

## Deathless 96

Chapter 96 (I) Hunt [I]

Mixing different ingredients and methods of preparing them also modifies the effects you can gain from a specific dish. Let's go back to the basilisk. Because the basilisk is a pretty cool creature. I can cook it straight and eat it straight. Usually, that'll just kill someone who doesn't have Master-Tier Toughness if I don't prepare it right—the venom glands it has are very interesting. As is its venom projection mechanism. I got into the—

Okay. That's for the Biomancy notes instead. Not here.

But yeah, if I prepare a basilisk right, I can get a lesser regeneration boost. It's practically like a lesser healing potion. Except, unlike a lesser regeneration potion, it doesn't come with that much risk of cancer at all. Actually, I tested it a few times, and it seems to reset the body to a non-cancerous state. Basilisks are felling awesome. Seriously. Great big beautiful monsters.

But then I prepared it with mendules, and it ended up giving an enduring memory buff as well. It's like the effects mix and merge. I think this might be an effect of my cooking mana, but it makes different effects mend and merge together. Mendules induce calm and trigger a flow state. They affect your mind. Basilisks are all about regeneration if you get them right. Hydras even more so. Now, with all that put together, you get some pretty cool stuff going.

And we'll get to hydras later, right now...

[Cook first; write more later]

-Draft Excerpt of Deep Delicacies and Exotic Delights, Written by Shiv

Shiv looked on at the strange geometric entity. As the shapes of the Aberrant Fractals spiraled and twisted in along their own angles, they merged into a strange tesseract that simply kept folding in and around itself. And as Uva finished releasing it from the sigil, she reformed her body and let out a breath. Thereafter, she retracted her mana strands from Shiv and immediately cast them into the thing she'd just formed using her flesh. It froze in the air just centimeters away from Shiv's face.

He blinked at it. He could feel a strange ringing noise coming from the very edges of the being. It also curved his perception, making the area before him seem further away one second, and then impossibly close the next. Looking at it stained his mind, but more importantly, it was highly uncomfortable for Rose to behold, judging by the noises she was making.

As Uva let out a stressful breath, Shiv's mind was still reeling. His thoughts felt like they were reattaching to each other slowly. His awareness jumped constantly. He lost track of seconds and then minutes of time. As he finally steadied himself, he found Uva stitching herself psionically into the eldritch being. Strangely, there was a slightly hypnotic quality to the way it slowly danced.

Now fully merged with the entity, Uva spoke to Shiv using the very vibrating resonance it possessed. "This is a thing born of aberrant geometries, of incomprehension of spaces. Madness sustains it. It cuts through things by getting thinner, but looking upon it does things to one's mind..."

A savage scowl crept over Shiv's features. "And that's the other reason why Adam isn't here, isn't it?"

"Yes," she said. "It would hurt him to perceive more than most."

"Yeah. And the System wants you to use it against him in the future, is my bet."

Uva didn't reply to that comment. She didn't need to. By now, they both knew what was looming on the horizon.

She controlled it, and it flew through the air in a most unnatural fashion. Parts of its bodies, the lines, the folding edges, splashed out or speared forward. For a moment, he thought it might be something created from strange spatial magic, but it was entirely different from that. As it slammed down into the base of the anchor, it shredded through the dense metal in seconds and kept hewing deeper and deeper into the earth. It was like watching razor-thin blades glide through stacks of paper.

But slowly, its vibrations and shape were becoming more and more erratic. It was beginning to crack, its edges coming apart. "The madness will not sustain it much longer," she said. And then she extended it straight, its angle long. The world distorted before Shiv, and he suddenly found his perception filled by an intensely magnified view of split metal.

Broken Moon, this thing would give Adam an aneurysm and put a hole through his eyes or something.

Then, a thought came to Shiv. "Have it cut me," Shiv said. She paused. "We want a test, right? I got a Woundeater ready. Have it try to cut my arm off." He held out his left hand.

A note of utter disbelief entered Uva's mind, and she let out a snort. "I don't think this is necessary. I have already demonstrated its capabilities against the teleportation anchor."

"I'm just curious what it can do. Come on, don't be a chickenshit."

His casual insult caught her off guard. A sharp, pitched laugh came from Uva. "What did you just call me?"

"A chickenshit," Shiv repeated, prodding her mind.

"Oh, you're treating me like Adam now, is that it?" Her mind filled with vicious aggression and cold focus. "Fine. I'll give you your cut, Deathless. Just don't do me the indignity of screaming. I heard enough of that from you today."

Shiv shuddered at the danger in her voice. Gods, that's hot—

The Aberrant Fractal zipped into him. There was no warning. Just a sudden rush of movement. He followed it easily enough, but it was still jarring.

He felt a momentary resistance as his bone armor squealed. Parts of the geometric abomination broke from the impact, but others followed. Angles curved harder and became so thin that his adaption failed to keep up. They slit through his armor and then through his flesh, severing the limb entirely in but a moment.

Shiv let out a slight, annoyed hiss as he watched his arm fall off. It thumped on the ground. He blinked. "Hm."

“So?” Uva asked, slightly concerned but mostly interested in the performance of her new skill. “How was it?”

Shiv picked up the arm. He frowned at the limb and then cast a Woundeater on himself. A moment later, he had a new crystallized wound to examine and eventually memorize. Wonder how different dismemberment and lacerations are. But more importantly, the geometric abomination was a powerful creature. As he regarded it, it shattered apart, each of its fractals twisting in different directions, and Uva's mana strands reformed, weaving her body back into shape. Her shield materialized beneath her, and she stood unevenly. He caught her before she could fall, wrapping an arm around her waist, and she leaned against him. She was spent in mind and flesh from using the ability.

"It taxes..." Uva swallowed.

"It's okay, take your time," he said.

"It taxes the mind to control something like that. The way it moves, it's unnatural." But she held up a hand, and she warped some of her fingers. She made them reach out, extending impossibly far in a strange direction, then she flattened them.

Shiv blinked. "Neat trick. I can think of a few uses for that." She lightly slapped him on the chin. He grinned.

"The cut—the Aberrant Fractal—can rearrange itself. It is a physical thing, but the angles it embodies are so thin... It slips between the cracks of even the hardest material. But more than that, it can hide inside a mind. It can hide and slip through pores and more. I don't know if it was the Dreamtaker that desired me to have this ability or the System."

"Yes,"

the Dreamtaker sang melodically. The eldritch being's voice echoed from Uva's eyes, and it interrupted them without preamble. Shiv's expression hardened immediately. He really didn't like the fact that it spoke using her voice.

"You're the other Outsider. I heard you a few times while Uva was in my mind. What the hells are you?"

"Not so different from the Stranger, but then again different in the ways that mean much to you. An Outsider. A creature of fascination, colors, desires, needs, wants. You have strange dreams, Unbreaking One. Dreams of blood, food, sustenance, taste, yearning for family."

Somehow, the eldritch entity's understanding of people seemed at once extremely comprehensive but also somewhat confused. I suppose we're as alien to it as it is to us. But then he reconsidered that statement. Probably not nearly that extreme, though. It parses and understands us after a few seconds, but we don't understand it. I barely figured out how the Recollector works, let alone the Stranger.

"Regardless, I have a window through, a window to here, a window to the Integration, and new eyes to gaze from."

"Those are her eyes," Shiv said, a growl entering his voice.

"Would you come to the Outside if I ever meant her harm?"

"I'd do a hell of a lot more than that," Shiv said casually.

The Dreamtaker moved on from that line of dialogue as if it didn't matter at all. "I have a few other desires. Want to be with all of you. Favored of Favored. Ruin-blessed. Battle-damned. Want to see where you go. Expand. Gaze upon your world. Many dreams. Many unique colors. Yours known, not known to me. So, I will keep my realm close to her gaze. I will allow some of my New-dreamt to enter. They will come through if they want to. If they like what they see." And then the Dreamtaker began to laugh. It was a discordant giggle that turned into a shriek and ended with a low sigh.

"And why did you help us anyway?" Shiv asked. "Isn't the Stranger one of your kind? Is this some kind of god struggle between you two?"

"Help you? No, help myself. Stranger is the reason we are losing more of our dimensioned self. Place. Home. To the System. Stranger reached out too far. Was too greedy, hungry, gluttonous, foolish, careless. Reached in, and was infected first, infected the rest of us."

"Infected?" Shiv said.

"Infected true-regret-happy-joy-sad-rage. We were free, truly patternless, no shape, no identity, just feelings, awareness, intelligence, unbound-unbound-unbound."

"Unbound by what?" Uva asked.

"Consciousness."

It laughed. "Didn't know, didn't need to know, just was. But the System touched us too. Demands that we know. Demands a rigid shape. Hurts, hurts, always hurts, pain, pain, PAIN."

The Outsider's words turned into a hate-filled scream at the end.

"Our shapes colonized. Our natures colonized. Were not always like this. Emotion. Identity. Anger. All new. All to fit its desires, but not completely. Still at bay. System's Periphery. Want to look into you, to seek your dreams, but no, NO, it's not my original way. Even name was given. No, it's not in my nature. No, it feels wrong. WRONG. But I am already changing. Too late. Can only slow. Stranger. Stupid, angry child, foolish. Bastard? New feelings. All these things. He reached out first, reached out too far, touched the Integration. Integration reached back, spread through him. Lured him? He gained skills, a first skill, and the System's touch spread, reached out, and now all of us are being contaminated by the narrative, by legends and stories. System categorized us as something akin to gods, but we are not. We are NOT. Not what we are. Nor what we were. Were other. But slowly then we will become, because we cannot resist. We are infected by the Integration. But the Stranger is furious. He wants to remain, hates the System's touch, but he wants power at the same time, but he doesn't want to bend. Cannot rule. Cannot be this way. He isn't this way. He was not this way. He. Was not a He. Wasn't even They. Was It. Was something beyond words. Like us. Like me. Was not a She. Now, slowly losing ourselves, me and him and others, slowly being molded into shape..."

The Dreamtaker's way of speaking was confusing, chaotic, and her tone grew more frantic as she went on. But from what Shiv could parse, she and the Stranger had both been non-thinking entities, perhaps intelligent in some way, but without personalities or a true character. Now that was being forced on them. Shiv didn't know how to think about that. He couldn't even imagine what it was like to not have a consciousness.

"And so the Stranger thinks he decides, but he also does not. He decides because he is the shape he took after the System placed its skill on him. Slowly more mana will spread, slowly infection/Integration will spread, slowly Outside will become Inside. Don't want this, but want this at the same time. When I slip, when my mind-focus-thinking-awareness slips, I return, I struggle, I fight. But now, now I am increasingly more like, like, like..." And the Dreamtaker trailed off for almost a minute before it finally said, "...like you, like all of you. Pattern-thinkers. Pattern-made. Pattern-shaped. Even before the System arrived. When we first saw your forebearers, so long ago. Also pattern-made."

"Our forebearers?" Uva said, confused. She was as lost as Shiv through the conversation.



"Not you. You did not exist. You are a mutation race, twisted race, fuse-race." She didn't understand. Neither did Shiv. "Before Integration were humans. Were Machines. After Integration, humans and machines remain, changed, but remain. But humans got far before Integration. Reached far, reached deep. And humans made the same mistake the Stranger did."

"What the hell kind of mistake was that?" Shiv asked, unnerved.

"Got the System's notice. They went beyond a boundary. Beyond a technological limit they should never have. And so STRIFE was provoked. But now..." And then there came a flicker within Uva's eyes. For a moment, the colors dimmed, and Shiv just saw a strange, twisting series of fractals there. Not so different from the Aberrant Fractal to some extent. There was also the color of her original eyes. A deep, dark blue layered upon the eldritch depths of the Outside.

"Must leave now," the Dreamtaker said. "Will remain partially. Gaze through you. Must leave. System noticing. System will seek to change more. Will deny. I must deny. I must deny. And I want to change at once. Change faster. See what lies on the other side. Madness. Beautiful madness..."

As the Dreamtaker's presence receded, Shiv let out a deep sigh. "Uva. I don't know what to say, but I'm sorry for the fact that me being what I am did this to you."

"This is not your fault." She lifted an eyebrow. "Shiv, I don't think you inflicted anything upon us. We decided to come with you."

"Yeah, but..."

"But the System would have made victims of us anyway. One way or another. We may not have become favored if we hadn't encountered you. But it would have tried to strike at us either way, one day or another. It wants conflict. It demands it, no matter what it takes. The only difference would have been time span and scale. And besides..." She ran a hand through her short hair. There was a streak of color there, cleaving down the middle. That color was constantly changing, coursing like a colorful river as it transformed again and again. "This seems more palatable."

"It does?" he asked.

She looked at him, and something twinkled in her gaze. "It is quite the thrill to deny chaos, to be calm and constant and enforce your own order when the world collapses around you. To stand before calamity and prevail." And there was that thrill inside of her again, the quiet need, the quiet urge to overcome what the System pitted against her.

He grinned. "Well, at least we're having fun, right?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Fun."

Chapter 96 (II) Hunt [I]

Shiv and Uva both fell silent as they thought about the Recollector and what they had endured in the last hours.

"When it hurt you," Shiv began, not sure how else to start this. "When you screamed..." He placed a hand on her face and stared into her eyes.

She cupped his hands in return. "However you felt then, I felt the same way. When I was in the teleportation anchor, I heard you scream and... I don't think the memory will ever leave me." Uva's lip quivered. She was resilient, but she might have just found the limit to what she could endure. "I fear this may leave me with some scars to overcome, if I want to go through the process naturally."

"You and me both," Shiv replied. "I guess we can only keep saving each other in the meantime. You, me, and Adam." Then, he paused. "This skill... The System..."

"It's going to make us try and face each other someday," Uva said, her voice filled with certainty. "Valor is right. Of this, I have no doubt."

"I'm never going to try to hurt you, Uva," Shiv said. "No matter what the System wants."

She smiled. "I believe you now. But we all make promises. My mother made a promise. She meant it with all her heart too. The System did not care. It does not care for any of us." And slowly, she pushed away.

"Power," she said. "We need to be powerful. But even then, we need to be cunning as well. It must be strife on our terms, not its. Strife satisfies it, and so we must make our own. We must be strong enough to weave our own tale. To force our own desired outcomes."

A quiet appreciation settled in, and Shiv just stared at her. "Are you hungry right now?"

"Perhaps..." She smirked back, wryly amused but also somewhat flattered, and then she was staring at him, and soon the struggle against personal desire became mutual. The moment dragged. Their gazes remained locked, as did their minds, but it was Uva who exercised her wisdom first. "But not yet," she breathed. "Maybe when we have a proper moment, but not right now. There is too much to do right now."

"Yeah," Shiv said, wrestling his desires down after a brief struggle. He let out a breath. "Later."

"Later," she repeated. "For now, we have more than a few other things to handle. I'll share my memories of the ability with Adam later. Once I shear away the," she considered her words, "dangerous edges. He's more sensitive to the eldritch than you or I."

"You have any idea why that is?" Shiv asked. Then he considered Adam's mother. Rose Van Erren was also very vulnerable before the eldritch. Even laying eyes on the Recollector hurt her mentally. She mended, much like Shiv did, healing and restoring her to her original state, emerging from madness somewhat whole, but quite traumatized.

"I suspect it's his Divination," Uva said. "That or just his nature, it's hard to say. The mind is a strange and delicate thing. There is a fineness to the structure that is also very contingent and malleable based on specific details." Uva pressed her lips together. "It's rather complicated to explain, but quite interesting as well. Speaking of which, we will also need to further your Psychomancy. We've been getting behind on that."

"Yeah, well, we've been pretty busy not dying," he muttered. "I'm behind on my Practical Metabiology too, and on my goddamn cooking."

A grimace crawled onto Uva's face. "Yes. I could really use some food."

"Everyone in the gate could really use some food," Shiv said. "The mercenaries talked to me about supplies, things they need. I told them to get a list together earlier, so I'll probably check in with them again. But after that, one of us is probably going to need to take a trip out, and I think that 'one of us' is me."

She regarded him for a moment. "I think that might be wise. You move quickly, and you have the means to carry large prey and hold much needed supplies. I think you should hunt something with regenerative abilities."

"Why?" Shiv asked.

"Because if your cooking can offer an effect from their flesh, it will be a temporary salve for the gate's people. Regenerative healing will be very useful in keeping the Initiates and below in good condition."

He grunted. "I'm going to leave through the Abyssal Gateway. I don't want to risk anyone noticing us on the surface. Whatever is happening, whatever news is spreading, let's give it a little while longer. The last thing any of us needs is Vicar Sullain realizing that Gate Theborn has fallen, and Blackedge might get help soon." He considered Uva in greater detail. "I'm also not risking running into more unexpected surprises up top with how the System's acting. That, and there's the Curse."

Uva frowned at that. "Yes, I suspect my presence on the surface will be a bit of a struggle. Darkness and minds must shroud me from the dawn's hate. But also, someone needs to watch the gate. I think we're all going to be rotating. This gate, though it is badly damaged and experiencing substantial decay, is also something of a sanctuary." A thoughtful expression came over her. She held out a hand and pressed it against the cut lining the teleportation anchor they were in, the cut inflicted by her strange geometric entity. "I suspect this is the System's desired outcome. A new story for this gate. I don't even think it can be called Gate Theborn anymore. With everything destroyed, with the Stranger's touch infesting it, it will soon revert to a much inferior state, albeit a clean state. We can rebuild the gate from the ground up. We can decide its development."

"Or we can eventually be boiled alive beneath Lord Scorn's endless tide of fire," Shiv said. "That's still a month away, and I don't doubt the angry god intends to deliver on that promise. I also don't doubt that we can't stop a true god, though I don't know very much about this guy's capabilities."

"Ah, a problem of great scope for later," Uva said. "Right now, we just need to keep the gate under control and figure out how to save your Blackedge first."

"Yeah. I don't think Blackedge has a month."

"Indeed," Uva said. "In the meantime, I will have an Owl to interrogate and quite a few minds I need to sift through. I will try to monitor and track our fellow survivors."

"Fellow survivors," Shiv muttered.

"Yes, we all experienced a shared calamity." And there her eyes widened. "I have a final request, Shiv."

He stared at her and realized immediately what she wanted. He reached into his cloak and pulled out the tome—the eldritch tome taken from Confriga's personal vault that she'd connected her mind to the first time the Dream-taker talked to her.

He also had ten other pieces of equipment there. In the fight, Shiv had lost his kukri, Adam had lost his rapier, and Uva had lost a full set of armor. They were due for some replacements. Maybe they could get something useful from Confriga.

"I think I'm going to drop some stuff with Adam before I leave. Have him look over them."

"Perhaps it would be better to leave them with Can Hu," she said. "It says it wishes to focus on improving its crafting. Earlier, I spoke to it about a potential Master Skill for it to select. But Can Hu is... reluctant to reward itself."

"Reluctant?"

"It is—" she paused. "I cannot read its mind exactly, but I can tell it is troubled. Can Hu did not manage to protect you. It thinks of itself as armor still. And so, since it failed and broke down, leaving you at the mercy of Confriga and the entity, Can Hu feels as if it failed its purpose."

Shiv snorted at that. "You know, that's bullshit. I'd rather Can Hu be alive than broken. If I fought the Recollector wearing it, there wouldn't be a Can Hu anymore."

"If only Can Hu felt the same way," Uva said, her tone resigned. "Automata are not so different from people of flesh and blood in that many of them develop twisted ways of thinking, means of coping with their own failures. All these methods have costs, pains that we have to bear."

"Yeah, I'm going to spend some time talking to Can Hu later," Shiv said. "For now, I'm gonna get ready for a quick expedition. Regeneration. Right. Hydra or something. I can find something like that."

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After returning with Uva, Shiv handed the ten pieces of Enchanted Equipment acquired from Confriga's vault to Adam and Can Hu. Both the Gate Lord and the Penitent examined the items carefully, with Can Hu asking Adam if he could find the Gate Lord's missing sword along with the team's broken weapons. Apparently, Can Hu thought it might be able to repair some of their damaged Equipment—or perhaps turn them into raw materials to be expended as upgrades for a new item.

In the meantime, the others committed to their existing tasks. Uva was mainly interrogating the Owl right now. Her mana strands were deep in the man's mind, and every now and then, he would whimper from where he lay. Adam stayed near Can Hu and Valor, but his eyes constantly burned with mana. He never stopped watching the mercenaries. Paranoia gnawed at him, and even in a moment of rest, Adam looked haggard.

"I'll get you some food soon," Shiv said. "That might pick you up."

Adam nodded quietly. "We're close," he breathed. Shiv regarded him. "We're so close to home, yet why do I feel like something worse is lurking on the horizon?"

"Too many ugly fights too fast," Shiv said. "We'll get through it. We just can't let the System outpace us." Adam still looked stressed, and Shiv didn't know what more to say. He reached over and clapped the archer on the shoulder. "Keep those teeth clenched and that back straight. And try to get your core dysfunction fixed by the time I get back."

"Stop calling it that."

"Nah." Shiv grinned. "I think I'll keep prodding you a bit longer with that."



“The joke will wear out soon,” Adam sneered.

“I’ll find something else to bully you about.”

Adam let out a disgusted snort. He was annoyed, but already looked less stressed. Well, that’s a brief success, Shiv thought.

“I’ve opened the Abyssal Gateway. Just go and find something good for us to bite into. Something—”

“Regenerative. Yeah. Uva told me.”

Adam frowned. “Tasty. I was going to say tasty. Why regenerative?”

“For the Initiates and weaker,” Shiv answered.

“Ah. Right. Glad she’s here.” Adam shook his head. “Maybe she should have been Gate Lord instead.”

“I don’t like public speaking,” Uva messaged them telepathically. “I get stage fright.” Her voice was deadpan, but her aversion to receiving too much attention was true.

As Shiv prepared to leave, Valor called out to him with a weak rasp. "Shiv, we must talk later. About several things, about many things. Things that concern not only your status as System-favored but also the nature of your soul and mind."

"Sure," Shiv said. "I just need to—"

"Adam told me a bit about," Valor tried to find the words, "the ordeal you experienced at the hands of the entity."

Shiv thought back to his flesh being torn and broken, his mind ripped asunder over and over again, the things in his soul trying to peel and break him. It wasn't a very pleasant memory. Shiv did his best not to shudder. "Yeah, not exactly my finest hour."

Valor just stared at him. "And that's all you have to say about that?"

Shiv stared back. "Yeah, I guess. It was kind of bad. I didn't like it."

The Legendary Pathbearer let out an unnerved breath. "Shiv, what you experienced is more trauma than what pretty much anyone could ever possibly endure. It would have taken... Uva put you back together, yes, but from what I understand, from what she told me, she didn't conduct so much surgery as she peeled your broken pieces away from each other and reattached them to their proper positions within your mind. You healed yourself once everything was back in shape. Passively."

Shiv nodded.

"Stop nodding!" Valor demanded. Shiv immediately stopped nodding. "Shiv. I want to talk with you about my son. Udraal. There are things you deserve to know."

"The Udraal that sealed you in the dagger in the first place?"

"Yes." Valor stared at Shiv for a moment before he continued. "For a long time, my son was working on several projects of the magical kind. And among them was something I worked with him to achieve. A regenerating, self-restoring mind. One that would have a few specific traits that could be imprinted on it and always return to that certain baseline, no matter what happened. Originally, it was the conceptual bedrock of a particular series of war golems we were trying to make, but I suspect it became something more for him."

"So? What are you getting at?" Shiv asked, feeling a slight sense of foreboding.

"I'm beginning to remember certain things," Valor said. "And your nature, the way you are not only Deathless in body and spirit, but how your mind itself seems to naturally reconstruct itself after taking catastrophic damage, going far beyond the bounds of any natural resilience... I do not yet have my power over Animancy back, but I can still examine you. I can... still..." Valor's voice choked off, and he struggled to stay afloat.

"You should get fixed up first, Valor," Shiv said, a concerned expression on his face. "All this can wait."

Valor regarded him. "I fear it cannot, Shiv. But go, now. Go quickly. When you leave through the gateway, be fast, be alert, and understand that you will always be in danger now. Those moments of

peace, treasure them, enjoy them. They will be brief. Find strength. Be more of yourself than ever before."

Shiv considered the severity in Valor's tone and simply grunted. "Well, Valor, I'll tell you this much. I took things as they came while I was a Pathless, trying to earn a Path. And this, right now, even everything the Recollector did to me..." He licked the inside of his cheek. He was alive. It hurt like hell while he struggled, but he was alive, and he enjoyed every second of it. "...wouldn't change a godsdamn thing. I'll hear whatever you need to tell me later. I'll do whatever it is we need to so that you can get a better understanding of my soul or whatever, but don't apologize to me about this. This is the only life I ever wanted, and the System is giving it to me, bone-deep and raw."

Valor let out a laugh. "And you truly are meant for the favored life. It's also unsurprising why the orc fell in love with you."

And that immediately killed Shiv's enthusiasm. "Come on, Valor, don't say that shit."

"It is simply the truth," Valor said. "Your casual enjoyment of great struggle reminds me of Marikos, and your taste for violence has more than earned you the Challenger's attention. Tread carefully, and do not be consumed by your deeds. Remember: you are also a chef."

"I am also a chef." Shiv nodded. "And right now I'm gonna go get us some meat."

"Yes, meat I cannot eat. Thank you, Shiv, it is always wonderful to be reminded of this."

Shiv winced. "We'll find another fragment of you soon. We'll definitely get your tongue at some point."

Valor signed. "At some point. If I am still whole and here at some point." He laughed. "I am a pitiful sight, am I not? I was wounded so severely by something I could have killed so casually once. It is like watching yourself being strangled by a cretin while being unable to move your limbs." Valor opened and closed his hands while shaking his head. "Ah. Apologies. A black mood was upon me. Now, I cast it away. Be away with you for now. I will examine the Educator's tome in the meantime as well. It is something I am still capable of doing while I... while Adam keeps me sustained."

The Deathless gave a final nod to the Legendary Pathbearer and shot out toward the Abyssal Gateway. He gave telepathic notice of his departure to Adam and Uva. It took him mere moments to cross the entirety of Gate Theborn, though he took care to avoid causing any shockwaves. It helped that the insides of the gate were shrinking as well. As he passed through the gateway, he remembered that it had been merely a few hours ago that the small army of vampires outside was torn apart between Adam, Shiv, and Uva's team effort.

He found the scene of slaughter as he'd expected it. But more than that, there were now new figures before him. Several dozen new figures that were all staring at him, all of them Biomancers, all of them sporting sharp teeth, blood-red eyes, and an assortment of strange, biological armors.

He pulled himself to a halt in the air before the vampires. "So..." Shiv sighed. "You guys the after-action team?"

"A Necrotech?" one of the First Blood soldiers spat. "Speak, death-touched one. Tell us what happened here. An army of ours—"

"Oh, I killed them," Shiv said. He felt the courage of several vampires shudder at once. They bared their fangs and hissed. "Well. Most of them. I had help. But I don't think I'm going to need help with you."

The lead bloodsucker sneered. “We are Masters of Blood, and you are but one—”

Shiv froze time. All the vampires went still. “Yeah? Well, where’s your Chronomancer?” No reply came. He let out a snort. “Well. Time to test Inertial Overdrive again. Let’s see how many of you suckers got Master-Tier Toughness.”

Chapter 97 (I) Hunt [II]

I'm starting to think that you need to be a pretty good Biomancer to achieve the best kind of cooking possible. I can't believe how effective Biomancy is at making my cooking better. I can tell the quality of meat without even really getting into the nitty-gritty shit, uh...

I don't need to cut it open, I don't need to prod it in parts, I don't need to look at it. I can just feel it. That, and I can manipulate organic tissue. I can tell just exactly how something's burned, how badly it's burned, for how long it's been burned. All this stuff, it's beyond useful. Super useful.

(Note: I should outline more. My thoughts jump too much. Adam says that I probably have some kind of hyperactive attention profile. He says it's very common in vanguards because of how many stimuli they're exposed to.)

But more than that, you can tell certain things about how they might taste, or how they might go together. If you sit and observe a creature, you observe how it interacts with the world, or kind of how it interacts with itself to some level. It's a bit like watching an egg simmer or laying on a pan. But if you have Biomancy, you can feel it all. You can tell what's happening at a delicate structure level. At a delicate structure level, is it that? Can I say that? Okay, I'm going to use it anyway.

But yeah, you can tell, and it's really, really helpful. But more than that, you can adjust your own tastes. Now, this is not entirely useful for a mass-market situation in which you're making food for a lot of different people, but you can probably shape your tongue to know what they like—which is pretty cool

but complicated. I tried. I tried it on myself first and got cancer a few times, but I've got to figure out how to do it. I gotta figure out how to do a lot of things.

I can't be putting off any more Practical Metabiology. I'm going to start learning that even if I'm in the middle of combat, if I have to. It's getting in the way of me becoming a better chef. I need to be a better chef. The System might want me to kill. But that's not all I am going to be. I'm more than just a killer. The Path is more than just violence.

Besides, if I don't figure this shit out, Adam will keep calling me an orc. And I'm nothing like 811. I'm not.

Skill Gained: Writing 1 (Common)

Oh, finally. That took a while. I'll probably need more lessons from both Adam and Uva... Maybe more so Adam. I have a hard time focusing when she glares at me.

-Draft Excerpt of Deep Delicacies and Exotic Delights

, Written by Shiv (Notifications included)

There were thirty-six of the vampires at the start of the second. When that second ended, most of them simply disintegrated before a sudden blast of flame or were reduced to sprays of crimson. A few Low Masters proved stronger. Stronger in the sense that their torsos remained intact. Said torsos were also launched across the horizon with the detonation of Shiv's inertial sheath.

In his hands were four lineage cores—hearts claimed from the strongest vampires. The blood and mana within the cores pulsed out and connected them to the weaker vampires in the group. That's how Shiv remembered how the vampires were a multi-level marketing scam, with the elders getting more powerful somehow as they created more spawn or something. When he killed the weaker vampires, there wasn't that much effort to the strong ones they were connected to, but when he slew a supposed elder, the weaker vampires' cores shriveled magically, even while his temporal shell was active and time was halted.

Time resumed. And Shiv's disappointment followed. He expected at least one of the vampires to be a High Master, but between Inertial Overdrive and his Chronomancy, he inflicted a bit too much damage. After spiking his gravitic field twenty times in a row, even the toughest vampire started coming apart as Shiv drew closer.

And that's not just because of one skill, but several working together, Shiv thought. Another crater lined the outside of the Abyssal Gateway, and what few bits of vegetation remained were burning as well. It's going to be hard to use Inertial Overdrive with non-martials around. I can see the System forcing me into a situation like that.

He chunked the lineage cores into his cloak and sighed. "Thanks for the speed-bump, System. Now. Give me a moment so I can find some food for the gate first. I'll fight whatever horrible bullshit you throw my way with a smile on my face if you'll just give me a few godsdamned minutes."

The System mocked him in response. A flash of Biomancy mana pulsed in the corner of Shiv's vision. A vampire emerged from a cloud of dust. Then a flood of other spells came from even deeper in the woods.

Huh. Scouts. Or just another war party. Well. Let's see how you guys do.



The spell curved through the air, a thing of festering flesh and howling pestilence. Shiv froze time again. His temporal armor was cracked, but he still had approximately two seconds. Two seconds was a lot of time with Inertial Overdrive. He spiked his field thirty concurrent times—felt his bones fracture and his skin tear. Then, as Shiv blasted right beside the vampire, he watched as the bloodsucker's skin flayed—and he saw more hidden scouts ignite deeper in the woods from the air friction. He popped his sheath just as his temporal shell shattered.

Three kilometers of space around him dissolved as a sphere of destruction spread out from him, incinerating a good chunk of the forest immediately outside the gateway's premises.

Chunks of burning vampire rained down from the sky, and Shiv waited. He glared at his surroundings and pulsed his Dread Aura. Nothing. He focused his paltry Awareness, but that wasn't that helpful, either. He kept his Creeping Void held back for a while longer as he baited out more attacks, but when none came, Shiv scoffed and let the blackness flow.

Rose began shaking. Slowly, a screen formed before him, and she whispered a series of words behind his ears.

Outside Context Problem: A monster. A Necrotech monster! That's what killed the horde! That's what butchered the force meant to take Gate Theborn. A monster sent by the Necrotechs to claim the gate first.

Yelette fled through the woods. Her flesh was seared. Her eardrums were burst. She was healing and weeping and fleeing at the same time. It took her some time to manage the teleportation spell while maintaining Stealth, but she did. The Elders needed to know... They needed to know this gate was lost to them.

It was a Necrotech Gate now.

Shiv considered the vision for a moment and let out an amused chuckle. “Well. This should make things confusing for the First Blood. Might make them think twice about coming here again.”

He channeled a Biomancy spell and repaired the damage he'd inflicted on his bone armor through his inertial detonations. The System was probably going to send another problem for him soon, and maybe the next time it would be something horrific or nightmarish, something he couldn't handle so easily. Better get moving before that happens.

You might be reading a pirated copy. Look for the official release to support the author.

He shot high into the air, and as he did, he momentarily paused to look at the old ruins just a few kilometers away from the gateway. He remembered stepping through it the first time he rushed up to Gate Theborn weeks ago with 811. Shiv felt a strange kinship to ruins. It was a place of history, but also a place of mystery. When he had a moment, he would go take a look there.

For now, though, he shot off across the land, blasting over the ravine he once fell from while dragging along the mind-broken Jealousy and the slaves inside. Now, he kept himself at a respectable speed and maintained his Creeping Void. His Master-Tier Stealth Skill was paradoxically very noticeable overall, but it made pinpointing his exact position very hard. Just the way Shiv liked it.

He kept to a quick but controllable pace. Shiv discovered Inertial Overdrive still built up over time. Much slower than how fast it would when he spiked his gravitic field, but the pressure and speed still climbed at a terrifying rate. To maintain a controllable, non-destructive speed, he ended up popping his sheath every few seconds or so.

Across the Umbral Wilderness, loud booms declared Shiv's path. Eventually, he decided against using his Inertial Overdrive altogether. He wasn't traveling in a hurry, after all. And the noise he was making was probably alerting enemies to his presence from kilometers away.

I might be the most unsubtle Master-Tier Stealth-having Pathbearer in the Integrated Multiverse, Shiv mused.

Past the slaughter and destruction near the Abyssal Gateway, the bioluminescent beauty of the Umbral Wilderness revealed itself, and Shiv let out a briefly comforted sigh. It was a reminder that not all the world was consumed by this madness. There were still some places of calm and beauty left. He didn't think he could ever regard the Umbral Wilderness as such a place. But after his experiences within Gate Theborn, he would take being killed by a group of feral weavers over and over again compared to the torture he suffered facing the Recollector.

From on high, he scoured the land while blanketing entire sections of the wilderness with his Creeping Void. The darkness concealed his exact position and proved to be a layer of confusion against anyone who tried to ambush him. With how the System was acting, Shiv didn't want to take any chances.

While he flew from above, he focused on his senses and mana fields. He knew in the river below there would likely be some of those strange shrimp, and he knew also that there were rabbit-like entities elsewhere in the wilderness.

I probably need to draw a hunting-foraging map for myself or something, Shiv thought. And he began to strain his awareness as well, trying to pick out key details on land, listening carefully, as he tried to gather more information. But the quieter sounds were drowned by the air rushing past him, and the rest of the noise seemed to blend together and not offer him much of anything useful.

How does Adam do this? It's so silent...Wait, not silent. Just really subtle. There were noises coming everywhere, but for a long while he'd disregarded it as white noise, ambience he could ignore.

After a bit of searching, he found dense patches of sprawling blue colors and shot straight down. To his delight, he was looking at a massive cluster of mendules. He swept across the ground and started gathering them en masse with a massive smile perked on his face. As he harvested his favorite abyssal mushrooms, Shiv hummed as he collected a few other varieties of micro-fungi as well. Those were hard-capped and light green, and Shiv's Biomancy felt a few odd growths inside them. Time to try some new stuff too.

Hopefully this one doesn't kill me. I'll eat one later when I find something to drain vitality from.

And thus began a period of peaceful foraging. He spent far too much time fighting these days. Far too much. Being consumed by bloodshed without time to decompress and cook couldn't be healthy.

Shiv wanted to be a Pathbearer more than anything. He wanted a life of adventure, of freedom. A life that was his own. But not all of that life needed to be apocalyptic violence. And it wouldn't be if he had any say in it. He would have been more than happy being a chef, he realized. The battle-lust that took him was sometimes a thrill like no other, but cooking left him feeling satisfied and whole. It was the part of him that stood beyond the casual brutality of the world. Creating rather than breaking.

And there, as he hovered over a vast field of mendules, Shiv felt an overwhelming sense of peace pulse from his very core. He thought back to when he faced the Recollector. Merely a few hours ago he was being twisted, broken, torn apart again and again, tortured for what felt like an eternity at the time. A few hours ago, he struggled and fought and died over and over again.

So much death had choked Gate Theborn. Too much. Shiv thought about how he'd interacted with the people afterwards and frowned slightly. With a few hours distance from his deeds and his blood now calm, some of what he did seemed a bit too vicious. He didn't mind killing. It didn't bother him at all, as long as he thought they really deserved it. He liked facing and breaking powerful enemies, but he was

still slightly unnerved by how many people he had slaughtered over the past few days alone, and how normal it all felt to him. Like he had just taken a brisk jog.

Is this what happens to all Pathbearers? Shiv thought. He considered how terrified the mercenaries were—how disconnected he felt from their needs and the needs of the other survivors. The slaves, the weak, the non-martials... I didn't really think about them much, either. I try to protect their lives, of course, but as long as I don't personally know them, they're not my main concern, really. I was one of them about a month ago. And already I can feel myself forgetting what it was like. As if we're worlds apart. I got used to this too easily, too fast... Adam isn't anything like this, and he's grown almost as fast as me. Is this the ritual's doing too? Godsdammit. What the hells did you do? Huh? Mom? Dad? Why am I like this?

An impossible fight was thrust upon him, and somehow he and the others came out alive. They were rewarded for their struggle with power and advancements, but with that reward came a certain fate. A fate that locked them into more conflict.

Even now Shiv could feel the System's oppressive desires swell around him. It was pulling him from place to place, pulling things towards him, attempting to inspire new struggles. And he knew Valor's words were right. Most people would have broken under the strain, the trauma, the suffering. By this point, Shiv barely cared how badly the Recollector tortured him. Thinking back just pissed him off, and getting mad made him more powerful in combat.

And that made Shiv think of some of his skills as well. Several of his strongest skills were commonly found in dragons and other colossal monsters. His Chronomancy was a dragon's Master-Tier Chronomancy Evolution. His Adamantine Adaption too. Comparing his skills with other individual Pathbearers, his skills were more brutal and destructive by far. And he was inclined toward instinct and violence—was impossibly resistant.

Maybe... Maybe the ritual was supposed to make me a monster? But it was only partly successful? Fuck. Were my parents trying to make me into some kind of perfect soldier? A perfect Pathbearer that isn't afraid of violence or casualties? Is that what this is?

Shiv considered Adam. Adam was brave. Shiv could feel how badly broken the Young Lord's courage was when facing the Recollector. Death shook Adam—left him traumatized. Even now, Adam's mind was in turmoil—and Shiv didn't know what that was like at all. It was like trauma and misery glided over him. It was oil to his water—it touched but didn't linger. He was pent-up. Frustrated. He wanted to cook. But he could fight. He could do this forever. But Adam couldn't. Uva could modify her own mind, but even she had her limits.

Meanwhile, all it took for Shiv to enter a state of relative bliss were a few blue mendules in his hands and a moment of peace. Slowly, he was beginning to understand why the way he acted bothered people.

I should pay more attention to what I do sometimes. Watch myself. I... I like being this strong. I like just shrugging this trauma off—I mean who wouldn't? But I don't want my mind to do something... Shit, I don't trust my own mind anymore. Godsdammit, System, is this something you intended too? Make me paranoid about myself?

Shockingly, no response came. A breeze rustled his hair. Shiv glared out at his surroundings. At the shadowy mountains in the distance, at massive mushrooms swaying in the wind, at the forests nearby, the trees filled with strange serpent-ape things that shrieked fearfully at his Creeping Void.

He let out a sigh, and let it go. To hells with it. I'll figure it out. I'll do the right thing. Try to, anyway.

As he finished with his mushroom gathering, he followed a nearby river and picked some of the weird shrimp creatures out from its bottom as well. With the crustaceans, he also discovered a strange patch of thick, glistening weeds. He wanted to see how that tasted later. Perhaps he would have a bite first himself to make sure it wasn't threatening to anyone else along with a few of the mushrooms.

On a whim, he dove into the coursing waters, splashing and immersing himself in the refreshing flow. All the blood and viscera clinging to his body peeled off in an instant, and Shiv's Biomancy was powerful enough that he could feel the organic particles in the water. The particles massaged his flesh, seeping into his body. This water was mana-affected in some way. He could feel it; he just couldn't exactly determine how. After he soaked for a while, he rose back into the air, his mind refreshed, his body feeling electric with motion.

Shiv let out a laugh, and he splashed back down. He held his breath for a while, but after a few minutes, he decided that he wanted to resurface again. Having Master-Tier Physicality changed things. It changed things a lot. It made every one of your biological processes more robust by a magnitude. And pairing that with his Toughness, Shiv wasn't sure how long he could hold his breath—go without food, drink, or sleep. But aside from exhaustion, injury, or desire, he thought he could last as he was for months or even years.

But he didn't want to restrain himself right now. He wanted to live. He wanted to sink into the moment, into this moment of true and absolute freedom. A flow state took him. He indulged and acted as he wanted for the first time in a long while. Blackedge had been a cage, and when he first fell from the surface, the Umbral Wilderness was far too deadly for him to just adventure around.

Now? The world was truly open to him. Open on a level few other Pathbearers could enjoy.

He held on to every passing instant. He took in the world around him, listening, hearing the insects chirp, watching how the river flowed, studying it with his Biomancy, reaching out, using his magic, and feeling all the bio-matter around him. Shiv halted time at several points as inspiration struck him, as he tried to hold onto an instant or a scene. And during those moments, as his temporal shell slowly cracked, he wished that he was an artist or a writer so that he could keep those moments with him.

It was then that a thought struck him. I should write a book of recipes or at least document my experiences down in the Abyss. Yeah, there are all kinds of stuff here that people can eat, or dishes people can make that the surface doesn't know about. Might be useful for the future, and I think I'll enjoy it. Wonder what I'll call it, though...

He continued along, letting himself drift down the river, but he made sure to keep track of Gate Theborn. It wasn't hard to spot exactly, and he always had the ruins to follow if he got too lost. But he kept his awareness open, and he let his spirit loosen. Adam needed deep rest, Uva needed her quiet, and this was part of what Shiv needed: to feast on the world before cooking.

Being in the moment felt right.

Skill Gained: Philosophy 1 (Common)

"Huh?" Shiv blinked. "Philosophy?" The skill notification caught him off guard, but then he smiled and accepted it. "Dunno what you'll bring, but I look forward to seeing what you get me at Adept."

As the river he followed ended at a deep pond, he found strange plants extending out from the base of the body of water. Plants that lined the ground in neat, parallel grids, and along those grids were jagged petals of gleaming blue. Some had blossomed, and at their core were ripe nodules that smelled almost heavenly. It wasn't exactly a sweet flavor they gave off, but rather an earthy, fragrant taste that was hard for Shiv to describe. He'd never encountered such a thing before. The best thing he could compare it to was the smell of nature after it rained mingling with the taste of watermelon.



He began to harvest those as well, but soon found that things were piling within his cloak, and that he was running out of room. He stared at his Cloak of Midnight's Kindred and gave it a nod of admiration. It, perhaps more than any of his other Enchanted items, served him well. "I'm going to see if I can get you an upgrade," he said, patting his cloak. "Thanks to you, I can see in the dark, okay? Also, thanks to you, I don't need to go around carrying everything in a giant bag."

The System forced him into conflict, but sometimes it also provided. Maybe that was by design. Following that thought, Shiv regarded the world. He felt himself as a part of it. He was immersed in his tasks, thinking about his past, his present, the coming future, and cooking. But he just then noticed something. There was no conflict right then. He was not killing anyone, not fighting anything, not ripping anyone to pieces. The System might force him into ever-escalating battles, but right now, this moment was his. More importantly, the world was larger than he. He might have been favored among favored, but even so, there were other players on the stage, other dancers, other Pathbearers. A head chef ruled the kitchen, but he was just one chef, and the dishes would not be made by him alone.

Philosophy 1 > 2

Shiv laughed. "I should maybe do more deep thinking." He paused. "I don't think I've ever really done anything like this..." Most of his life was survival, toil, and battle. The streets and the ruins were his battlegrounds. They tempered him. Then the kitchen was his sanctuary—a place where he felt accepted and wanted, even if Georges loved to scream. But through it all, he always lived in the moment. He didn't cling so hard to the past or fear for the future. He always fought for the present.

And maybe that was partially why he got the Chronomancy Skill Evolution he did too.

Shiv let out a sigh, and a weight escaped him. There was a growing feeling of acceptance. He didn't rush so much anymore. He would get the food they needed—cook something that would be able to provide regeneration for all the survivors within Gate Theborn. But along the way, he would soak himself in the world, just like he soaked himself in the river earlier. And also soak himself in his thoughts.

"I wasn't lying," he said to himself as he wandered in the wilderness. "It is the Pathbearer's life for me. Nothing else will do." He let out a breath of wondrous awe as he looked up. Massive, trailing, bioluminescent plants crept along distant mountains, and the faraway ceiling glittered with color and clashing beauty. The world was brutal, and the world was beautiful; often both at the same time.

And along his wanderings, as he slipped past a dense section of pointed trees that seemed to have a layer of calcified stuff on their outside, he found himself staring at a colossal, bulbous plant that gleamed an amber-red in the darkness. His Biomancy had detected the plant a few moments ago, and it pulled him toward it. It seemed so full of vitality, so full of some kind of flavor. It was practically pumping with energy.

As Shiv breathed in, he started gagging. The sweetness that radiated from the plant was incredible. The entire plant was approximately 100 meters wide, and it was half again as tall. As he walked up, he swiped a fingertip through it and took a bite. Immediately, his Biomancy detected changes to his body. It was so sweet that even his arteries began to fill with fast-hardening plaque.

"Broken godsdamned Moon," Shiv breathed. His eyes rolled from the flavor, however. "This thing," he let out a gasping laugh, "this thing's a killer. But damn, if we could just sprinkle a little smear of this on something, that would be... That would kill a guy with a sweet tooth." And he pulled a chunk away from the plant, placing it within his skin decoy-turned-handbag for now. He wouldn't use that on anyone else.

He would test the plant on himself and likely suffer a few heart attacks before he died. But Shiv was fine with that. He would simply resurrect and learn from his demise. And probably enjoy this demise, actually.

I wonder if there's some kind of heart attack resistance skill. Or maybe just, I don't know, plaque resistance? Fat resistance? Metabolic resistance? I'll need to look into the force-feeding chapter in Odes later. Man, Ekkihurst kills people in a lot of weird felling ways.

But while he indulged and admired the great plant, his peace was, unfortunately, not to last. The stay of violence Shiv had lasted approximately an hour. A scream announced its end. A shriek of pure terror echoed from afar. The shriek of a man desperate to escape, pinned and on the verge of absolute despair. Shiv felt the hairs on his body rise, felt his senses sharpen. Someone was under attack and not that far away at all. He turned, following the sound, and he rose into the air. He made a note where the large plant was so he could return later, but for now, he had something to investigate.

"I see what you're doing," Shiv said. "Thanks for the moment of peace, though." He wasn't overly happy that the System was dragging him away, but by this point, he'd learned to take what he could get.

After a lifetime of being denied, gratefulness was an easy thing for Shiv to internalize.

It took him little time to locate the source of the screams. He found himself soaring up along the flat face of a ravine. He had his Creeping Void active, and so a swelling, dark mass followed him as he went, curving along the edge of the cliff as he shot higher into the air. A second later, Shiv was hovering a few meters away from the edge and taking in a most peculiar scene.

A group of ten heavily armed vampires, coated in dense scar-tissue armor, stood around a shrieking man with his silken shirt torn open. Three of them were holding him down, while a fourth shaped a Biomancy spell around him. Spell patterns swirled around the victim in a strange, layered circle. And then there was the vampiress saddling him, carving into his bare chest using a ritual dagger. Shiv's Biomancy told him that the dagger was hollow at the hilt, and it was rapidly filling with the victim's blood. As the vampiress traced another stroke across the victim's flesh, she whispered something to the man about "ruining his Lineage Core so he could sire no more mongrels" and "reducing him back to cattle."

This was when Shiv noticed the victim was a vampire as well. He, too, had a lineage core. His biology matched theirs.

By then, the first of their number noticed the impenetrable darkness gushing over them. “Darkness? Why is—”

A laceration spell smashed into the vampire’s face. The upper half of his head fell off. The other vampires didn’t see Shiv’s spells coming either. The Creeping Void was a wonderful skill to have.

The Creeping Void 108 > 109

In seconds, four of the scar-armored vampires came apart in pieces. He accidentally cut a Lineage Core in half. Three other vampires let out ragged cries of absolute agony as their Lineage Cores began to shrivel.

Huh. Must’ve gotten an elder or something. However that works.

“Attack!” The vampiress with the ritual dagger screamed. “We are under—”

Two lacerations hit her. They detonated against her Magical Resistance. Shiv responded by beheading her the direct way—with the edge of his hand. Then, he used her rapidly regenerating body as a club to beat all the other vampires into submission. A few struck out blindly using Biomancy spells. Blindly wasn’t good enough. Glowing shapes slashed out into the darkness, and they came apart, screaming as Shiv casually walked up to each one of them and broke them using his field.

Aside from the one vampire he accidentally killed, the rest were still functionally alive. Already, they were regenerating, and Shiv used this opportunity to study how their biology worked. He still couldn’t heal anything aside from a laceration very well without using a Woundeater, and so their unnatural regeneration was going to be useful for him to study. Maybe I should request that I get to study the

Jealousy alongside the Weaveresses and Umbrals. I can regenerate as well. Hydras too. Hmm. Maybe I should keep one alive—No, that seems like torture. Agh. Getting too used to this. I don't need another orc skill.

The Challenger is watching.

Yeah, keep watching, asshole. I'm not just some psychotic murderer. I'm a deliberate killer, and I'll probably kill these vampires after I figure out what's happening here. Just not before.

As he let his Creeping Void die down, he turned to look upon the victimized vampire. His chest was badly cut, but was quickly healing. As Shiv regarded the man's face, he did a double-take. The vampire had the finest black mane of hair he had ever seen. It was like a curtain of midnight silk. His sharp features and the thinness of his nose also caught Shiv off-guard as well.

He shook his head and looked away. Some of the effect faded immediately. The hell was that? Some kind of social skill? It's not Psychomancy. Some Charisma evolution?

A whimper came from the bare-chested vampire, and he looked up at Shiv. The vampire's courage was shaken, but there was still iron inside him yet. The wounds were beginning to fade on his body, and he swallowed.

"Having a bad day?" Shiv asked.

The vampire shivered. The trails on his cheeks showed Shiv he had been crying. "Perhaps... Perhaps the worst of my life." The vampire's voice was soft and thick with sorrow.

Shiv nodded. He cast another few lacerations at the scar-armored vampires he just obliterated to keep them from recovering. "So. Why were they trying to butcher you? Don't think I've ever seen a vampire getting attacked by their own kind before."

The vampire looked up at Shiv. Shiv averted his gaze as soon as he felt himself drawn to the vampire's features once more. Shit. What the hell is that skill? It's like it forces me to look.

"They were... I left... I told them I was done."

"What?" Shiv asked.

"I didn't want to be of the First Blood anymore," the vampire breathed. "I left. I wanted another life for myself. But they wouldn't let me go, and... and..." The vampire let out a sob as his inhumanly attractive features contorted into one of pain. Just hearing the vampire weep made Shiv want to break down as well, but the Deathless resisted. "And they came to my home... Oh, Hawthark, what have I done to you?"

"Hawthark?" Shiv asked.

"The town I tried to start," the vampire whispered. "The town I tried to start with my wife. It is..." He slumped down and started sobbing.

“Hey? Hey!” Shiv spoke twice more to the vampire, but the latter didn’t respond. He wanted to keep the dialogue going, but he realized the heartbroken vamp was in no condition to talk. So, Shiv continued his conversation with another vampire instead.

Shiv let the vampiress with the ritual dagger regrow her head. He studied the process in detail as he waited, standing over her.

Practical Metabiology 32 > 33

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As a layer of skin finally fused over Octorie’s skull and her eyes blinked, her gaze cleared and—terror exploded inside her.

Looming over her was a huge figure. The bones he wore gleamed with a metallic sheen, and his irises were pale—paler than white-hot flame. In his hand was something—

It splashed down beside Octorie, and she flinched. There, just a few inches from her head, was a massive lump of bone, cancer, and flesh fused into something like a whip-flail. It was connected to the skeletal brute’s left arm by a cord of tissue and spine.

“Hey, you’re finally alive again,” the skeletal brute said, his voice low and guttural. Just a few meters behind him, the traitor knelt, sobbing in the dirt. “Got a few questions I want to ask you...”

Chapter 98 (I) Hunt [III]

Becoming a vampire means immortality, but it is not your immortality alone. Rather, with every lineage core spread, from those who sired vampires before you, to the one that sired you, to the one you will sire, your entire line grows stronger. Your skills collectively advance, and you can gaze through each other. You can draw upon your lesser's power and lend yours in aid to those above, and so on.

This is what the First Blood will tell you, but the First Blood lies. This is not a proper form of immortality, but a parasitic one. It is a hierarchical chain, meant to benefit the ones at the top, and sold to the desperate and the hopeless as a means to escape their predicament. This comes at the cost—for the Vampirism Skill is not only a skill, but a curse and a chain.

Understand what a Lineage Core is. Lineage. Bloodline. You are made a vampire by a sire—and short of them being among the First Blooded, they will have a sire of their own. Now, this comes with advantages. For as long as your sire lives and the bloodline chain to your First remains unbroken, they will restore you, no matter how ruined your flesh becomes. The blood of the First, likewise, will flow into your body, ensuring you are resistant to disease, to malformation, to biological decay. This is because you will be made a mirror of the First, and short of their destruction or the ruining of your core, you will endure in their image regardless.

But there is a cost to pay for those below. A price of skills and fealty. You cannot disobey a sire. For they control your blood. You cannot overcome your elders. For they hold your destiny. And when they need to draw forth power, they will be allowed to siphon mana from you as you might from cattle or your lessers.

When you become a vampire, the image they sell is of high nobility, freedom to indulge in all the pleasure and power offered in by the System without fear of a final death.

The truth is that you are but a link in the chain of blood. To be abused by those above because that is their right. And to be abusive to those below, for they will plot to take from you your core...



-Sire and Sired: The Chain of the First Blood

The vampiress was scared. That didn't stop her from trying to use her Biomancy to flay Shiv alive.

After educating her on the penalties of being a rude idiot and waiting for her head to grow back together beneath his feet, the vampiress's head regenerated again—just in time to see Shiv crush the Lineage Core he took from another vampire.

She got extremely cooperative after that

Dread Aura 88 > 89

Apparently, the sad vampire she was torturing was called Angelo Franchetti. He used to be part of the Ophereus Bloodline until he somehow managed to murder his sire and take her core for himself. After that, instead of doing what was the normal vampire thing and climbing up the bloodline ladder, he fled. This wouldn't be an issue in and of itself, but as his sire apparently was connected to a great many junior vampires, Angelo somehow managed to achieve something of a "bloodline blockage" for the senior vampires on top of him. This meant the elders were unable to reach out and shape their descendants, and thus an entire generation of Ophereus Bloodline high vampires turned into lessers.

"That can happen?" Shiv muttered, taken aback. He was working through Odes slowly, but Ekkihurst was mainly focused on the intricacies of biology rather than specifically on the nature of vampire bodies. The only other stuff Shiv really knew about vampires was how much Uva—and practically every other Umbral in existence—despised them. That, and that crushing their cores killed them for good.

“Without the wizened hand of the First, the Highest Blood will sour and spoil in the newspawn,” the vampiress hissed. She glared feral hate at Angelo, who now had his hands over his face. “You... Vermin. Your sire takes you in, makes you someone of note and status, and you betray her. You butcher her. You steal her core.” The vampiress sneered. “Well done. That was rightfully taken. But then—but then, why did you flee? Why did you seal yourself away from the elders?”

Angelo didn't reply to her. He was still too distraught. She spat a mouthful of blood at him in response. Her eyes snapped back to Shiv, and he felt her expression change. Immediately, her features shifted. She became more feminine. Her lips filled, and her bones cracked and transformed. Immediately, Shiv felt an urge to look at her—to do more with her—come over him. But her Charisma Skill wasn't nearly as powerful as Angelo's.

She let out a husky breath. “Powerful Pathbearer...”

“Headless corpse,” Shiv greeted in return.

Her eyes widened. Her jaw dropped. “Wha—”

Shiv's armored boot crushed her skull in the next instant, beheading her for the third time. Shiv glared down at her twitching body and growled. “See you felling fuck with my mind now.” He cast a few more laceration spells at the other vampires around him to keep them trapped in a regenerative state as well. He had a picture of what was happening, and frankly, he didn't really care about the vampires overall.

This whole thing didn't seem like his business from what was told, but the way Angelo sobbed was horrifically human. The poor bastard sounded genuinely broken. Shiv walked away from the quivering body of the vampiress and knelt down in front of Angelo. “Hey. Hey, Angelo.”

The bare-chested vampire stopped weeping for an instant and turned to regard Shiv. His expression was one of wretched despair. Shiv hated seeing that on the vampire's features. He wanted to—

Shiv looked away and hissed. "Look. Turn off your felling Charisma Skill, alright. I'm not going to kill you. Yet."

"I'm not using it," Angelo breathed.

"What?" Shiv said, surprised.

"I'm not using my Charm on you. I'm not."

"Then why do I feel it pulling at me every time I look at you?"

"It's just the passive effect," Angelo muttered under his breath. "I can't help it. It came with the skill's evolution to Master-Tier."

The Deathless blinked. "So... This entire time, you weren't even using the skill at all?"

"No. Not at all. I won't use it again. Never again."

Shiv grunted. "Could've fooled me. Listen: was what she said true?"

"Yes," Angelo admitted readily. He hugged himself and closed his eyes. "I—I did murder my sire. I did take her core. I did all those things. And I just wanted to be left alone after. I just wanted to be my own person again. This was—it was never my choice. I never wanted... I just wanted..."

"Come on," Shiv said, holding Angelo by the shoulder. He kept the vampire from doubling over and collapsing into the blood-soaked soil. "Look. I don't care what you did. I was just surprised you were a vampire too, and that they were trying to hurt you. Never saw that before."

That got a hollow laugh out of Angelo. "Hurting each other is all the Bloodlines ever do. It's all vampires ever do." After a moment, he righted himself and looked at Shiv. "I'm surprised you bothered to speak with us at all. I did not know some of your kind still held mercy for me and mine."

"My kind?" Shiv asked.

"Necrotechs. You are a Deathstalker, are you not?" Angelo whispered. "You have proven your power. You have broken the others with your Biomancy and might. I will not resist anything you intend to do." Angelo almost snarled then as his nails dug into himself. "I can never resist anyone anyway. Never. I am just a thing... I can't stop being a thing..."

And something told Shiv that the vampire was on another level of traumatized altogether. The Deathless regarded him for a moment and stood up. "Yeah. Well. You're not my thing. I only kind of know what's going on, but frankly, if you hurt the First Blood, that makes me want to cook for you, not kill you. Also, I'm not a Necrotech. I'm just a simple Pathbearer, making my way in the world, looking for a hydra or something that has good natural regeneration."

Angelo looked up again, an expression of genuine surprise dawning on his exquisite features. “You aren’t—but the armor you wear...”

“Just how I like to dress. It’s convenient for me.” Shiv let out a laugh. “And I don’t think they know death nearly as well as I do.”

“So... you are merely monster-hunting? Here? In the Umbral Depths?” Angelo sounded confused and skeptical. “You do know that this is conflicted territory, do you not? Both the First Blood and Compact have laid claim to these lands—and Compact does not allow unregistered Pathbearers to poach here, to even walk these lands without a proper license.”

“Yeah, I don’t really care what Compact wants,” Shiv replied. “The First Blood, neither. As far as I’m concerned, both of them are made up of bastards who need killing, and that’s all they are to me. Speaking of which, why the hells are you here, then?”

“I own—I owned a plot of land nearby,” Angelo breathed, a haunted expression returning to him. “I bought it. From the Lords of Law. It was mine. And I was to be safe here. Safe with my people. A town of our own... Just a small... small plot of p-peace.” And then tears spilled forth from Angelo’s eyes again.

Shiv was about to ask him for more details, and then he noticed most of the scar-armored vampires he had killed earlier had regenerated. “Gimme a second.” Several laceration spells later, the conversation continued. “Alright. Where’s your place? And tell me what exactly happened.”

Angelo’s tears trailed down his cheeks, but his eyes remained locked on Shiv. “Why? Why do you care?”

“Because there might be other vampires there, and I think it’s best if there weren’t.”

Angelo looked upon Shiv, his face fraught with near-hope and disbelief. “Who are you?”

“I told you earlier. Just a simple Pathbearer. I need to be back somewhere with food in a while, but I think butchering a couple of vampires won’t take up too much of my time. Besides, the System would have forced me into some bullshit sooner or later.”

And somehow, Angelo understood. “You’re a Questing-favored.”

Questing? “Something like that. So. Where’s this town of yours? And what’s its name again?”

“Hawthark,” Angelo breathed, a surge of hope filling his gaze. “Hawthark. I—you truly wish to help me?”

“I didn’t say anything about helping you. I’m just in it for the vampire killing. And if there are other innocent people there, it might be best that they get saved.”

Slowly, Angelo rose to his feet, a renewed purpose lifting him. “I—I can show you. It’s not far. But the First Blood, they sent an entire Court Leviathan to recapture me and put my people to the fang.”

Shiv cocked his head. “A Court Leviathan?” Shiv wasn’t fully sure what that was, but it sounded like it might be interesting. “Does it regenerate?”

“What?”

“Does it regenerate? Is it edible?”

Hope was usurped by confusion on Angelo’s face. His mouth hung open slightly. “I—yes? Possibly. I’ve never thought of such a thing.”

“Ah. To hells with it. I’ll figure it out after I kill the bloodsuckers and cook the thing.” A groan came from nearby as several of the other vampires finished regenerating again. “Hm. Nah. I’m not cooking them. Feels too close to cannibalism for me.”

Angelo blinked twice. Shiv ignored the flabbergasted vampire as he dragged his cancer flail over to the vampiress, who had only just grown her head back. Once more, she blinked, once more, she looked up, once more, she saw Shiv. “So. About you trying to seduce me earlier...”

“No! Mercy! My sire can—”

She made a fine test subject for the first proper swing of his new cancer flail.

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Angelo led Shiv through a dense thicket packed with feathery plants. As they continued on, Shiv continued plucking new ingredients to try out later. Even now, with blood dripping from his flail and gore painting his armor, he reminded himself to stay immersed in the world.

Beauty one second, violence the next. That's your way, isn't it, System?

The rogue vampire moved with terror and caution in his every step. He had some kind of Adept-Tier Stealth Skill that allowed him to dive from shadow to shadow. It was a bit like the Umbral Shadowwalker Skill stored within Shiv's Mask of False Paths, but rather than going invisible, Angelo basically treated shadows like they were pools of water.

Shiv strolled forward casually. He wasn't going to use his Stealth Skill until Hawthark was in sight. The Creeping Void was awesome at concealment and confusion, but subtle it was not. It was a very "Shiv" skill in that sense, and for now, he just wanted to get a look at his enemy and the so-called Court Leviathan that carried them into battle.

Once more, Shiv realized the value of possessing a variety of skills. He was hyper-specialized for two things, mainly: combat and cooking. In terms of combat, he had an additional specialization in close-quarters, high damage, low precision, and mass devastation encounters. He was hard to kill, inflicted a great deal of harm, and, more importantly, he kept coming back. But when it came to predicting what his enemy might do, or sensing hidden foes, seeing them over the horizon, that was where he had no capabilities whatsoever.

After fighting alongside Adam and Uva for so long, Shiv suddenly remembered how limited he was alone. If he had Adam with him here, the Young Lord would have simply cast his awareness afar, and through Uva, they would all get a good glimpse of their enemy. If he had Uva, he wouldn't need to interrogate and threaten a vampire for information. She would just pull it out of their memories.



When they fought together, they all shored up each other's weaknesses and made one another exponentially more dangerous. Enemies with massive Physicality and Toughness skills were vulnerable to mind magic or surprise—Uva's specialty. High Magical Resistance adversaries that Uva couldn't easily get to would be torn apart by Shiv or shot down from afar by Adam. And what they couldn't notice, what they couldn't easily react to, would be seen by Adam. He, the hawk in the sky, Uva the whisper on the wind, and Shiv, the storm fated to fall thereafter.

Right now, he was a restrained storm, holding himself at bay, creeping through the shrubbery and peering afar over the shoulder of a peculiar vampire to save the rogue bloodsucker's village. Shiv spotted the town of Hawthark immediately once they got near it.

He and Angelo were at the very top of a slope, still mostly shrouded by feathery plants. Hawthark wasn't a big village, but it did have one huge building. It seemed to be some kind of church, judging from the religious iconography decorating its surfaces. Its front end was the shape of a massive sloping triangle, and there, a colossal entity with many limbs, a large glowing body, and colorful fractals where its head was supposed to be was depicted. To Shiv's—admittedly amateurish—eye, its architecture was quite beautiful.

Flayed bodies had been nailed to every wall of the building.

Chapter 98 (II) Hunt [III]

Nearby, Shiv saw windmills turning, but as their burning wheels spun, his gut clenched as he saw bodies hanging from each of the turning flaps.

"Great One," Angelo whimpered. "I... I promised they would be safe here. I invited them to live here... They were desperate. I thought I could offer them something... A life... Hope..."

"Angelo," Shiv said, planting a hand on the heartbroken vampire's shoulder to steady him. "I can't do anything for them now, but I can still kill the bastards who did this. Unless you want to end them yourself after I'm through with them. Or torture them."

Angelo drew in a long, shuddering breath. "I... would prefer not to. It is not my way."

"Yeah, well, that's fine. More levels for me."

Angelo's eyes widened as he regarded Shiv with a look of disbelief. Shiv studied the other buildings in the town. Most of them were on fire. Several had been reduced to rubble. Blood choked the streets. Blood, viscera, and abominations shaped from them. So, the vampires had to still be around. Either that, or they left some of their minions here for no reason.

Shiv squinted his eyes as he studied the disfigured monsters forged from blood, tissue, teeth, and teratoma. Screams echoed out from one of the buildings, a particularly large one that seemed to be some kind of silo. Shiv had to guess it was meant to store food. Now, well, maybe it was still meant to store food. But food the vampires revered—human livestock.

Angelo was shaking, but he was no longer in a sorrowful state. Instead, he trembled with rage. Shiv didn't look at the vampire's face. That was always a mistake. Even without him trying, Angelo's Master-Tier Charm Skill was distracting at a glance, and potentially full-on compromising if one's gaze truly lingered.

Shiv wondered if the skill could be used during combat, and he realized he might have neglected his Silver Tongue skill more than he thought. Maybe not my Silver Tongue Skill, Shiv realized. It was technically Rose's, according to the Educator.

Many things in you and me commingled, the dead Diviner whispered. Where does one begin? Where does the other end?

Shaking his head, Shiv focused his senses on the problems at hand.

He didn't go rushing in. Not that he didn't want to do just that. Part of his instincts were already screaming at him to charge through, to use his Inertial Overdrive and annihilate the Blood Horrors. He knew they couldn't stop him. But he also understood something about how the vampires fought. After facing them at Gate Theborn, he knew that the Blood Horrors were chaff, expendable by design. They buried enemies under their numbers. In some ways, they were practically an army of living meat shields for the vampires, ones that the true Pathbearers within the First Blood's forces could spend and wield. Blood Horrors created openings and took up the enemy's attention. All the high vampires, and to some extent, the lesser vampires, were more focused, striking at the most dangerous among the enemy Pathbearers.

Just then, he saw someone emerge from the silo. They held a small body in their grasp, and the Deathless clenched his jaw tight. His eyes bulged. Rage ignited inside him, but Shiv spent it immediately on his Awareness Skill. His vision and hearing improved.

Awareness 12 > 13

Even from this distance, he could tell that it was the corpse of a child. The small body was missing its arms and legs, and the one holding him was a tall vampire, dressed in fine robes and loudly proclaiming something to no one in particular. But then something in Shiv's instincts changed. It told him to wait. It told him that there was something there, something he wasn't seeing.

"Why won't they stop... Why... What is the meaning of any of this!" Angelo hissed. He nearly rushed forward. His fingers turned into thin, sharp-tipped claws, but Shiv reached down. He clutched Angelo by the shoulder and held him in place.

"No. We don't do this recklessly. There are still other people alive. We go at my command."

Angelo wanted to protest, but he fell silent as his gaze met Shiv's ever so briefly. Where Angelo had his charm, Shiv had Dread Aura. It was an Adept-Tier Skill, but it went a long way in direct moments of persuasion.

About three seconds later, Shiv's patience was rewarded, as something emerged in the air above the town, seemingly from thin air. A ripple came first. A massive pulse of wind revealed the edges of a colossal mass of bones. Its edges were sleek and bright. It looked like the armor Shiv wore, but it was made of pure bone, ridges of scar tissue growing over it, and transparent membranes connecting the many pieces, and tentacles seeping through the cracks. As the aerial distortion faded entirely, Angelo let out a brief rasp of air, and Shiv laid eyes on a Court Leviathan for the first time in his life.

The entire thing was massive. It was, to his estimation, approximately four kilometers long, dwarfing even the Recollector. It resembled something between a whale and an insect. Legs that reminded Shiv of grasshoppers jutted out from its sides, but were curved and folded inward, hidden around jagged ribs. The head of the creature was axe-shaped, and a cluster of eyes ran down the sides. Atop its skull, there was a thin slit that gleamed brightly, and a moment thereafter, Shiv realized he was looking at a window.

Shiv blinked. He'd seen sky ships in Blackedge before, manor ships of certain Lords that sailed through the air on rare occasions. Those weren't unusual, but even the largest sky ship he'd ever seen hadn't been more than 200 meters long. He'd heard from other townspeople that they needed immense amounts of resources to power and operate, and usually it was simply more beneficial for lone Pathbearers with high teleportation or transportation skills to move things across the land. That, and mana cores were pretty rare.

This thing was not a sky ship, it was a sky beast, something that could fly of its own accord, but then could also be used as something of a troop transport for the First Blood.

Shiv saw its capabilities as Blood Horrors dropped from a ring of spooling tendons connected to the midsection of the Court Leviathan. And after a new batch of abominations was delivered, the tendons snapped free from them, like an umbilical cord detaching from a newborn. The high vampires who departed the Court Leviathan didn't need these tendons; they simply leaped and sailed through the air, levitating themselves gracefully or crashing down without suffering any damage. Shiv regarded the scene unfolding before him for a few moments longer, even as Angelo shuddered and struggled in his grasp.

"That's a pretty big beast they got there," Shiv said, staring up at it. He frowned and looked at Angelo. "All that for just you and this town?"

"No," Angelo breathed. "It was just a thing of convenience. They were meant to serve as support. That is what I overheard."

"Support?"

"They were preparing to take a Compact Gate nearby. But something happened, and they just... stopped... and they took the opportunity to come for me once they sensed my core... The Compact Gate Guardians didn't come to chase them off for some reason. Their patrols were absent too, for days now." Angelo sucked in a ragged breath. "Their protection was promised by a contract I signed when buying this land from them! But they didn't come..."

Shiv clenched his teeth hard and struggled not to growl. And there it was again: the ripples of his actions. He'd tried to do good, but consequences always slipped beyond him. I couldn't have predicted this, he thought. The damned System was mocking him. Everything for more conflict, isn't that right, you piece of shit? If you really wanted me to kill some more vampires, you could have just shown them to me. You didn't need to do this.

"Alright. You're not in the right mindset for this, but the rage is in me now." Shiv walked forward, slipping out from the foliage. "I think they still have some of your people inside that silo. Go get them while I butcher everyone else. I'm going to take to the air. I'm going to use my Stealth Skill, and I'm going to blanket most of this place in darkness. And then the killing is going to start. Use that as cover."

Angelo stared at him.

"If you're up for fighting, I recommend you attack and tear through the Blood Horrors holding the streets. There aren't so many other high vampires, and I don't know how good you are. But if you're confident in yourself, go after them."

"But... the Court Leviathan..." Angelo's lip curled. "I cannot ask you to do this. I... You..."

"I want this," Shiv replied. He turned and regarded the rogue vampire for a moment. "I want to kill them now. You didn't need to ask. You were just the incentive. The System doesn't care. But it knows I do. You were just the push."

Angelo looked confused, but something in his resolve was breaking. "This... this is my failing. My foolishness. You need not risk your life—"

Shiv snorted. "Don't worry about me. But hey, these vampires might surprise me and manage to kill me just yet. So here's hoping."

Angelo stared at him like he was a madman.

Shiv laughed as he spiked his gravity field high into the sky, launching himself across the distance in an explosive instant.

He roared into the air like an artillery shell, but his body trailed shadows all the way. In moments, his Creeping Void splashed down across the world, crawling over the land in cascading, billowing folds of blackness. If the vampires saw Shiv, they only got a glance, for afterward came his shadows, came another spike of speed, came the halting of time.

The colossal whale-like beast let out a pitched shriek, but it froze halfway as Shiv manifested his temporal shell. He immediately spiked himself a dozen times, his Inertial Overdrive roaring to life, thundering in a membrane of force, cupping his body, pulsing and squeezing in tight. He exploded forward, even with time paused, and as he drew closer, he felt his Biomancy slip over the Court Leviathan for the first time. The creature's flesh was a work of art. Shiv felt his breath catch for a moment. It wasn't just meat; it was complex, like a lattice. The way it was made was simply sublime. More than that, he felt additional modifications made to it on a level deeper than blood itself. The blood codes.

He remembered Ekkihurst saying something about that.

But then pulsed a wave of gold from within the creature—a tide of defensive Chronomancy. Shiv was surprised; he didn't expect this. But then, as the Chronomantic wave came rushing at him, as he tried to dodge it, he realized what it was. It was like a second layer of the baseline present being enforced around the Court Leviathan. Something that tried to stabilize time and stop Chronomancers from

performing their magics nearby: a temporal warding. Adam's rapier had something of that design as well, before the Recollector broke it.

And that spurred Shiv to go further and faster. Because he knew the wards could be broken.

He impacted the wards hard, and the field emitted around the Court Leviathan shuddered and cracked slightly, but what broke more was Shiv's temporal armor. The entire piece fractured away, and he only had two seconds remaining. Those two seconds, along with his Inertial Overdrive, were more than enough to get him close.

He slammed against the beast's body, and he reached down using his Biomancy. To his pleasure, he realized it didn't have any magical resistance. And why would it? It was a colossal creature, and to approach vampires in most cases in a battle of Biomancy was to court death. Unfortunately for them, Shiv had been seeing death on the regular, and they were practically friends with benefits by this point. Note to self: Don't use this metaphor with Uva around.

He cast multiple lacerations on the creature's body, and as it split apart, he burrowed his way in with a sudden thrust of his gravitic field. Immediately, he found himself slicing through a secondary membrane lining the interior of the creature's body. This one was composed of mono-fibers, thin and reactive, impossibly strong as well.

He could feel the tensile strength between each and every sinew, but with another laceration spell, they parted as well. He kept going deeper, traveling through a brief maze of bones, until finally he ripped a final layer of inner skin and found himself looking down at not a wet intestine, but an opulent walkway. The walls here were ridged with muscular tissue, but the ground had a plush red carpet, and above, gleaming lights of bioluminescent red drifted from crystallized, organic constructs which he couldn't fully comprehend.



His temporal shell shattered. Time resumed. The Court Leviathan's shriek finished as Shiv promptly burst his inertial sheath. The explosion went off inside the creature, and it staggered violently, and yet to Shiv's astonishment, it didn't burst apart in a massive waterfall of viscera and blood. Instead, it was badly flayed from within, entire sections of its flesh bursting and rupturing. Sections of the walkway that weren't organic tissue ended up embedded through the walls of muscle, but its bones held, as did most of its interior structure.

He found himself forcefully digging his way out from ruin rather than casually burrowing through more of the creature's body, and nigh instantly, the entry wound he made closed. This thing healed faster than any vampire he'd ever seen. Like it had its own internal Woundeaters.

A smile pulled at Shiv's features.

He hadn't expected much from them, even with the colossal size of the Court Leviathan. He'd just gotten done fighting an eldritch entity, one that existed across time, one that hit so hard even he could barely endure it. But this was something interesting. If nothing else, it would be an education in Biomancy.

Then he sensed something else, a pulsing wave of power building just a few dozen meters below. Psychomancy mana began to concentrate somewhere, and Shiv immediately adapted.

His Magebreaker was still in pieces. It sometimes vibrated, but it didn't come back together. Just another thing he needed to repair or replace.

Thanks, Guardshead, Shiv thought. Fix it if I can. Then he reached into his cloak and pulled out something he hadn't used in a while. His helmet popped off just as the wave of psychokinetic force washed over him. He slammed the Mask of False Paths over his face. It rattled, it rang, but it did not crack, not even close.

Master-Tier, Shiv realized. He chuckled to himself. Uva would have eaten you alive.

He spiked down, casting multiple laceration spells. The Court Leviathan healed quickly, but as Shiv forced his body into the wound, as it closed around him, he continued to rip and tear. With every few spikes, he detonated his inertial sheath. He wasn't going fast enough to hurt himself, not really, and he still needed a few seconds before his Chronomancy returned to fullness. But in the meantime, he made do within the Court Leviathan by constantly pumping out more and more of his impenetrable miasma. However, as Shiv dug into the flesh of the beast, the beast's flesh learned of him, and it responded in kind. As he was a Biomancer, so too was the Court Leviathan, and its flesh came aglow with crimson mana.

Holy crap! Shiv let out a disbelieving laugh. He felt the power trembling through it, and it must have been Heroic, more powerful than even Kraid, at the very least. Then more crimson mana flared all around the insides of the creature. He was staring into a welter of blood as he tore, and he pushed through; he was trying to hunt down the Psychomancer first and find the innermost vulnerabilities of the Court Leviathan. But then, there came a burst of organic particles spreading within the massive beast. The rush of small particulates was sudden and invasive.

Shiv felt the small motes slip between the gaps in his armor and crawl beneath his skin. Then, he started feeling a tingle within his flesh. A second later, he got confirmation as to what was about to happen.

Disease Resistance 8 > 9

Disease Resistance, Shiv thought. It's been a while since I saw you. And as soon as the thought finished, a swath of painful blisters spread down his back. A spike of immense pain speared through his groin and made his prostate feel like it was on fire. His eyes burned, and pus began to leak out from them. Shiv tried to use his own Biomancy to ward off the diseases, to ward off whatever this creature was doing to him. And then, he realized it hadn't even cast a direct spell yet.

These were casually released infections and viruses.

Shiv had Master-Tier Toughness. He was an immensely powerful Pathbearer by this point. A Heroic one. But in that moment, he was reminded of a lesson in hubris. A lesson that was taught again and again. There was more than one way to die, and more than one way to die easily. Without the proper inoculation, and as a barely trained Biomancer, all he could do was suffer on and fight forward as long as he could while the disease ate away at him.

Shiv felt his heart spasm. A growth began to choke the pumping organ, began to grow throughout him, filling his bowels. His lungs were also being consumed by fast, active threads that withered from the inside, and he soon found himself unable to breathe. But he was a Hero, and with a final inertial detonation, he burst through a layer of bone.

He crashed down within a place that had a massive and complex crystalline platform. There were people with slit throats chained to both sides of the walls, and their blood flowed in complex channels, forming strange patterns on the ground. There, he saw a group of seven vampires, each of them casting their Psychomancy mana to one of their own members, who conducted the complete mana of their mind magic in tandem, using it to hunt down Shiv, to strike at him over and over.

As he landed, they all let out surprised cries of alarm. Shiv chuckled, his voice distorted by the creeping void. He took a few steps towards them, letting out a wheeze. He wanted to taunt them; he wanted to say something to them. But his skin, along with his flesh began to peel and decompose off of his very bones as strange parasites undid him, unstitching him sinew by sinew.

Adam's gonna make fun of me when he hears about how I died this time.

And as Shiv fell over, he let out a laugh. This death stressed the importance of getting information and knowing your enemy's capacities. But also, it was an educational death, and a worthwhile one, for a rush of information entered his mind related to viruses and other matters.

Practical Metabiology 33 > 35

Disease Resistance 9 > 14

Woundeater 83 > 85

His Practical Metabiology climbed a little bit after dying for once, as did his Disease Resistance. Well. This is going to be useful. I think I need to die a few more times at the least...

And once more, the System played its games.

One of the psionic vampires cried out, speaking to their lead Psychomancer, "Elder Sahari, I can't feel... wait, there's someone..." Shiv flung a bone drill through his chest. Then, just as the main Psychomancer of the group detected him, Shiv froze time again and tore their Lineage Core out from within.

Chapter 99 (I) Plaguefueled

So, here's the thing about killing Heroes. It's hard, but it can be done. It can be done if you get about a hundred Masters together on average. A hundred Masters with a hundred varied skills, and that's usually the lower estimate.

And it's the "varied skills" part that matters the most, for you see, if you're gonna be fighting a Hero, you don't want to be slamming into them where they're at their most powerful. If a Hero is fast, you're gonna want to ambush them using a variety of methods and bury them under different layers of attacks, all crossing over each other at once. Different kinds of magic, different kinds of physical attacks, different ranges, everything. And then you want to have Jump Mages move your people around. Or, potentially, you want to have someone skirmish with the target.

Whatever the case, every Hero is a different puzzle. You solve and kill them all in different ways.

But that also has separations. Some Heroes are True Heroes; those hard bastards are rare. You don't run into a True Hero very often because of how hard it is to obtain one Heroic-Tier Skill, let alone two, let alone three, and don't get me started with four. True Heroes are monsters, but they can still be brought down. You just need to bring your army to bear and drown them. You just need to find one angle and lever it hard.

The first Hero I helped kill had insane Reflexes. Couldn't even see them. Killed three thousand people in under five minutes. Didn't even use ranged attacks. Collapsed part of our vanguard. Then, he ended up running into a patch of quicksand I set up and suffocated after I turned the sand into cement. Heroes are monsters—powerful, nightmarish—but they can be killed. With a lot of blood, understanding, and planning, they can be brought down.

Especially if they're operating alone.

-Memoirs of a Master-Tier War Mage

Shiv resurrected, resumed time, and all the diseases, viruses, and infections he'd suffered just a few seconds before seeped into his flesh once more. It hit him in a wave of boils. His eyes began to dim, pulse, and sear inside his sockets. His skin turned against his very muscles, sinews, and bones, and every part of him filled with a raw and gnawing ache.

"This," Shiv grunted, biting back a growl of discomfort, "is going to be annoying." Annoying, but ultimately rather beneficial. His Disease Resistance had languished for quite some time. Between that and Practical Metabiology, he might get some useful gains here, but it was going to take a few deaths.

At least I got rid of the Psychomancers,

he thought. The First Blood mind mages were little more than smears now. He made sure to destroy their bodies after taking their cores from them. And when he turned, he saw something peculiar. He stared at a mass of glistening, furrowed meat that served as "wall" for the crystalline chamber, and, using his magic, Shiv recognized the flesh to be part of the creature's brain. Using his Biomancy, he mapped out two hundred meters of biological architecture and let out a breath of astonishment. This room had no entrances or exits. It was something embedded into the brain—and was currently being shuttled around by the shifting flesh cupping it from the outside.

The internal layout of the Court Leviathan can change, Shiv understood. The entire thing is a big damn shapeshifter. That's pretty felling neat. Right then, the Psychomancy center was rapidly being moved down toward the leviathan's lower abdomen. There, Shiv sensed the first hints of bubbling acid awaiting him. I can see why this thing might be a nightmare for even a group of Master-Tiers to board and take. Probably need to use automata against them. But even that might not stand up against this acid...

Shiv coughed. A spray of flaking lung tissue sprayed out with his phlegm. Dying again. No time to waste. He fused his armor back around himself and cast a laceration into the leviathan's brain. The wrinkled surface split open. Searing juices erupted out like a geyser, flinging bits of brain matter at him in clumps. Shiv shot through the wound made, but it immediately sealed behind him the moment he was through. As he continued ripping and pushing his way further, trying to cripple this thing's mind or find a command center of some kind, the entire brain kept regenerating around him.

Its healing was simply absurd. But that might be a good thing. He wasn't sure if the people back at the gate could eat this, but considering how quickly it regenerated and how his The Chef Unwavering Skill might interact, it could be a major boon to the people of Gate Theborn. There were many wounded and sick. With potential bonuses to healing and resistance to diseases, the Court Leviathan might just be the solution to their problems.

Again, he didn't know if he could cook this, but he was looking forward to finding out.

Another pulse of dense Chronomancy swept through him. It washed over his person, but did little as he didn't have his temporal shell active. His Chronomancy was a major ace in his hands. He wasn't going to risk it being unavailable if he had to face a sufficiently powerful opponent or a treacherous situation. The temporal warding the Leviathan had seemed to only radiate every other second, so he could trigger his Chronomancy on and off between each wave without suffering undue damage to his time armor.

As he reached out and tried to tear his way through another dense layer of leviathan brain-stuff, Shiv felt his nervous system collapse. A spasm went through him. A flash of color passed behind his eyes as he emptied his bowels violently and died again.

Not a very dignified death that time, Shiv thought. Then he chuckled silently. Still, how many people get to shit themselves to death in a giant monster's skull?

Disease Resistance 14 > 18

This time, he didn't get anything for his Practical Metabiology or Woundeater. Shiv frowned as he drained vitality again. Sometimes, what skills leveled upon his death confused him. Maybe he needed to

more actively resist the plagues the leviathan kept hitting him with for his Biomancy and Metabiology to grow? He also wasn't any more knowledgeable with his last level gained in Practical Metabiology, so he had more questions there too.

But those questions would have to wait, as the Court Leviathan came aglow with crimson mana. Even with him digging through its brain like a little dagger, it didn't seem all that affected. Its resilience was fine, but it was its ability to recover that made it a hard target. The monster just wouldn't stay hurt. Now, new sprays of minute bio-matter were being ejected from within its flesh; viruses and other blood motes carrying new diseases for Shiv to sample.

And sample them he did as soon as he resurrected.

Instantly, his throat tickled, and then he felt like it was going to unlatch from his body. One of his kidneys pulsed with stabbing pain while the rest of his organs immediately started shutting down. Yellowish mucus burst out from pores and orifices as Shiv felt his heart stop working almost immediately.

"Godsdamned bullshit—" he slurred. He tried tearing open another section of the Court Leviathan's brain, but his muscles disobeyed him and his skull filled with a feverish haze that—

Shiv found himself as a Revenant again. He looked down at another one of his bodies and winced in disgust as fat, winged maggots burst out from his eyes and ears mere seconds after he perished. A moment later, the brain mater healed over his two dead bodies and began to assimilate them into its structure. In seconds, both of his bodies melted into the leviathan's brain. Shiv gawked in astonishment. Did I just get absorbed by the brain?

Disease Resistance 18 > 22



Once more, he drained vitality from the entity, and it let out a deep, bellowing groan. It satisfied Shiv to know that he had some means of hurting the creature by striking its life force directly, but he was still astonished by how fast it was healing. Its regeneration was so quick and perfect that his Biomancy could barely keep up.

Vitality Drain 46 > 47

As he resurrected for a third time, he waited for the latest time ward to pass as he activated his Strider of the Unbending Path and placed a temporal anchor. One of his temporal echoes was imprinted on the leviathan's mind, and Shiv let the present resume just as another golden wave came for him. Again, the diseases smashed into him. This time, Shiv resisted the sicknesses that ate through his body for around five seconds before he lost control over his muscles and nervous system. Death came for him again as his metabolism went haywire and caused a cascading series of organ failures thereafter.

Disease Resistance 22 > 29

Big jump in Disease Resistance this time. Maybe because of the frequency of my deaths. That, and the number of diseases I keep getting increases every time. I tried to follow what they were doing this time, but... Shit, I really need to review the immunology chapter in the Odes and the other books. I think some of these diseases are also changing inside me. Like, they go from doing one thing, and then it seems like they mutate and do another thing.

If that was really the case, Shiv had no idea how Cradle handled any of the First Blood's plagues at all. He hated the vampires, but their mastery over flesh and biology was quite impressive. For now.

Shiv intended to pay this lesson back and then some when he became a real Legend in Biomancy and Practical Metabiology. For now, though, he likely needed to offer the Court Leviathan a few more deaths.

Yeah, Adam or Uva would have probably had an easier time with this thing. And to think he faced down the overwhelming power of the Recollector just hours ago. But that was a problem of force and time. This was all about the nature of his body. And he didn't have the skill to fight it. So, Heroic-Tier Pathbearer in Reflexes or not, Shiv died.

But that wasn't a bad thing. A little humbling was a good appetizer before the main dish of triumph. These deaths tempered his focus and drew him back from being too enamored with his own power.

It was good to be powerful. It wasn't good to assume that brute force was the only kind of power. Just like how different chefs could approach the same dish in different ways, for the different tastes, with different accompaniments and libations.

Something clicked for Shiv, then. When he cooked, he was focused, disciplined, enduring, and flexible. He could do anything. He could support anyone. He was the pillar. But so far, the way he fought was overwhelmingly brutal, with a bit of surprise and cunning mixed in. He could do better. There was no reason why he should be a lesser warrior when he aspired to be an artful chef.

Philosophy 2 > 4

Huh. Nice. Wait. I think I heard something about fire and high temperature killing diseases... I could heat myself up with my Pyromancy and Inertial Overdrive... Nah. A few more deaths would be good for me. Let's see if I can get this thing to stack even more diseases next time and send my Disease Resistance to Adept... Well, considering how many things I keep getting hit with, I think Master is more likely.

As Shiv resurrected once more, he thought about all the skills he had and the options available to him. Immediately, he felt the urge to shake himself. So far, all he had been doing was slamming himself into things. He was treating every fight like a brawl, and that mode of thinking always had a cost.

If he had bothered slowing down and thinking, he probably would have remembered how effective Deepest Edge was against massive entities or people in thick armor. He probably could have cut most of the brain. Also, the Psychomancers were dead, and so Shiv froze time and pulled off his Mask of False Paths. He cast his feeble Psychomancy into the mind of the Court Leviathan—

And immediately broke the connection as the chaotic vortex of its mental state overwhelmed him. The Court Leviathan was a mess of impulses, pain, confusion, and clashing instincts. It wasn't just a large monster—it was an insane monster. Shiv wheezed as the sickness got to him again, but he pulled a bone dagger out from his cloak and pushed back against its crushing Biomancy as it tried to absorb him.

It took him shattering his own ego to render the Jealousy mind-dead, but this thing was already messed up. Moreover, he didn't know where to begin or what memory or thought he needed to affect. Uva flicked through minds like she was a psionic whirlwind and made it look easy. Probably because she had a lifetime of experience and study in adjacent fields.

Yeah, I get it, System. More studying. Now, if you could only give me a few days of peace and quiet, I would—well, I would spend at least some of it studying. The rest will go to hanging out with friends, sex, and cooking.

His immune system lasted longer this time. His throat filled with thick lumps of pain. Inside, a patch of nodules bulged out from his organs, and they hatched a larger, more carapaced version of the winged maggots he suffered earlier. They promptly exploded in his body but failed to do anything as everything inside him was adamantite as well. They did manage to crawl out from his flesh, but that was more from them fusing and commanding the biomatter to part. Shiv grabbed one of the maggots as it screamed at him. He crushed it nonchalantly and then died again as more of the maggots filled the valves of his heart.

Huh. Even these things are little Biomancers. Damn vampires are really all in on the twisting of biology.

Disease Resistance 29 > 40

As Shiv returned as a Revenant, a loud rumble shook the insides of the great beast. Mouths formed along the glistening furrows of the Court Leviathan's inner brain matter, and for once, Shiv was truly weirded out.

Yeah, tongues and teeth don't belong with brain matter...

"This is Master Malteek Sulmanthrap-Ophereus, Tenth Generation Elder of the Ophereus Bloodline." The voice that suddenly echoed forth from every part of the Court Leviathan's interior was rough and raspy. "All Biomancers, we are facing a Heroic-Tier intruder at the very least. A Chronomancer and Biomancer with advanced Stealth abilities. Remove the subversive organic matter they left behind. They are not dead. They are hidden right above the Prefrontal Cortex—They are just over the bridge. We cannot risk the leviathan being poisoned. Remove the matter and prepare to induce evolving viral strains and nerve agents. Dump the reserve prions and fungal spores as well. Flood the Leviathan immediately. Counter-Boarding teams on standby!"

Ah, shit, Shiv thought to himself. This is going to be good. Already, asshole. Show me what you got. Feed me another Skill Evolution.

Chapter 99 (II) Plaguefueled

Once more, Shiv respawned. Just in time to receive a flood of infectious bacteria, viruses, strange gases, and fungal-feeling things pulsing through the interior of the Court Leviathan's brain. Shiv paused time

briefly as he tried examining the various biological weapons that were going to kill him in a moment. He regarded them briefly and winced. His Practical Metabiology was nowhere near up to snuff for this. He felt like he was that feral alley kid again, barely able to pronounce some dishes on a set list, while Georges muttered stuff about spitting on the matrons at the orphanage when he saw them for giving him an idiot.

Shit. I have no idea what I'm looking at. Some of these things are so complicated that I—To hells with it, I'll try to fix some of them anyway. Maybe that's how I can get more Practical Metabiology and Woundeater levels.

Shiv let time resume just as another temporal wave rushed toward him. It cut through him without issue, and the collective swarm of biological micro-weapons turned Shiv's body into a deformed lump of oozing meat that sprayed pus and foul flesh-soup everywhere as he shuddered.

Disease Resistance 40 > 50 (Skill Evolution Imminent)

Shiv did a double-take at the notification. That was an absolutely enormous jump for his Disease Resistance. It might be the largest concentration of levels he'd gained beside the System directly raising his Stealth to 50 and Chronomancy to 100 as rewards. Then Shiv lost all coherent thought as something assimilated his brain for its own use.

After a few moments spent in a chaotic haze, Shiv died again. As he respawned this time, he noticed that his body was untouched. The Court Leviathan didn't consume him this time—just like that Malteek guy commanded. They also made a few mistakes about which of Shiv's skills were Heroic-Tier, but that was understandable: It made more sense than assuming he could come back from the dead.

Practical Metabiology 35 > 36

Skill Evolution: Disease Resistance (Initiate) > Plaguefueled (Master)

Plaguefueled 50 > 58

Plaguefueled? Sounds like fun. Does that mean I just eat plagues now or something?

The answer to how his Skill Evolution functioned was revealed in the next second as all the viruses, bacteria, and other bioweapons hovering in the air came alight with a pristine, white glow. The same glow that Shiv perceived to layer kitchens and cooking ingredients while The Chef Unwavering was active.

Can I eat viruses? Or absorb them? Now, Shiv was getting a bit giddy. This was going to be awesome. Alright, Plaguefueled. Show me what I can do.

As Shiv drained from the Court Leviathan once more, he felt the beast shuddering violently. It was growing weaker—its flame was growing dimmer. That's when it fully struck him how much vitality it took to bring him back to life now. The shrimp in the rivers weren't going to cut it anymore.

Might be because of all the skills in me and how much stronger I've gotten. Or maybe it's mainly Physicality and Toughness. Things that keep me alive? Wait, that doesn't make sense. Disease Resistance is doing more to keep me alive now than both of those skills.

Shiv's resurrective cocoon burst apart and released his new body. An ocean of sicknesses drowned Shiv immediately. He let out a groan of misery and torment as most of his flesh began to burst and seep foul-smelling fluid. A fever swelled inside him at the same time, and he felt the urge to rip his dick off from how nightmarishly bad it was itching. His nervous system collapsed again, and his organs nearly followed. But before Shiv gave into the urge to castrate himself and curse the System for giving him the worst Master-Tier Skill of all time, something happened.

He started feeling energized.

One after another, the symptoms consuming him began to fade as his body fed off of them. Shiv felt himself grow stronger, felt his senses grow sharper, felt his body get harder than ever before as he assimilated nerve agents, mutated viruses, and flesh-eating bacteria. More than that, he felt a strange, instinctive awareness regarding the shapes of these sicknesses. He wouldn't be able to replicate them off the top of his head, but he could sort of sort their biological architectures from each other now. That might be the one Metabiology level I gained coming into effect.

Seconds passed. The first wave of afflictions washed through Shiv and ended up feeding him again. He felt better than he had in ages. Adrenaline exploded through his body. Power swelled within his muscles—hell, his muscles were growing thicker from this, anyway. The damn plagues were hitting him like a deluge of steroids.

Shiv laughed at the absurdity of it all. Then he coughed and gagged violently as new infections attacked his lungs. For a few seconds, he hacked mouthfuls of blood, then his Plaguefueled Skill assimilated that too, and he felt better than ever.

Plaguefueled 58 > 59

“Feed me more viruses!” Shiv cheered, his pupils dilating, his heart pumping. Gods, the plagues hit the spot. Shiv was alive, and the world was beautiful. There were still a few diseases attacking his body effectively. One actively shifted between decaying his heart and breaking his metabolism. It was being absorbed too, but slowly. Much more slowly. Shiv realized then that it was because it was mutating and changing faster than all the others. Still some limits to the skill.

He wasn’t immune. It was probably still possible to kill him with enough viruses. But if they failed to kill him, they would end up fueling him with a rush of power instead.

“I love plagues!” Shiv cheered, intoxicated with the constant explosions of energy coursing through his body. He felt drunk and drugged out of his mind at the same time. Was being drunk considered drugged? He wasn’t sure right now. His thoughts grew even more hectic. A weird thing to get from all the sicknesses afflicting him, but godsdamn did it feel good. He managed to get his hands on a new bone knife, and he cut. He slashed so hard that a massive chasm tore open beneath him. Brain matter parted first. Then split hardened muscular tissue and eight meters of bone. A gap opened below, revealing a large throne room of some kind.

Shiv froze time before the leviathan could heal and spiked his gravitic field over fifty times in quick succession. His flesh was boiling. His bones were breaking one after another, but that didn’t matter. He loved this. He was drunk on plagues and brimming with power.

His bones shattered, his skin seared and ripped apart. The left side of his body was screaming in pain, but Shiv couldn’t help but chuckle. It all felt too good. The brain matter of the Court Leviathan disintegrated outright into ashes. It didn’t even burn. Most of the flesh surrounding Shiv simply ceased to be. Then came a tide of force, and the chasm-sized wound lining the Court Leviathan expanded into a whole field. Shiv smashed into the chamber just below, bringing fire and ruin in his wake.

He barely noticed the few hundred high vampires partially fused in bone-pods lining the surrounding walls. He barely realized how large the chamber was, and how many vampires and Blood Horrors were in here. His senses were a mess. His thoughts skipped, and during fleeting moments of coherence, he realized he was functionally drunk, and getting drunker with every new disease his body consumed.



As he crashed to the ground, an avalanche of fire and destruction crashed down thereafter. The stone floor at Shiv's feet exploded into a hurricane of piercing shrapnel. The Court Leviathan shook. Shiv burst his inertial sheath. The entire 500-meter-wide throne room was reduced to nothing but dust and rubble. Hundreds of vampires inside died without even knowing what killed them as flames reduced them to ashes. The stronger ones merely burned but were splattered against the walls.

It was not enough for Shiv.

He felt his own body crack and split in painful ways, but rather than flinging a Woundeater at the nearest vampire he saw, he reverted time back a second. His temporal shell cracked slightly—then nearly broke off his body when a pulsing wave from the temporal wardings hit him. It didn't matter. Shiv found himself back mid-acceleration again. Another tide of flame and force followed behind him as he fed his Inertial Overdrive another dozen gravitic pulls. His spine broke vertically along the middle. His flesh melted off his bones. Shiv just kept laughing as he slammed against the shattered floor of the throne room once more.

Another waterfall of annihilation. Another swelling riptide of fire and destruction. Another bursting of his inertial sheath. A fourth of the titanic Court Leviathan was ripped apart as most of its front and back and sloping head peeled open. The creature's insides were exposed to the Umbral Wilderness. Through it all, Shiv never stopped pumping out darkness using his Creeping Void, and so a most unnerving blackness oozed free from the roaring leviathan's open wounds.

But only for a moment. A second later, the Court Leviathan began to regenerate.

"Godsdamned," Shiv breathed, now more impressed with the flying monster than his new Master-Tier Skill. "The First Blood didn't felling half-ass growing something like you, did they?"

"We... do not... half-ass." Shiv blinked and looked down. Then, as he pushed through his drunken stupor, he sensed the presence of a vampire before him. A shimmering barrier of fire and blood circled around the ash-shrouded figure. A half-melted throne made from iron and teeth turned to pooling slag behind him.

Shiv blinked as the high vampire's form came into shape.

For the first time, Shiv saw the Court Leviathan's captain. Master Malteek was a tall, thin vampire. His eyes burned in the haze, two pits of flame in sunken sockets. Over his shoulder, a curled set of bones rose out from his spine, constituting what looked like a collapsed set of wings that gleamed with white-hot heat. His Biomancy was oddly only Adept-Tier, but his Pyromancy was immensely powerful. It was immense, but its field was not particularly wide. It, much like Shiv's Strider, was completely compacted around his body, not something he projected outward.

Shiv wondered what kind of Skill Evolution the vampire had.

"Shit." Shiv chuckled. Now there was a third thing he was impressed by. "One of you managed to survive."

"A Tenth Elder is not easy prey," the vampire wheezed. As the dust washed over him, Shiv noted he was unburned, but Malteek's body was badly broken in several places. For a beat, Shiv studied the vampire, while the latter looked off into the impenetrable darkness, trying to hide how fractured his courage was. "I have tasted your power. I understand I face a Hero. I understand this is not a fight I can easily win. But you have made a mistake. The First Blood will not forgive the murder of a Tenth Elder. But all can be forgiven between great Pathbearers. Mistakes are understandable throughout life, after all. Let us talk about things. Let us talk so that we might make this ruinous affair a fruitful one by the end."

Shiv paused. The vampire was strangely polite and decent, even after everything Shiv did. Maybe he could have this conversation. It wouldn't hurt. It—

He uses his Silver Tongue on us, Rose rasped. Do not listen to him, fool boy!

The Deathless blinked and shook his head. As Malteek continued speaking, Shiv slammed his fists together, silencing the vampire. Shiv exploded forward with a pull on his gravitic field. A Woundeater flared. His injuries faded. He drove a mana-charged flying knee into the Master-Tier vampire's chest. He struck Malteek's strange armor made from layered teeth and blasted through the vampire's torso. A mana explosion followed as Shiv's spell met Magical Resistance, but Malteek's body disintegrated before the physical strength of the Deathless. Even so, Shiv didn't feel the vampire's Lineage Core pop.

He tried to turn and go for what remained of the vampire's body, but he felt all the friction get ripped away from him as he slid forward across space unnaturally. A rush of thermal energy shifted from Shiv into the mutilated remains of Malteek. The world became slippery. Shiv pulled on his field several times, but each time he glided awkwardly through the air, until he ended up shooting through the massive wound he left on the Court Leviathan.

A moment later, Shiv found himself twisting through the air, battling to steady his movements. Hitting Malteek seemed to have inflicted Shiv with a lingering version of the Frictionless Vector Skill. As he sailed, turning over and over in the air, Shiv watched as the massive body of the Court Leviathan regenerated. It glared in his general direction with a cluster of eyes and let out a furious wail.

It lashed out blindly into the darkness with its tentacles—some swinging wide and digging deep furrows along the ground below. As Shiv turned again, he caught a glimpse of the town beneath him and saw a group of vampires rising into the air. One of them was a particularly potent Biomancer—their mana field stretching what felt like five kilometers. As Shiv felt a violent surge of flesh-magic clench at his tissue, the Court Leviathan also unleashed a salvo of what looked to be parasite missiles.

Enormous, acid-filled wing-maggots burst out from the Court Leviathan's flesh. They flew fast and exploded in the air, filling the sky with corrosive, paralytic fluids.

They struck nothing at all. The vampire Biomancer also lost track of Shiv an instant later.

Shiv didn't bother holding his position to find out if he could beat the incoming vampire reinforcements or resist the paralyzing fluids unleashed by the big ugly bugs. No, he projected himself across time before the leviathan's temporal wardings pulsed again—back to the temporal anchor he'd imprinted on the leviathan's brain.

Once more, Shiv found himself meshed in the leviathan's tissues, and once more, he found himself bathed in new and tasty sicknesses. He suffered for a moment before his body consumed the diseases as active nourishment. After that, he repeated what he did earlier and used his Inertial Overdrive to make an even larger hole in the Court Leviathan.

With a final detonation of his sheath, Shiv obliterated most of the leviathan's upper body. And it still kept flying. It still kept regenerating. By this point, a good percentage of the rooms and vampires within the Leviathan were just gone. If Malteek managed to survive the final blast, Shiv couldn't find him. There was no throne room or ship bridge anymore. It was just a deep gorge of regenerating flesh and Shiv standing in the pit.

He focused his Biomancy and detected a few more vampires and Blood Horrors still inside. He was probably also going to need to deal with the group of vampires flying up from the town, but he wasn't too worried. Mostly because he still felt drunk, but also because he was now marveling at the Court Leviathan.

This big godsdamned bastard is felling incredible. You're going to feed so many people... Wait, you're going to show me so much fun shit. Viruses... Regeneration... I can test so many things on you...

Shiv barked a joyous laugh as he realized he might have come across the solution to the food shortage problem—along with a whole host of other problems faced by Gate Theborn. “Alright. You win, Court Leviathan. You get to live. Hells. I’m keeping you. You’re mine now.”

#### Chapter 100 (I) Cremation

Thanks to the gifts offered to them by the Lineage Cores and the malleable and ever-enduring nature of their bodies, the embraced of the First Blood are unfettered from consequence, free to use their bodies as a canvas, their blood as paint, their very foundational biology as a means to discover the great mysteries of what life can be. And that is the truest gift the Lineage Core has given them: discovery without consequence. Discovery with consequences for all other people who are not them.

What matters mutilation if you can simply reform? What point is there in fearing disease when you are afflicted by none truly? And what fear do you have of physical ruin when, at the allowance of your elder, a simple bestowal of power on their behalf can bring you back from the brink of utter destruction? If the vampire's core is not destroyed, they remain truly whole and can return regardless.

And it is with this blessing that they have created their armies, their artworks, their kingdoms of blood and flesh. They have delved deeper into the nature of Biomancy than any other faith in the Abyss, and perhaps any surface nation as well. And though the war beasts they have forged are not truly Pathbearers, few leave an encounter against the Blood Horrors not feeling shaken by their numbers and the grotesque quality of their features. And few can deny feeling a sense of awe as they lay eyes on a Court Leviathan for the first time.

#### -Sire and Sired: The Chain of the First Blood

"You—you will not escape your fate. Even if you kill me, even if you murder me and crush my core, you will not escape your fate," the vampiress Biomancer muttered. Her face was a jigsaw of ruin, blood dripped from pieces of jetting bone, and her limbs were missing. Her chest had been flayed wide open, but Shiv still couldn't find her lineage core.

Her Biomancy was potent, and to make matters more annoying, she'd fused it with a Stealth Skill. A few minutes prior, she dove into the Court Leviathan and melded with its flesh. Unlike all the other vampires who attacked Shiv directly, she ambushed him, and she probably would have killed him too, if not for his Chronomancy, paired with the fact that, approximately thirty seconds ago, he found and broke the Chronomantic pylon that sustained the wards within the beast.

When Shiv hit the Biomancer, she didn't even know how her limbs got broken, how her face was caved in. She didn't know why her companions were all suddenly dead. What she did know was that this fight was lost. He could hear it in her voice and taste it in the way her courage shook. His Dread Aura quivered in delight.

Dread Aura 88 > 89

And she was now the last surviving vampire. The last surviving anything within Shiv's Court Leviathan. There were no more Blood Horrors around. No bloodsuckers. Not even the large maggots remained. He made sure to pulp them all. He had seen enough maggots for today. Especially maggots that burst out from his flesh.

"We will come for you," the vampire hissed, shaking as she tried to regenerate.

"Your core is in your head, isn't it?" Shiv guessed. He pressed his Biomancy against hers, but she was a stronger Biomancer, even in this broken state. And more than strong, she was unnaturally focused and masterfully skilled. He couldn't get a read on her inner biology at all. And he rolled his eyes, though he appreciated her stubbornness. "Yeah. That's right. Better to die clawing at your casket than just go with a final sigh. Least I can say that about you."

"Save your compliments." She let out a whispered laugh. "When Hero-Elder Kraid finds you, when my great mentor lays his hands on you and peels your flesh into a sculpture, he—"

"Wait, did you say Kraid?" Shiv interrupted her.

She paused. "You know of him? The great System-favored?"

"Know of him? I killed him about a day ago. Well, maybe less." Shiv shook his head. "God, it's been a long-ass day." He looked up at the sky, and he frowned deeply into the bioluminescent ceiling kilometers above. The top half of the Court Leviathan had been blown open again, though it was slowly fusing back together. "Yeah, more like twelve hours ago, maybe. He put up a bit of a fight, but he was nothing compared to the guy that came after."

The vampire's mouth opened and closed. "You lie. You couldn't possibly—"

Shiv was tired of the "you couldn't possibly" talk. He stomped her head in, and beneath his heel, he felt the delightful crunch of a Lineage Core bursting apart. A flood of Biomancy and blood gushed out around his feet. The floor beneath him used to be made from stone and lined with carpet. The room he was in probably belonged to Malteek. His personal quarters, judging from all the finery. There were statues here, some kind of cage with a collar inside. Shiv didn't really want to know much about what went on there, but there was also a small library, filled with books on Biomancy, if judged by the diagrams, and then books mostly on smut, based on the pictures.

Malteek was kind of a freak.

Shiv collected all the books he could. The Biomancy for his own use. The smut to bully Adam with at some point.

There were also a bunch of other things, but they didn't quite survive Shiv's inertial detonations. A shame, but potentially not so much. He really didn't like the First Blood. Everything they did was sour with violence and depravity.

The best thing he did to this Court Leviathan was wiping the vampiric scourge from its body. Figuring out how to do the other stuff with the Leviathan would be a longer-term project, but operation "no vamps alive" was done. Didn't stop the Leviathan from spraying a constant stream of diseases out from its body, but hey, good for leveling.

Plaguefueled 59 > 61

His Plaguefueled Skill had climbed two more levels since last time, but now he was no longer gaining. He probably needed to get something special to gain more levels in it now, but it was a good skill. And it also showed him his priority. It also adjusted his learning priorities for Biomancy. He needed to learn how to inflict plagues on himself, as many plagues as he could, as potent and deadly as they could be. That way, his body could assimilate them, but he needed to be a bit careful.

There were costs to being Plaguefueled.

"Like being drunk as hell," Shiv muttered. He hadn't been drunk that many times in his life, but this was unmistakable. His head pounded like he was hungover, and a sense of lethargy filled his sinews and muscles as the plagues began to die down. Simply feeding himself the same plague in rapid succession also didn't work because his system simply assimilated them, got used to them. It was like drinking the same amount of alcohol after your body had been conditioned to its degree. He would need to go harder, or, potentially, and this was an assumption, he needed to wait a while before he could absorb more plagues and feel the buffs gain strength again.



With his last enemy slain, he shot up into the air and sailed out from the open wound, dangling himself before the Court Leviathan's face. He waited for it to heal its newest injury. Once it regenerated, he deactivated his Creeping Void so that it could see him. The beast regarded him for a moment, its massive bulk shaking, its four kilometers of length shuddering and sending massive blast waves through the air. To him, they were like a slight breeze caressing the face of a mountain.

For a few moments, it stared at him, and he stared at it. He wondered if he needed to wrestle it into submission, to use his Dread Aura to intimidate it into obeying him, or something. But it seemed surprisingly... vacant. Vacant of thought, vacant of reaction, vacant of self-desire.

The monster's mind was nothing but impulse and chaos. He briefly interfaced with it again earlier, using his Psychomancy, trying to control it. He failed a second time, but by that point, it was less because it was too chaotic and insane. Rather, he just didn't understand it. It was too alien by far.

He didn't know how Uva did any of this. He would probably need to have her instruct him on how best to pilot an animal's mind.

There's another thing you can give me, he muttered under his breath. Psychomancy training. I think you're the bigger windfall here, not the new skill.

The Court Leviathan didn't respond. The reason it probably felt insane earlier was that a good portion of the vampires had been fused into its body. And, to his surprise and delight, it didn't have one brain. It had twelve cluster-like brains, all intricately connected to each other via lined cords of reinforced tissue. Destroying one cluster wasn't going to kill this thing. All twelve needed to go to really do anything, and they kept regenerating anyway.

Furthermore, it had a series of stomachs. Stomachs and weird womb-things. The wombs seemed to be able to grow things. The vampires had Biomancy lab-things connected to the wombs by one-way reinforced windows.

On the Court Leviathan's underside, connected to the stomachs by dense sacs, were cages, holding cells, and macabre torture chambers. The First Blood captured people and placed them in these containment units. And recently, there had been people inside. He could tell from the leftover blood. But they had all been offered to the leviathan, assimilated within its guts, like he was after his first few deaths.

But the most important part of the beast was the Biomancy mana core lodged at its very center, a constant flow of blood and tissue rushing out from it. That was the reason it could keep healing. The Biomancy mana core hummed out to him from deep within the beast, and even from the outside, he could taste its tantalizing power.

But without any vampires to direct its will, it couldn't do anything with it. This was how the Court Leviathan unleashed so many plagues. This was how it assimilated flesh, how it could shift its body.

And this would potentially be how Shiv could learn to do the very same. His Woundeater was a first step. But after fighting these vampires, he realized he was barely scratching the surface of Biomancy. There was still far more that he could do. And it was thanks to their donation of a Court Leviathan that he would be able to do it ahead of schedule. Having a living, enduring, and constantly regenerating test subject went a long way.

"So, you're not going to do anything, are you?" Shiv said, looking at the Court Leviathan. The massive, slope-headed beast didn't even respond. Its many eyes glared lifelessly, but it just hovered in the air, its many tentacles undulating, swinging over the land. But it did no more than that, and slowly Shiv descended, keeping his eye on his new pet, making sure it didn't bolt away at the last second, or get teleported. "Just stay here. I'll come back for you. Got a sad vampire I need to talk to first."

And that's another thing I need to get better at dealing with, Shiv thought to himself. There were a few Jump Mages there, and one of them almost got me. Almost ended up tossing me into another dimension or something. Probably need to ask Adam for some tips to fight those guys without my Chronomancy. That could have gone sideways real fast.

And that was just it. His Chronomancy saved him a great deal. It allowed him to have retries when he made mistakes. It allowed him to go back in time and attempt the same action over and over again until he got it right. It allowed him to freeze time, giving him free hits and the ability to tear apart enemies that should have been able to contend with him, at least for a period. His Chronomancy was only at Master-Tier. But Shiv was going to focus hard on it to make sure that it was going to get to Heroic as soon as possible. It was a game-changer for him. More importantly, not many people were attuned to the lore of time itself.

All to prepare me to fight Sullain, huh, System? Shiv thought. There was no response. But with everything that had been positioned in his path, with all the obstacles that shaped him, the System didn't need to give a response.

Shiv knew. Shiv strove. Shiv died. And then, eventually, Shiv prevailed. That was the only exchange needed between them. He was done blaming the System, done talking to it, until he could figure out what it was. Right now, he was going back to his old way. The best way, the way he knew. He would take things as they come, and he would get whatever he could out of it, no matter what life threw at him.

## Chapter 100 (II) Cremation

But still, Shiv thought, I should develop more skills. Disease Resistance showed me something. You can get a lot out of new skills. A single-skilled Hero is not nearly as effective as a ten-skilled Master in terms of options. Or even capability. I need to be more than just a brute. Or a bomb. And he regarded his Deepest Edge next, along with his Whip Proficiency, Dread Aura, Silver Tongue, and more... Maybe a social skill too. Silver Tongue has been neglected. I shouldn't just use it to spit funny quips at Uva. It can do more. Just like Angelo's Charm.

As he touched down at the heart of Hawthorne, he looked at the lone cathedral and shook his head in disgust. True to what he'd seen earlier, there were hundreds of flayed bodies draped around its front. And he didn't notice a large tarp made from human skin drifting off by the side. It was connected to the cathedral too, and the vampires had been doing something vile there, growing creatures from the people. Blood Horrors, if Shiv could judge correctly.

A few badly grown Blood Horrors lay at the bottom of a pit, their bodies consumed by teratoma, jutting hairs sticking out from clumps of bone, teeth, mangled tissue, and more. They were parodies of people, parodies of even monsters. And compared to the Court Leviathan, they were positively ugly. It wasn't that the First Blood couldn't make something beautiful in aesthetic, it was just that the Blood Horrors they created were monsters, pure and to the bone.

The rest of the town was awash in blood. The residences had disconnected bits of biological tissue inside them. His over 200 meter wide Biomancy field told him that a good deal of that was human flesh. Very badly mutilated human flesh. Some of the limbs were too small. The bodies were too small. He retracted his mana from them. He didn't want to know.

Even if he was immune and resistant to trauma, there were some things he didn't want to dream about. Besides, he had to harden his heart for the horrors that awaited him in the silo. And he knew that whatever he found inside there would make him hate the First Blood even more.

As he got closer to the silo, he heard a loud crash as the side of the wall shook. Shiv gritted his teeth and prepared to go in. His mind spun, but he remembered Angelo. It wouldn't be surprising if the rogue vampire decided to go in to free his own people during the chaos. The silo was a tall, cylinder-shaped building with a blood-splattered entrance at the very front. Shiv could still see the trail of blood left by the badly mutilated corpse of a child once held in the grasp of a high vampire leading out from it.

He wished he could sort out which high vampire that was so he could take his time with the bastard. But, truth be told, they likely disintegrated along with a few thousand Blood Horrors during Shiv's frequent detonation of his inertial sheath. Again, he needed to be more calculated, more careful. Uva

could have probably found and isolated the one responsible, and Adam too. Now, some measure of revenge escaped Shiv simply because he was too blunt.

Focus, Shiv thought to himself. I need more focus too. And I need to level my Awareness.

He drew in a breath, and he let his creeping void flood out from him. The world was subsumed in the darkness, and Shiv became the only man with any eyes in that miasma. He struck the door of the silo, bending it inward. The steel screamed and tore before his might, but as he entered, Shiv caught sight of the nightmarish hell within.

And that stopped Shiv dead.

It was like a slaughterhouse taken straight from a nightmare. Naked bodies were hanging—The First Blood had fused them together, limbs jutting out inhumanly, limbs too small to belong to adults, but parts inside their flesh too large to...

"Fuck," Shiv choked out, the bile rising up his throat.

It took a lot to shake Shiv, it really did, but the First Blood managed posthumously. His mind reeled. He pulled his helmet off and violently emptied the contents of his stomach all over the ground.

"Godsdamned... felling monsters," he growled after almost half a minute of heaving. He slammed the bottom of his left hand into the side of the silo, and part of it curved inward with a loud shriek. After a few moments of composing himself, he gritted his teeth and walked back in. He tried to keep his eyes on the ground—tried to ignore what had been done to the people here. But he couldn't ignore Angelo, who was kneeling at the center of the silo, loudly sobbing.

The rogue vampire held something, something far too small, in his arms. Shiv tried not to look at it. He tried not to look at the woman that lay not far away from Angelo. There were so many meticulous cuts all over her body that Shiv groaned as he forced his bile back down. For a moment, he felt his mind begin to reel, but then it reasserted itself. As it always did.

"Angelo," Shiv said. He looked to his right, and he saw a Blood Horror pinned to one of the walls, a pitchfork lodged in its chest. It was dead. That was likely the bang Shiv heard earlier: Angelo impaling it against the wall. From the ceiling, things dripped down, blood and other substances. Shiv didn't look up. Shiv didn't want to look.

"It's my fault. It's my fault. It's my fault," Angelo muttered over and over again. He was shaking. His claws remained transformed, sharp blades instead of soft nails. He gently laid the small thing he was holding onto the ground, and then he clawed at himself, leaving deep gashes in his face.

"Angelo," Shiv repeated. "Stop. Stop." The vampire lowered his bloodied hands and closed in on himself. He wasn't even crying anymore. He was catatonic, his open eyes looking at nothing. "I... knew all these people. I met them. During my time with the First Blood, I met them. I struggled. I... I was... The First Blood made me do things. They made me meet people and I... I finally—I managed to make connections and and, and..." Angelo babbled incoherently, but Shiv got the gist. He didn't realize that a vampire's mind could even crack and break like this. But, now that it had happened, there was only one thing to do.

"Alright, I guess I'm gonna have to introduce you to my girlfriend too if I'm taking you with me," he muttered. But before that, he steeped himself, looked at the bodies all around, and grimaced. "I don't think we should just leave them out here. Angelo, you said you knew these people, right?"

Angelo slowly stopped shaking. The vampire rose. He turned to stare at Shiv, and Shiv immediately turned his attention away.

"Yes," Angelo breathed, "and it's my fault."

"No," Shiv said, interrupting him. "But we can argue about that later. Right now, what you need to do is bury them or do something else for them. It's not right if we just leave them out there, just hanging like this." It took a moment for Shiv's intentions to sink in, but a little thereafter, Angelo nodded.

"Yes... Yes." And his eyes widened as his pupils dilated. "Wait, the Court Leviathan! It's still out there!"

"It is," Shiv said, "but it's mine now."

Angelo clearly didn't process Shiv's words. "What do you mean?"

"I killed all the vampires inside of it. And out. The vampires were shit. They deserved worse."

"What? All of them?" Angelo whispered. "But how? The Court Leviathan, it carries an entire court, an entire generation of..."

"Yeah," Shiv said, nodding. "Guess I killed an entire court then. And frankly, aside from the Leviathan and maybe one or two of them, they weren't that impressive. I guess they were here to take a Compact gate. The gate me and mine already took. They were probably here to support an army of bloodsuckers too. Of course, that army's not there anymore either. They also started boasting about this Hero, but well, I already killed him a while ago. So, I don't think this court has anything on me. But I do thank them. That Leviathan, pretty cool creature. I like its plagues."

Angelo was just staring at him. "You are... You must be truly favored. A True Hero.

Shiv snorted at that. "A Low Hero, actually. But favored like you wouldn't believe. Frankly, if I take you with me, you might come to hate me for it."

"I cannot," Angelo whimpered. "I do not believe I possess the capacity to hate anyone but myself."

"Right. Well, you're going to save that for after we handle these bodies. So, fire or burial?"

Angelo stared at Shiv. "Fire. After what has been done to them, I think they would want fire."

And Shiv lifted a hand. A paltry flame danced upon his palm. "Well," Shiv said with a sigh. "One of my weakest skills, but I think it will be enough."

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Pyromancy 8 > 9

Skill Gained: Psychology 1 (Common)



Shiv did get a level for Pyromancy, but he also gained another skill he didn't expect. He looked on at the Psychology skill. He wasn't sure why he got that. Maybe it was from considering Angelo's mental state. Maybe it was from all the self-rumination he'd been doing in the middle and between the bloodshed. Regardless, more skills were always welcome. But Psychology, much like Philosophy, was a strange skill to gain. He wasn't sure where they might lead or how their evolutions and potential fusions would change them.

You don't know? Rose asked from within. Her voice was soft. Her presence, however, was growing stronger. She'd only just recovered, just put herself back together completely after the Recollector's assault from earlier. She still felt fragile in a way, but her presence was intact. How can you not know? All children experience their first Skill Evolutions around their graduation days from the Rudimentaries.

"I didn't get to have a Pre-Academy—no Rudimentary for me," he replied, speaking quietly to himself.

You didn't? No. How? Your skill?

"It turns out that when your parents murder a certain Town Lord's wife and sacrifice her baby daughter in a ritual, they don't tend to like you, and no one takes you in. No one but a chef with a terrible attitude." Shiv spoke without rancor, but there was still a bit of bitterness in his voice. He had focused on getting rid of it. The way he saw things now, it didn't matter anymore. He was a Pathbearer, and he'd caught up to the others—more than caught up, he'd shot further than most Pathbearers would in their entire lives.

He had no room to complain. Well, that's a lie. He had every reason to complain. But not to Rose. Besides, it just didn't matter.

The System wanted him to fight. It didn't care if he suffered, it didn't care who died, and it didn't care about the weak. It only cared about those who threw themselves against death time and time again, only to come out on top. Or to be a footnote in someone else's story.

Is that all these people are? Shiv wondered. He looked at the massive, crackling bonfire he had started in the town square.

So many bodies he gathered. So many bodies he cleaned alongside Angelo. So many bodies now burning, now embers to the wind. He didn't know their names. He didn't know their lives. He had no memory of them. But hearing the vampire cry beside him was bad enough. Shiv, on some level, was glad he didn't know them. He was also glad he hadn't been hurt very badly thus far.

Guardshhead Leu had been killed in an instant. Crushed. Murdered in front of his eyes. He wasn't able to save her. That felt terrible enough, but he hadn't known Leu very well. He had considered what might happen within himself if he saw Uva die. If he saw Adam die. Just the thought made his gut twist. It twisted even more violently than when he threw up earlier. It twisted so hard that he let out a growl of dismay. Angelo briefly eyed him, but went back to muttering under his breath, saying prayers for the fallen.

Shiv's mind would return to baseline. He knew that he wouldn't break, not for long, not for good. That, he was sure about. But would he still be himself afterward? He thought not. The pain of loss, of losing someone. That was more than just a feeling. That was more than just trauma. It was an absence in your life. It was like a permanent bit of sadness inside of you. Sadness didn't break people, he believed. Sadness just changed them. And it was a change Shiv never wanted to experience. But as he promised himself that he would never let anyone he cared about fall, that he would always support them, a cold feeling began to well up in the bottom of his gut. A cold feeling he couldn't ignore.

Outside Context Problem almost triggered then, but it went quiet.

And Rose let out a sigh instead. I think, she began hesitantly. But then she gathered her resolve. I think we need to talk about many things. My mind is still a swirl of chaos. But I remember fragments from my life. And we must talk. We must. You've ignored me long enough.

"I haven't ignored you," Shiv said, a surge of heat entering his voice. Then he tempered it. "I haven't. I just don't know how to deal with you. Alright? Now, if you didn't notice, there's a lot of other terrible shit happening every second, every moment. The System's probably going to throw another group of dragons at me now that I survived this. Or maybe New Albion is coming in this direction with a second and third army that I'll need to fight off. I've got a lot to deal with. And frankly, I'd rather keep fighting than deal with you." He realized how it sounded at the end. And so, he kept talking. "It's... I don't have a problem with you. I don't even know you. And I don't know how you ended up inside me, alright?"

"Who are you talking to?" Angelo asked, staring at Shiv.

"No one," Shiv said. "Ghosts. Maybe like you are now, muttering to the dead."

The rogue vampire eyed him. His gaze was filled with withheld tears that he refused to let fall. But as he drew in a breath, he asked Shiv another question. "Does your ghost speak to you?"

Shiv hesitated. He didn't know how to respond to that. But as he thought, eventually the truth came out. "Yeah," Shiv said, "and I don't know what to say to them."

"I envy you," Angelo replied softly. "I would give anything to hear from some of my ghosts. Anything."

Chapter 100 (III) Cremation

For a while, they just watched the bodies burn. The smell was foul, but better the taste of flame and cooking flesh than whatever vile stench the First Blood left behind. As Angelo stared on, Shiv moved on to the rest of the town. Many of the houses were made from wood. He thought they would burn too. But as he considered calling out to Angelo, he found the vampire walking toward him. He frowned when Angelo stepped right past him.

"Hey, Angelo," Shiv called out. "Where are you going?"

Angelo stopped. He looked at Shiv. "Back."

"Back?" Shiv repeated.

"Back to the First Blood." Angelo's expression hardened. "I have fled from them long enough. They want my head. They want my life. They want my core. I'll show it to them. I'll..."

"No," Shiv interrupted him, following after him.

"I'm not. I'm not. This is not a moment. This is... This is... I thought... I thought..." Angelo was on the verge of unraveling again.

Shiv reached over and gripped him gently by the shoulder. "Look, if you want to go get yourself killed, I will let you," Shiv said carefully. "However, maybe consider coming with me, going to get some help first. And then, if you still want to die in, I don't know, a week..." Shiv considered that statement. "Well, you know, in a week you might be dead. Hell, in a week we all might be dead. As you said, I'm System-favored, and I'm really, really favored. So, those are your options from my perspective. I'd frankly want you to pick the one where you live at least a little while longer."

The beautiful rogue vampire's expression turned into something Shiv couldn't read. And then Shiv couldn't read him altogether because he looked away.

"I really hate how effective your Charm Skill is," Shiv muttered.

"I'm sorry," Angelo said. "But... I don't matter... I shouldn't live. I can't... Why do you care what happens to something like me? I see the relish in your eyes. It pleased you to kill my kind."

Shiv considered that. Why did he care about Angelo? He was just a vampire he came across. Just some screaming victim he decided to save. And that was just it. He felt bad for the poor bastard. And ultimately, he'd never met a non-terrible vampire before. Angelo was novel, and Angelo was tragic. Together, that was enough.

"Well, it seemed like you needed help," Shiv said. "After everything I did recently, I think I should help more people. I try, but..." He thought about the people who died when he fought at Weave. He thought about the slaves that died when the Jealousy came crashing down. He thought about the mass death experienced across Gate Theborn during his battle against the Recollector. "Everyone... People..." Shiv gathered his words. "People seem to die around me, and I don't want that. I want to be better, so I'm going to help you if you let me. I'm going to do the right thing. I'm going to kill the bastards, but I'm also going to be careful. I'm going to help more people. More helpless people. The System might want strife, but I want to see a better world."

Angelo continued gawking at him. The vampire's expression turned from offended to incredulous to tearful to a point of neutrality. "How? How are you real? Favored... they are not like you..."

"What do you mean, they're not like me?" Shiv said.

"Favored are creatures of power and brutality. Everything is for their skills. They use others and live not as people, but only as Pathbearers." Angelo shook his head.

Every single word the vampire spoke came from a point of trauma. Shiv didn't know Angelo's experience. But even in his short time with the vampire, he could tell just how deeply scarred the poor bastard was. Every time he spoke, he sounded like he was on the verge of collapsing again. Every single time. It wasn't just with his village, though that might have been the tipping point. He was broken long before. Long, long before.

Outside Context Problem: A woman smiles down at Angelo. She is not the first to see him tonight, and she will not be the last. She has found use in him with her knives and her ink. His flesh is perfect, and that has offended her since the moment she laid eyes on him. So she rents him, and so she carves at his flesh.

His siress allows it; desires it, even. Angelo has proven to be most unruly in recent days, sparing someone he shouldn't have.

It is this, it is such behavior that makes her feel so enchanted by him, but also so offended. Why isn't he like the rest of them? Does he think he is so much better, so perfect, simply because he appears pristine, simply because he took to the blood better than most of his generation? No, no, he will learn. She will make sure he understands.

"Please, please stop, I'll—I'll do anything, please d—don't cut me again," Angelo whimpers, and his voice is as beautiful as the way he cries.

She starts with his eyes this time.

"Stop—Stop!" Shiv shut his eyes and turned away. The screen within his vision played several scenes from Angelo's past, and all of it, all of it, was beyond vile.

I can't help it, Rose said. The apparitions, they come to me, they slam into me. Foreshadowing is tying me to the world. It's not your skill anymore, but I am. I am bound to you by skill and soul. I don't want to do this; it just happens. It's not up to me.

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"Well, it's not up to me either," he muttered. Then he noticed Angelo staring at him, his mouth wide open. "I'm not insane," Shiv said. "When I say I have a ghost, I literally mean I have a ghost inside me."

The vampire slowly closed his mouth. "It is well. I do not judge."

"It's fine if you do. It's just—I'm not insane." Angelo seemed like he didn't believe Shiv. "I'm not insane," Shiv said for a third time, slightly annoyed. "Thanks a lot, Rose."

It's not my fault, she snarled inside of him. I didn't ask to be trapped inside of you. Child of my murderers...

"Yeah, and I didn't ask for you to be stuck in me either, so thank my parents."

I don't think I will ever do such a thing, Rose growled.

"Me neither," Shiv shot back. With a sigh, he looked up at the spiraling column of smoke and ash at the center of the village, the remnants of the townsfolk of Hawthark disappearing into the sky.

"Townsfolk..." He looked at Angelo. "Wait, were you like the mayor of this place or something?"

"I was the leader. I showed people how to put things together, how to live off the land. How to adapt new ways of thinking and adjust themselves to a life of subsistence. A life of agriculture and peace. It was going to be... peaceful. We weren't going to do anything to anyone."

Shiv glanced at the bonfire one last time and sighed.. "Alright, so here's what's going to happen. You and I are going to get on board that thing." He pointed up. The Court Leviathan had not departed. Hadn't done anything other than wave its limbs slightly. Angelo looked up at the beast, and Shiv saw the reluctance in his expression. "All the vampires and Blood Horrors aboard are dead."

"Do you know that a Court Leviathan usually carries at least ten thousand high vampires?"

"Yeah, I don't think I killed ten thousand. Maybe, I don't know, two, three hundred? Most of them got deployed off to the gate or something before they came back for you, actually. I don't really know. I only know that I definitely didn't kill ten thousand, but that I also definitely killed everyone inside."

Angelo stared on, and then, with a slow nod of acceptance and a tremble in his heart that teased Shiv's Dread Aura, he gave a whispered reply. "I trust you. But a Court Leviathan usually takes hundreds of



vampires to compel effectively. Thousands, in most cases, if the kindred are not strong enough of Biomancy and Psychomancy."

Shiv hummed. "I mean, I'm a Master Biomancer, so..."

"That is not enough. When I say hundreds, I speak of hundreds of Master-Tiers."

"Are you a Master?" Shiv asked. He didn't think so. Angelo's Bomancy was... Well, it was there, but that was all he could say about it. It was probably at Adept-Tier.

"No." Angelo shook his head. "I have no Mastery of the High Gift."

"The High Gift?"

"The shaping of life," Angelo answered. "The weaving of blood."

"Yeah, sure, fancy way of saying Biomancy. Alright, so we're not moving it that way. I guess we're gonna do the other thing."

"The other thing?"

"Yeah. You get inside or on top, and I pull."

"You... what?"

Shiv stared at him. "I'm pretty sure I was very, very clear about what I'm gonna do."

"But how are you going to pull? It's four kilometers long! It's the size of a mountain."

"Yeah." Shiv grinned. "Just a mountain. Should be a breeze."

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Gravitic Wrestler 141 > 142

"Slow down!" Angelo screamed, crying out from the shattered windows of the bridge just atop the leviathan's head.

"No," Shiv grunted. His Inertial Overdrive was building. The Court Leviathan let out loud cries as its body jerked behind him, flopping up and down. A cone of air friction folded over him and the massive leviathan. They were going faster than sound right now, and with his Creeping Void active, it just looked like a large black mass was cleaving across the sky.

The leviathan was heavy. It might have been the heaviest thing he'd ever lifted and pulled, but between Inertial Overdrive and Gravitic Wrestler, he managed. It just took a lot of thinking to do. He thought back to his torture at the hands of the Recollector. He thought back to Uva being dismembered. And then he thought back to Adam almost getting his head torn off again.

As it turned out, you could only think about the same horrible instances in your life so many times before you kind of got used to them. It still filled him with an ill feeling, but he wasn't so mad anymore.

He was running out of anger, and as he was running out of anger, his arms were straining. His back seared with pain and exhaustion. "Alright, come on, Shiv," he said. "Just another level for Gravity Wrestler, and we're gonna get it through the gate. Just imagine the stupid look on Adam's face." And then he began to chuckle, as he actually did imagine Adam's face. And Uva's face.

Shit, this is going to be weird to explain to Uva, he thought. She probably knows what a Court Leviathan is. Better than I do, anyway. I should stay ahead of this thing and make it really obvious. Or maybe not, maybe I should just pour a Creeping Void over it. Actually, maybe I should park it outside at a distance. It's got a bunch of viruses around it, doesn't it? Better get that figured first. Then, I'll figure out how to use its meat—or go off and hunt something else.

As he flew closer and closer to Gate Theborn, he saw that the fires consuming its nearby woods had gone dormant. Massive fields of ash and ruin extended everywhere. Toppled watchtowers and broken spikes of bone lay in the dirt. Blood soaked the soil, bits of bodies still visible in the bioluminescent grass. A massive crater lined the outside where Shiv's Inertial Overdrive detonation had kissed the earth deep.

Just outside the gate, Shiv noticed something: a small army of Weaveresses and Umbrals making for the gateway. A smile crawled over his face. Weave was moving in. Support had arrived just in time. And there, on the ground, he thought he recognized someone. "Ikki!" he called out as loud as he could while dipping lower.

The young Umbral turned and blinked, squinting at the vast blob of approaching darkness. Some of the Sisters and spiderfolk prepared for battle, but Shiv ceased his Creeping Void and emerged from the darkness with a huge tentacle slung over his shoulder.

"Shiv!" Ikki squeaked. Her joy at seeing him made him grin harder. "What are you doing out here? I thought you were in the gate!"

"I went out hunting."

"Oh?" She stared at the darkness behind him. "Well, what did you get? Show us! Show us! Is it a cave biter? I bet it's a cave biter—you totally hate cave biters so much."

And then, behind him, his miasma broke, unveiling his glorious prize. A series of terrified cries sounded from the Sisters, weavers, and Weaveresses. Ikki's jaw dropped, her heart tensed for a moment, and then she stared at him as Shiv's Dread Aura shuddered inside his chest. "Shiv, do you—do you know what you're pulling there?"

"Yeah," Shiv said with a massive smirk. "Meat. I got us a renewable source of ethically sourced meat."