. Shiv cut a little deeper. He snapped the vampire's spine with a roar of effort, and there he found it: The Lineage Core. Pulsing in the place where most people's privates might be found.

Shiv blinked. "Huh, that's interesting." And just then, the high vampire groaned. His eyes blinked as Kraid managed to achieve a bit of coherence after the immense shock of pain. He stared at Shiv. Shiv stared back at him. And then Shiv casually lifted his dagger and stabbed the high vampire where his balls should have been. The vampire cried out. Shiv twisted the knife. And with a pop, System-favored Elder Novor Kraid died unceremoniously.

The large Bloodspawn twitched and spazzed a few times. But Shiv didn't entertain that. He gripped him, and he tore, ripping pieces and chunks out of the high vampire's body over and over until nothing was left of him but scattered pieces. Even with the bastard's heart crushed, Shiv wasn't taking any chances. That one had more regeneration and shape-shifting capabilities than anyone he'd met so far.

He didn't want any more surprises.

And as he was done, Shiv rushed over to Can Hu. His armor was in a bad state.

"Shiv," Can Hu cried out. There was a slight crackle, a distortion to the machine's voice.

"Can Hu, you alright?"

"Minor damage sustained, mostly to the head area." Shiv winced. He reached out, and he bit back a groan as he forced his Biomancy to function. He carefully peeled away his head armor, and there he saw Can Hu's slightly dented half-skull staring back at him.

"I might need to conduct some minor repairs," Can Hu said.

"Yeah, but you're fine, right?" Shiv asked.

"Yes. Are all the enemies dead?"

"Yeah." And just then, dimensional mana pulsed at the center of the anchor again. Shiv sighed. "Give me a second." He turned, and as another group of vampires came through, Shiv charged into them. Screams erupted, blood sprayed high, a golem was torn in half, and its core was stomped. A few moments later, Shiv returned, covered in blood. "Now, I think we're good." He narrowed his eyes at the surrounding spellwork, the light of the anchor around him.

Shiv bit back a sneer. "All right, then. I think we're getting out of here. But before that..." He flexed his gravitic field, and he fed it every bit of anger, every bit of frustration about how bad he was hurting, about how miserable he felt during that fight. "Let's see what it takes to crush a four-hundred-meter-wide teleportation anchor."

And then he drove his hands into the wall, and he began to pry. With a violent cry, Shiv slowly began to bend and rip through the titanium. The walls began to groan. The groaning became screaming as bolts came loose and tears spread through the walls. Sections connecting the titanium snapped violently as bursts of alloys crashed against Shiv and bounced off without inflicting any harm.

Finally, the twisting hit a point where the insides of the anchor couldn't take anymore. Shiv pulled with all his strength and began to crumple the Jealousy's teleportation anchor as if someone were bending a tin can around itself. The top sides tore open as massive rents formed where the spells used to be. Shiv gave a final ragged cry of effort before he collapsed to his knees, gasping, completely spent.

Gravitic Wrestler > 120

"Now," Shiv said, coughing, "now I think, I think the anchor is done for." Debris plunged into the badly damaged chamber through the massive tears he left in the titanium-reinforced hull, pieces of stone that once held the cavernous outside at bay. Shiv remembered that he suspected this place to be below the molten rivers, but there was no lava leaking in, at least so far.

Can Hu was silent for a moment.

"You really alright?" Shiv asked, worry filling him again.

From within his cloak, he suddenly heard a muffled noise. The Aviary agent's head briefly popped out, and the owl cried out. Shiv shoved him back in. "Stay down, or I'll seal your mouth up and let you suffocate for a while."

Can Hu let out a brief crackle. "Shiv, that noise... did you just twist the entire teleportation anchor in on itself?"

"Yeah," Shiv said.

"You know you could have just deformed or badly reshaped the area around the spell patterns? That would have worked as well."

Shiv paused. "Huh? No. I could do that? Well..."

"It was a very remarkable feat of strength," Can Hu said.

Shiv nodded. "Yeah. Yeah. I'll keep that in mind next time. Maybe..."

Can Hu paused. "Shiv, are you probably still just going to mangle the next teleportation anchor if you can?"

Shiv let out a slight laugh. "Yeah, probably. It felt pretty good doing so."

The Penitent responded with a slight, static chuckle. "I imagine it did."

