

Deathless 111

Chapter 111 (I) Surface [III]

Get up, Adam. Get up. You're not done. You're not done until you beat me.

And look at me. You can do it. With your team. With the people by your side, you can do it. It doesn't matter that I'm a Master. You're an Adept. Look at me. Don't look away. Never look away from your enemy.

I am proud of you. I'm proud of you. I'm proud of everyone in this class.

But pride doesn't mean fucking shit.

This is the final exam. This is your final test. I'm not going to fail you if you lose, but I think you understand this isn't about passing or failing. Because when it comes to an actual fight, dying is failing.

But maybe not. Maybe you'll sell your life dearly. Maybe you'll delay your enemy long enough for someone on your own side to arrive. Someone who's also a Master. But you won't be there to see it. You won't be the one that gets to go home. They might sing your name in a story, but that's just all you'll be. A story for someone else. A lyric in someone else's song. Something to pad the purses of bards and be slapped on a poster for more young boys and girls like you to be recruited and get themselves killed.

Get up. Get up. Be more than a story. Make your own legend. Live to experience it.

You've got one final attempt left. One last try. Make it count. Make a plan. Make it good.

I've seen it before, on real battlefields. Ten Adepts bringing down one Master. It can be done. So. Show me one Adept and Nine Initiates finding a way to do the same.

-Captain Harry Irons, TacStrat 101, Phoenix Academy

A crimson serpent emerged from within Shiv, drinking away his final wounds. It was practically half the size of his body now, and its interior glistened with crystallized injuries; ruptured organs, flayed skin, burst vessels, and too many lacerations to count. Such were the contents stored within the Woundeater, and it would be unleashed against the next viable target Shiv could find.

And he had a strong feeling he would be running into some viable targets very soon.

The air combusted around him, crowning him in a veil of force and fire. He sailed just a few meters above the ground, keeping his person concealed using Minor Illusion, Chameleon, and Creeping Void in tandem. He might have destroyed one observation post, but he was sure there were more, many more. And with how much noise he just made, Shiv was expecting trouble very, very soon.

When he flew over the ground, the kinetic energy he displaced cleaved deep into the earth, revealing the bones of things that were. Sometimes there were very literal bones, a sea of them, humans from the looks of it. And then there were the husks of old machines, massive automata. Shiv caught just a glimpse, but this place must have been something more than a wilderness a long time ago.

As he looked over the distant, rolling mountains, a mounting feeling that Shiv was heading into a storm built inside of him. And that feeling only grew as the last light of the sun faded, vanishing behind the

towering shape of the distant Tidewall. Night fell immediately, but before the dark came, there was a glint of color from high above.

A glint of color that pierced through weary gray clouds. There were ten shapes approaching Shiv. They were golden, and they were moving fast. Perhaps not as fast as he, but they were closing fast enough that he could see the curving trail of force peeling around their forms.

More importantly, he thought he could feel them through his Chronomancy.

Great. Didn't take long for me to run into the enemy Chronomancers. No easy fights for long, huh, System?

He saw four wings on each of the shapes. Two arms, two legs, long, sinuous necks, and a tail that ended in a spear-like tip. These were dragons. And for a moment, Shiv thought he was about to face another Lance of Dragon-Knights. But despite the adamantium barding they wore, there was something undisciplined in their movements, an animalistic taint. And somehow, he could instinctively tell he was facing beasts rather than true warriors.

Still, ten golden dragons didn't emerge from nowhere. If he had to guess, they were deployed for him specifically. And why not? Dragons probably didn't have an issue with the Light Curse. Maybe Sullain had them captured, or struck a pact with them somehow, or twisted their minds, or—

Before he could theorize further, each dragon pulsed with brilliant, gleaming mana.

Each of the dragons flashed. A shudder of power ran through them, and Shiv's Chronomancy trembled in return. His eyes widened. Their mana felt like it was operating on the exact same frequency as his.

Then, each of their bodies flared a radiant gold, and they were promptly coated by a shell forged from the lore of time itself.

Shiv felt an aching pull in their direction as his Chronomancy rattled inside him, begging to be unleashed.

He reflexively activated Strider of the Unbending Path. Time stopped. The world ceased its movements; the wave of destruction following him went still. But the dragons were still moving, and they were coming right at him. Shiv clenched his fists and clutched his knife tighter. Not just dragons. Time dragons. The type the Recollector spoke about earlier.

How do they know I'm a Chronomancer? Shiv wondered. Do they already know? Or is this just—

A flash of color blinked atop one of the dragons. A jet of searing green curved from the approaching beast and came for the Deathless. It was pure instinct that saved Shiv again. He spiked himself downward, and the stream of corrosive energy lashed across the land and cleaved clean through the ground behind him. It left a gap in the world that promptly detonated upward, projecting a blade of Necromantic energy high into the air. Soon, the blade expanded into a sizzling screen of acid that chewed at the very fabric of the world.

Necromancy. Godsdamn it, why does everything they do involve Necro— oh right, I am fighting a rogue Necrotech outfit. Shiv grimaced, and he immediately plunged downward, drilling deep into the soil as he continued underground.

Not only did they have a counter to his Chronomancy, they also apparently could see through his Stealth Skills. That shot landed exactly where he was a moment prior. How did they see through The Creeping Void? How did they tell? And how could they also perceive him with both his Minor Illusion and Chameleon Enchantments active? What the hells?

"Gold-03, remain in position!" Gold-01 declared as he recalibrated his Necro-Thrower. It would take a few seconds for the crystal to stabilize, but that shot was dead on. The Divination Matrix enchanted into his rider capsule painted the most likely path of his adversary. At the last moment, they dodged. He missed. They were damn fast. In a scant second, they went from sailing forward to drilling through the ground itself, cracking the earth open and vanishing beneath the soil.

Who the hell is this guy? How in the deepest hells does he have Strider of the Unbending Path too? "Are you guys seeing this?"

"Stay focused, Gold-03," Gold-01 said. "Gold-02, Gold-10. Geomancy. Peel him out of the ground. Ten-kilometer de-solidification."

"Received, Gold-01," Gold-10 said. Gold-02 simply gave a grunt. They descended, plunging down toward the earth like falling spears. While the dragons glowed bright with Chronomancy, the rider capsules along their backs burst into animated fractals of twisting spells. Colors of rich soil came into shape as spell patterns were birthed from within the capsules. And then they rippled out, crashing over the land and alchemizing everything for approximately two kilometers.

What used to be earth turned into a rapidly evaporating slurry. It wasn't even mud. It was just liquefied dust and ash. Again and again, Gold-02 and Gold-10 channeled the spell, removing more sections from the earth and dissolving more substance. In seconds, vegetation, earth, soil, and stone faded. They continued concentrating on the spell, sweeping across the land as solid turned to gas.

And just then, Gold-01 caught sight of him. Immediately, his Divination Matrix pinpointed where he was based on the echolocation imprint they got from SC-Central earlier. Now, they had a trail—they just needed to solidify it.

Gold-01 issued another mental command, and Gold-08, their squadron scout, sent out a pulse of her own echolocation. Once more, they pinged the target, and the Divination imprint solidified.

Gold-01 had hunted Krakens before. They were creatures that took away their adversary's sight and muffled their hearing. Creeping Void was a treacherous skill to face, but ultimately, it didn't stop tactile movements, and sounds could still travel through it.

Absolute stealth was impossible. There were limitations to every skill, and understanding how they worked was the first part of overcoming them.

"Eyes on target," Gold-10 declared. But before Gold-10 and Gold-02 could pursue the enemy on their own, Gold-01 sent out another telepathic command. "Gold-10, Gold-02, rejoin squadron. Pursue in Kingfisher formation. Gold-04, descend. Gold-08, Gold-07, trail."

A few more acknowledgements came, and Gold-01 continued watching their adversary. The enemy was painted a bright violet now, the Divination signature glowing so bright that Gold-01 could see them even with his eyes closed. So why couldn't Gold-01 shake the feeling that something was about to go terribly wrong? He watched as members of his squadron shot down across the land.

Spells formed over their capsules, and their dragons let out primal roars. The first cracks spread across their temporal shells. Gold-01 prepared himself. Six seconds of halted time left. Let's see how long you can keep time still, Pathbearer.

"What kind of Geomancy bullshit is this?" Shiv growled to himself. For a few moments, he was drilling through the earth. Then, suddenly, it practically dissolved around him, turning fluid one second and then to dust in the next. His temporal shell was cracking. If he had to guess, he only had maybe three seconds of halted time left.

He cast a quick glance upward and saw the dragons gliding down through the air. They were still slower than him—made even more so by his ever-building speed. Furthermore, he moved through halted time far more easily than they did. They were grinding against the temporal friction caused by their dense shells of Chronomancy, and so he confirmed they were a Tier below him in terms of Reflexes

However, their temporal shells weren't as damaged as his. That made them slightly superior Chronomancers.

Not a good matchup, Shiv realized. Even if he was so much faster than they, once his Chronomancy shattered, he would basically be frozen in place, giving them however long they had to attack him. Considering how fast and far their Necromancy could hit, Shiv needed to keep moving.

He clutched his knife tight as he came up with a desperate plan. With a loud shout, he threw his blade as far as he could. It exploded across the land, spearing through the base of a nearby mountain and punching clean through the stone. A puff of dust burst free but froze in the air. A crack formed but didn't develop any further.

The damage wouldn't fully progress until time resumed.

In the same second, Shiv cast himself four seconds back in time. He jolted out of place. His armor broke apart. Only a few pieces clung to his body. But just then, he triggered his spatial anchor. And for the second time, he blinked across the world. The first was done by reverting his position back to a temporal anchor. Now, he projected himself using his knife's spatial Enchantment and materialized in a cramped space filled with jagged stone, falling soil, and creeping vines.

He found himself holding the blade again as he finished his spatial teleportation. But to his surprise, he found his Skysplitter embedded in something, halted by a wall of metal. The blade had pierced through, but the mountain had sapped enough kinetic energy from it that it didn't tear into the reinforced hook of metal entirely. And he quickly understood why.

Shiv couldn't help but laugh as the final fragments of his temporal armor broke off him. Time resumed. Three seconds passed as Shiv tore at what he believed to be an observation bunker.

He didn't do anything clever to find this place. He just got lucky. And judging from the muffled sounds thundering outside, the dragons might have lost track of him as well. With a final flex of force, Shiv tore into the observation post just in time to see eight skeletal armored figures turning, trying to get their crossbows, longbows, and blades up to protect themselves.

"Found you," Shiv growled. And then he spiked his Inertial Overdrive twenty times in quick succession before detonating his sheath.

Their armor crumpled first. Their flesh sprayed between the cracks. The bunker deformed and swelled like a steel balloon. As the observation post fell silent, Shiv observed the crushed bodies of the ones he'd just killed. They, too, wore the visages of death, but the metal of the armor seemed darker. They were definitely still organic, though, judging from the gore seeping out from them. Facing him was a firing port as well, overlooking a stretch of tumbling hills.

There were more mountains in the distance, but Shiv wasn't exactly sure where he was anymore. He needed to figure out his position. But more importantly, he needed to shake these dragons—or kill them.

Then, a thought came to him. I am dressed like some of these guys. Maybe there's something I can do with that. Maybe I can get the dragons to come to me...

"This is Gold-03 to Gold-01. We lost him. The matrix can't find him. We're trying to recalibrate."

But Gold-01 didn't say anything. Gold-01 was focusing, trying to figure out what just happened. The violet imprint of the target pulsed in and out of existence at several points, but they weren't there. And the Divination Matrix wasn't sure where he was either. Just then, their temporal shell came close to shattering, and Gold-01 gave his command. "Gold Primary, drop shells."

Time resumed. The wing regrouped at Gold-01's command. They rose higher into the air, trying to cover more ground, to take in more of the horizon. And Gold-07 spotted something there. Gold-07 pinged the rest of the group. They saw a massive series of cracks spreading along the sides of a nearby mountain just as a wave of displaced force slammed into it.

"One of the... Oh shit, I think that's where observation post 109 is," Gold-07 called out.

Just as he finished speaking, the mountain exploded from within. In the same instant, they received a telepathic message from SC-Central. "Gold Primary, I just lost contact with 109."

A bitter feeling filled Gold-01's gut. Was this Heroic adversary toying with them? How did he break contact? And how did he know exactly where 109 was? Through an eruption of stone, dust, and other debris, the mangled remains of 109's observation post sailed high through the air. It looked deformed. Swollen like a bomb had gone off inside. The metal was ballooned outward, and part of it was torn wide open.

"Great One's missing cock!" Gold-04 cried out. "What the fuck? Target has at least Master-Tier Physicality or Geomancy."

"Physicality," Gold-01 replied. He narrowed his eyes. "If he had Geomancy, he would have tried countering our strategy earlier. Gold-03, approach and conduct Divination pulse. Everyone else, remain at an active distance. 500 meters! L formation. Let's pick up this bastard's trail."

Gold-03 acknowledged and flew close to the now falling observation post. A Divination spell formed over 03's capsule, and a pulse of violet light splashed through the deformed bunker. Nine badly crushed bodies were highlighted through the walls of the destroyed observation—

Wait... One of them is still resonating with the Divination spell. And that body isn't crushed, it's—

Gold-01 felt his stomach drop. "Gold-03, Gold-03, pull back! Gold, pull back! Ambush! He's still inside!"

But it was too late. Gold-03 tried to turn and fly away. But she was too slow.

A blur rammed into her, and her dragon went tumbling in circles through the air.

Chapter 111 (II) Surface [III]

As Shiv impacted the time dragon from the side, his Biomancy sensed something interesting. He wasn't just facing a dragon. There was also a rider attached to its back. And the rider had Adept-Tier Pyromancy as well. He could sense their mana field washing over him.

But more importantly, he could feel both the rider and the dragon's Magical Resistances. To Shiv's surprise, he found the rider to be the one with the higher resistance. And so he brought his fist down against the dragon, slamming a Woundeater-empowered punch into the beast's skull.

A crimson explosion enveloped the 200-meter-long beast. Scales broke free from its exposed head, and Shiv seized it by the neck and suddenly spiked himself downward forty times. He gave himself a hernia at the sudden increase in speed and strain.

Parts of his bone armor snapped free, his arms nearly dislocated, but the dragon fared worse. He accelerated so fast that he denuded most of its neck. Its scales tore off in strips. The creature screamed. He felt it try to trigger its Chronomancy, and he saw a cracked temporal shell starting to form. Shiv slammed a knee into its head, stunning it. Its temporal shell vanished.

Then, Shiv drove the dragon head-first down into the earth—and he kept going. He drilled deeper using the dragon's face as an excavator. At the same time, he formed another Woundeater, fed it, and slammed it into the dragon's body once more. He felt a crack in its Magical Resistance and spiked his gravity field another twenty times as he spun in place.

Previously, he thought it was a struggle to break a dragon's neck due to how far it could bend backward, how it was far more flexible than a human's neck. But he thought about that for a while and realized there was a different method he could use.

If one twisted the dragon's neck more like a handle at extreme speeds, the outcome would be immediately grisly and quite fatal. It couldn't rotate its head in place three hundred and sixty degrees, after all.

The dragon's ligaments tore free from the base of its neck, and even its impossibly strong muscles couldn't keep up with Inertial Overdrive. Though Shiv's body was coming apart, the dragon's head was getting torn clean off.

He spiked his field five more times as he felt the dragon's bones shatter and muscles tear. As all resistance vanished, he pulled back hard and ripped the dragon's head off at its base before detonating his inertial sheath.

Just then, he felt the rider die as well—splattering apart inside the capsule from the sheer concussive impact unleashed by Shiv's detonation.

Shit! I wanted to take them alive. To figure out how they operated. Ah. Nothing for it.

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Shiv cried out as something in his spine fractured, but the dragon was launched aside. Its body resembled a rat that had been struck by a hammer. Parts of it were flattened. Its adamantite barding

had bent but didn't break, and inside the capsule, its rider became as if a puddle of jam inside a tight, collapsing can.

Just then, the soil around him became fluid and dissolved thereafter. Shiv scoffed, and he triggered his spatial anchor. He teleported back inside the mountain, back to where he left his knife, and continued along his way underground now that he got a good look at where the Tidewall was.

I'll keep moving for now. The rest of the bastards didn't close in. But let's see if I can lose them for good...

"Gold-03! Come in! Gold-03! Respond! Respond!" Gold-01 shouted telepathically, but in his heart, he knew Gold-03 was dead. Dead or mentally comatose. Even someone unconscious had a mind. You didn't just drop off from the world unless you went out of range, or you stopped being accessible.

Gold-02 and 10 cast their Geomancy spells again. As the ground turned to dust, Gold-01 saw the mangled remains of Gold-03's dragon. It looked crushed. Its head had been torn clean off, but the enemy was nowhere to be seen. A growl of absolute fury escaped Gold-01's throat. That monster was going to pay for this. They were—

Gold-01 received another telepathic missive from SC Central. A chain of images splashed into his head. An observation post noted a series of cracks spreading along the ground, traveling fast in the general direction of the Tidewall. The adversary was underground again and moving fast.

"Received, SC-Central." He shared the memory with the rest of his squadron, and they immediately moved. They soared through the air with hurt spreading between them, with things unsaid and anger building.

Gold-03 had been in the squadron for five years. Five years and 600 combat flights. And now, in an instant, she was dead.

You didn't get to make mistakes with a Heroic-Tier adversary. Especially not a cunning and vicious Pathbearer like the one they were hunting.

Broken Moon, I'm a fucking idiot, Shiv thought to himself. I think I'm already lost. I can't remember which way I'm supposed to be going...

Right now, he was traveling vaguely in the direction of the Tidewall. The thing was, he couldn't really see where the Tidewall was anymore because he was underground. As he continued tearing through the foundations of the earth, causing minor earthquakes and cracking the surface wherever he went, he lost his sense of direction in seconds, and now he was considering what to do.

Shiv knew he needed to surface at some point to get his bearings, but if he surfaced, those dragons were likely going to be on him. There had to be observation posts everywhere in this place. There was no avoiding that, and even now, they were probably tracking him somehow. They managed to figure out how to get past his Creeping Void, didn't they?

God damn it, if only I had some kind of subtler skill, Shiv thought to himself. And that was another benefit of having more Adept-Tier skills as well. If he had Adept-Tier Geomancy, maybe he could have navigated underground. If he had Adept-Tier Hydromancy, maybe he could have turned himself into water or something.

Being a powerful, overwhelming brute felt good, but it also made his actions very, very obvious. Shit, nothing for it. Once more, he pinned his blade in the parting soil, and he shot upward. If anything went wrong, he would jump back down to his knife and find a different direction to hit. It worked the last two times, so it might work a third as well. But Shiv didn't expect it to be a trick he could use over and over indefinitely.

He exploded out of the ground, casting stones everywhere. His Creeping Void was still active; he didn't deactivate just because no one had fired any arrows at him in a while. The dragons might be able to see him, but maybe the observation posts didn't have the same skills. Better to have additional layers of protection anyway.

He found himself sailing over a rocky meadow that became a series of rolling hills. Dense patches of vegetation became a series of bushes below. There were fewer mountains around him now, but there were more in the distance. He thought he caught a glimpse of something atop the Tidewall. Shiv spiked himself in its direction. He kept low to the ground as he did before and—

Nine beams of necromantic energy pierced the surrounding soil.

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SHIT! Shiv screamed internally.

He teleported back to his knife and immediately started moving in a random direction. They missed! They weren't as accurate this time. But they still had his general position, and so he had to keep moving. He had to do as Adam suggested. How did he get a level? Did his Creeping Void fool them this time? Why didn't it work before?

Wait... Do they have some kind of Divination like Adam does? That... that might make sense.

Shiv tried to remember which way he was heading, but he bit back a gasp as lacerations began to open across his body. He was going to need to detonate again soon, and once he did, they would definitely notice his position. Judging from where the shots came from, they were right above, high up in the air.

I wouldn't be surprised if they just stayed far away and kept shooting at me from... Wait a minute. What if... what if I can get closer? Can Hu... Can Hu was supposed to be my armor against Necromancy. What I need now is armor... Something that might let me take a few hits and get closer. Those dragons are pretty big. What if I can get inside one? Use it as a literal meat puppet while keeping it alive.

A terrible thought formed in Shiv's mind. He considered doing something just a bit reckless. He clutched one of his decoy bodies inside his cape using his Biomancy. If Minor Illusion and his other Stealth Enchantments weren't working on their own, maybe he just needed to give them something solid to shoot at.

And maybe I need to give them more than one thing to worry about. Shiv continued barreling through the underground. He reached out, and his gravity field expanded around a massive chunk of earth.

"Alright then," Shiv said to himself, "let's give them a distraction."

Gold-01 watched as the spreading cracks marking the path of their target suddenly stopped. A spider web expanded outward, and a fissure began to form in place, but the enemy wasn't moving anymore.

Gold-01 did the same. He wasn't going anywhere near that monster. Whoever could tear the head off a dragon in little more than a second wasn't someone he intended to fight in close-quarters combat. They would grind him down using range, strategy, and Necromancy. That was why there was 500 meters of distance between each of the riders now, and why they remained two kilometers above the ground.

Every dragon was to cover their own sector, and every dragon was close enough to render the other aid should they come under attack.

"What is he doing?" Gold-10 asked. "It's like he's just..."

And then there came a massive shudder. The earth trembled. The fissures grew and became chasms. Gold-01 primed his Necro-Thrower for another cycle when he realized what the adversary was about to do. An entire parcel of uprooted landmass rose into the air—three hundred meters of stone and dirt shaped into a dense ball.

It accelerated fast, the soil peeling off, the stone staying together longer. It soared high like a missile the size of a small mountain, but it was still far too slow to hit any of the dragons, and it wouldn't reach the altitude they were at either.

"What is he trying to do?" Gold-06 asked. But just then, they saw the bone armored figure shoot out from below the earthen sphere.

01's Divination Matrix painted the target into shape. A shroud of violet enveloped them. "It's him! Fire! Fire!" Gold-01 roared.

Nine streams of Necromantic energy immediately speared through the target's body. Nine streams intermingled, and a concentration of necromantic corrosion built and detonated outward, catching the large mound of soil and stone as well. In seconds, it vanished.

In the aftermath, all Gold-01 could hear was the fast pumping of his heart as the world fell silent.

"Did we get him?" Gold-02 asked. "Gold-01, do we have confirmation?"

"I think we hit him," Gold-10 said. "Wait, something just passed by..."

Gold-10's thoughts promptly trailed off into a scream.

The hardest part of lifting an entire section of the earth was keeping it together rather than bearing its weight. Shiv was more than strong enough for the latter, but soil... Soil didn't stick together. Even stone broke apart after you accelerated it at a certain speed. It took all his gravitic control to keep it from unraveling right on top of him. As he rose higher and higher into the air, he kept his Chameleon Enchantment active as he prepared to launch his decoy body.

Five seconds passed as Shiv's insides tightened. He watched the skies, waiting for one of the dragons to fire. Then, his patience broke as he threw his decoy body out.

All the dragons promptly fired their Necromantic beams. Nine different streams came from nine different directions, and Shiv almost let out a miserable sigh. They're spread out. Why the hell did they have to be spread out? The worst thing about not fighting an idiot was that you had to use more strategy and planning every time you engaged them. These dragon riders learned from him just as he adapted to them as well.

But his plan wasn't over. He needed to get to Part Two: Dragon Meat Armor as soon as possible.

Rearing his arm back, he threw his Skysplitter across the horizon at where one of the corrosive streams came from. In an instant, the sound barrier broke. His Skysplitter shrank and vanished. He doubted the dragon could spot something that small. Shiv hoped so, at least. As the blade traveled, a blast of corrosive energy swept down. Shiv's eyes widened. A muscle in his shoulder came apart as Inertial Overdrive wounded him once more. A wave of Necromancy crashed down on Shiv's cover. His dirt mound disintegrated.

He teleported to his blade at the last second. A squeeze of pressure washed over him, and he found himself a mere four hundred-something meters away below a dragon.

Luck smiles on me again, Shiv thought. He detonated his inertial sheath, and a blast wave swept out from him. It broke both of his legs, but he didn't need legs to control his gravity field. Shiv stopped time—and the dragon, unaware of his presence, failed to trigger its own temporal shell in time. It stopped moving. Shiv fed his injuries to a Woundeater and crashed into its chest. A detonation followed as he crawled along its body, but as he came into contact with it, a flare of gold flickered in place as its temporal shell came alive. Shiv was almost taken by surprise, but he was still faster—especially with his Inertial Overdrive running hot.

Didn't know it could—Wait, we have the same skill. I didn't know it could just jump back in time and activate its temporal shell. Wait, that means I can do it too if someone tries to ambush me using Chronomancy...

The primal dragon bit at him. It moved like it was pushing its head through mud. Shiv caught it by the jaw and twisted it to the side. However, instead of killing it immediately, he drove a blade into its right eye and used that to launch himself along its neck to get at the capsule on its back.

A flash of green flared before Shiv. Sticking out behind the capsule was a strange weapon. It had a long barrel that was wide open, and a corrosive crystal was lodged in its backmost section. That must have been how they were firing the Necromantic beams at him.

Shiv extended his Skysplitter's size and cut without thinking. His blade extended thirty meters in a single second. He split the Necromantic weapon on the back of the capsule into two pieces. Then, with the greatest threat eliminated, he studied where the rider resided for the first time.

The capsule was pod-shaped, with a series of faint glowing windows on all sides. Shiv laid eyes on the rider, and they laid eyes on him. They wore a helmet that had gleaming, purple visors, and their armor consisted of something that was only leather. Shiv snorted and sliced through the glass. The rider tried to get up—but then they froze still. With the capsule compromised, the rider was no longer spared from Chronomancy, and now they were at Shiv's tender mercies.

Just then, the dragon twisted its head around to bite him once again. Shiv caught the monster's jaw with his left hand and growled as he pitted his strength against its. With a snarl of effort, he shrugged its head off, and Frictionless Vector activated. It slid off against him violently, and Shiv found a new opening as he cut at the capsule several more times.

Most of its frame was adamantine, which meant Shiv couldn't just brute-force his way in quickly. Thus, he changed his tactic to cutting at the bolts and seals around the capsule. Here, Deepest Edge proved its worth. It popped open just as the dragon came back around for another bite. Shiv's temporal shell cracked. Three seconds of Chronomancy left. He ripped the rider out of their seat and prepared to face the dragon once more.

But then, a thought occurred to him.

I want to be inside this thing, right? I want to use it as a shield against Necromancy. To pilot its body with Biomancy. Well. It's not easy to overpower this thing without Overdrive, and I can't exactly just tear my way through the adamantine barding and its scales... The dragon's jaw opened wide, and Shiv looked at the time-frozen rider before he shrugged. Well. Nothing ventured. No dragon meat shields gained.

And with his mind made up, Shiv spiked himself and the rider straight down the dragon's throat.

Chapter 112 (I) Surface [IV]

Teams and armies have a breaking point, just like individual Pathbearers. That breaking point is variable. It depends on a hell of a lot of things, such as how long a group has known each other, how dire the situation is, if any of them are already dead, and whatnot.

See, a good team of Pathbearers can keep itself standing and fighting even as things look hopeless.

Some group compositions can even claim to be unbreakable, but that's not a guarantee all the time, and that's not even a guarantee for that specific group when the right pressures are applied. See, with the right kind of damage inflicted, everyone collapses. Everyone. No one is immune to harm. No one is beyond the touch of trauma.

And there's even a specific term for this thing.

Usually, armies collapse before their greatest Masters and Heroes do. This is called the "Adept Collapse Point," mainly because generally, most of an organized fighting force is made up of Adepts. When they go down, when the core of your army gives, the rest will fall after. It doesn't matter if the Master wants to keep fighting; he's just one guy. He can do quite a bit of damage, but eventually, with the right approach, he'll be brought down.

It doesn't even matter if a Hero wants to keep warring. A Hero is a dangerous threat—one that can deal a lot of damage and kill thousands of people. But if you got a good group of Masters with varied skills, you can kill a Hero like a pack of wolves can kill a bear.

Understand that you have to take care of your people. After a certain limit, they're not going to be combat-capable. And after a certain amount of trauma, if they start thinking about just dropping their weapons and going home, pull them out of there. They are more of a liability than an asset by that point. People, like equipment, need maintenance. Everyone's maintenance level is different. But it's there.

Ignore this truth at your peril. You might still want to keep brawling, if your guys are done, take them home, if you can.

War is not something you half-ass.

-Memoirs of a Master-Tier War Mage

Shiv accelerated down the dragon's throat with his new hostage in tow before the beast could close its jaws. The glistening inner flesh of the dragon proved to be a surprising lubricant. But as he went further, the space grew cramped, things got dark, and Shiv ripped through the dragon's esophagus.

Just then, a trembling sensation pulsed out from the dragon. It flared with golden mana, and Shiv felt its Chronomancy start to shift.

It's jumping back in time,

he realized. Fine. Two can play at that. Shiv spiked himself at an angle. He pushed through squirming organs and ruptured countless blood vessels as he slammed a boot into what he guessed was the dragon's kidney. The beast let out a skull-shattering bellow of pain. Shiv anchored this moment in time, losing another of his expendable seconds.

The dragon shifted across time thereafter. It vanished around him in a stream of traveling gold, and Shiv found himself hovering in the open air some three hundred meters away from the dragon with the rider still frozen in his grip. It reappeared where it was three seconds ago before he slammed into it. A flash of green slashed at him from the corner of his eyes. The other dragons were firing at him. His temporal shell was a second away from cracking.

Shiv snorted. His shell ignited with surging mana as he cast himself back inside the dragon, back to the point where he was stomping on the dragon's kidney. The beast howled with renewed pain. Shiv's temporal shell cracked apart.

Then, he lost a patch of time. Or rather, it was like a patch of time happened to him all at once. The dragon thrashed, the dragon tried to move, the dragon roared in pain—and then its Chronomancy broke apart as well. In the end, Shiv found himself still inside the writhing dragon. Rather than jumping back in time again, the beast had been incapacitated by pain.

And beside Shiv was a struggling, thrashing rider, who was utterly confused and utterly terrified about his current predicament.

Squirming tendons pressed against Shiv, and blood spilled over him. The bitter copper taste of the dragon's insides seeped into Shiv's armor and painted him with a foul-smelling stench. The rider wasn't doing much better. He was absolutely lost, kicking and struggling, slamming elbows and knees against the dragon's massive organs. Shiv tightened his grip on the rider, and the latter went still.

With a flex from his gravitic field, Shiv tore the rider's armor asunder, splitting it down the middle and exposing bare flesh. The rider let out a ragged cry and struggled to break free. A gleaming piece of metal appeared in the rider's hand, but Shiv broke the fool's arm and took the knife from him.

The rider's agonized shriek reverberated in the dragon's depths.

With the rider incapacitated and stripped of Magical Resistance, Shiv shifted his attention back to the stunned dragon. Time to fashion you into a suit of proper meat armor.

A Woundeater manifested upon the Deathless's right hand, and its insides gleamed with crystallized lacerations. Shiv drove the spell into the dragon, and mana explosions rocked the beast from the inside. It took seven spells to finally shatter the dragon's Magical Resistance, and as he did, Shiv immediately began reshaping the beast's body.

It had an adamantine barding serving as chest armor, so opening a gap along its torso wouldn't work. However, its arms were still bare of metal and guarded only by its natural scales. Shiv exploited that fact as he liquefied the dragon's left arm all the way up to the shoulder and pushed out all the blood and viscera plugging the gap. He then wiggled his way between the dragon's ribs and repositioned himself right in front of his new viewing port.

Dragon blood was flooding his armor and stinging his eyes. Both dragon and rider were caught in the throes of pain and suffering, unable to respond. Shiv positioned his head right where the dragon's left shoulder used to be and peeked outside. The world was spinning around and around as the dragon plunged from the skies. But then it stopped as something caught it. Shiv saw a set of massive golden claws holding onto the dragon by the tail.

And that made him grin.

The enemy was confused again. They were trying to save their friend. And now they were close. Shiv focused his Biomancy and sensed four other dragons enter the vicinity of his mana field. Four riders came with them. That made a good chunk of the entire group. He killed a dragon and its rider earlier. He had this one down now. That left seven. And if he could handle those four, he would only be fighting three.

Should have been ten originally, and nine still alive now. I counted nine Necromantic streams. Gotta do this fast and strategically. Take them by surprise.

"He—he's got me..." the rider whimpered. "We're... we're inside my dragon. He's..."

"Who are you talking to there, buddy?" Shiv growled.

The poor rider promptly pissed himself. Shiv wondered if that had ever happened before—a rider getting kidnapped by someone else and then pulled inside their own mount.

Probably not, Shiv thought, proud of his achievement in a twisted way. I deserve a reward for this, System. This might just be the most unique act of intimidation I've ever performed.

The Challenger is roaring with laughter.

The Challenger is proud of you.

Shiv winced. That was the opposite of a reward. That filled Shiv with shame. Yeah... Maybe all this shit's making me a bit too sadis—The hells, was that just a pulse of felling Psychomancy mana leaving his mind?

The translucent mana was so faint and sudden that he missed it, but when another ripple spread out from the rider's mind, Shiv gritted his teeth.

Awareness 13 > 14

That was a pulse of Psychomancy. And the rider was communicating with someone. Shiv's first thoughts were to knock the rider out or kill them if he had to, but he stopped himself. A thought came to him—one that might just allow him to affect all the other dragons and their riders at once.

Shiv directed his own Psychomancy into the mind of the rider, and he tasted the rider's pain and terror. More importantly, Shiv felt how the rider was broadcasting wavelengths of Psychomancy across the world. Shiv wasn't sure what kind of Skill Evolution this was, but it seemed to be focused on range and telecommunications. The rider's mana was supple and soft—practically like gas compared to Uva's solid threads, but it traveled far and fast, and as it came crashing back, Shiv received fragments of memory and flashes of insight from other minds.

And the opportunities for havoc just keep coming. Inspiration struck Shiv. He had more than one angle to hit the other riders now. Maybe all at the same time. The rider's Psychomancy turned against Shiv. The poor bastard was trying to push him out. And he would have been able to do it too if Shiv didn't snap the rider's other arm by the elbow just then. Pain consumed the rider thereafter, and while he was busy wailing in pain, Shiv pushed deeper into his mind and prepared to do something unpleasant.

If the rider thought a few broken bones were bad, he was going to hate just how bad things were about to get.

Shiv activated his Icon of the Paindrinker and immediately started tearing himself apart. He bound his mind tighter to the rider's, and while Shiv grunted in discomfort as his blood mingled with the dragon's, the rider's cries reached a fever pitch. Shiv telepathically urged the rider to focus, to push through some of the pain to contact his comrades.

"Only they can save you now," Shiv told the rider. "Call out to them. Let them know what's happening. Carry the hurt across for me."

And trapped in the depths of his own anguish, the rider didn't realize what Shiv was trying to do. So he cast out to his fellow riders, his Psychomantic broadcast lined not only with a plea for help, but an escalating flood of new and exotic suffering born of Shiv's mind-linked self-mutilation.

"Gold-10! Gold-10! Respond!" Gold-01 watched as Gold-10's dragon fell. It was tumbling tail over head, turning over and over as it failed to regain its bearings. The dragon was wailing, clawing at its own torso while its head whipped about in pain.

Gold-01 struggled to contain his own horror. He had never seen a dragon react like that. He'd seen them die in battle. Seen them get ripped apart by other dragons in mana storms, or reduced to bloody paste by Master Dynamancers. But to make a dragon make these kinds of torturous noises...

Gold-01 focused. He tried to get his Divination Matrix to zero in on the target. Three seconds ago, the target briefly reappeared as Gold-10's dragon jumped back in time. But then the target Chrono-Jumped too, and now all Gold-01 had was a pulsing imprint of where the target used to be. In the interim, Gold-07, 08, 02, and 09 all moved in to assist Gold-10.

"Keep it still!"

Gold-02 called out to the others. "Gold-07. Biomancy. Now. It's missing an arm."

The other riders commanded their own dragons to hold 10's dragon in place, to keep it from falling further, so they could figure out what exactly was going on. But as they worked to save the dragon, a telepathic cry crashed over them. The pulse of mana was accompanied by a nightmarish howl—a scream coming from Gold-10.

"Fuck!" Gold-09 flinched. "You guys hearing this?"

"Yeah..." Gold-02 breathed. A building dread flooded the group's shared Psychomancy field.

But then came something else. As Gold-10's message fully sank into them, it came with an explosion of agony unlike anything any of them had ever known.

Gold-10's screams proved contagious. His cries continued as the others in his squadron let out hisses and groans at first, before barking out shouts of pain. Then, a scream erupted from Gold-08. And things all fell apart from there.

Gold-01's eyes rolled as he felt himself getting torn apart from the inside. At the same time, he learned what it was like for someone to peel the flesh off their back and detach every last one of their muscles from their bones. This pain was on another level. Words failed to capture the immense torture that consumed them. And it just kept building with each passing wave.

And with the squadron's riders drowning in trauma, their dragons reacted with confusion and agitation. They flared their shells and skipped back in time, trying to avoid threats. They slowed time and searched for the unseen foe that was hurting their masters. The only good thing was how they went unaffected by Gold-10's Psychomantic broadcast.

Human pain wasn't the same as dragon pain.

Gold-01 did everything he could to push through the hurt and refocus. If he could reach 10, stop this at the source—

Then, another presence brushed his mind. Gold-01 shuddered. The new mind that pressed against him was human. Or so 01 thought. Yet, there was something off about its nature, off about its shape. Visions flashed through 01's eyes. Memories cast by the strange mind into 10 before it was filtered over to the rest of the group.

In scenes that resembled feverish dreams, 01 saw himself staring down at Gold-10 in a dark place, a cavern of blood, fragmented bone, and shifting tendons. Light spilled in through a narrow gap, and it showed just how badly injured Gold-10 was. Both of his arms were broken, and he was screaming—

screaming as he broadcast telepathic messages to the rest of the group, begging them to come save him. But his mind was also being filled with external sources of pain. By traumatic memories that didn't belong to him.

And through the mist of pain and near-madness, 01's perception skipped, and he found himself staring through Gold 10's gaze. For the first time, 01 laid eyes on his enemy. He saw a pair of bright, white irises amidst pools of shadow and blood glaring back at him.

Then, the adversary spoke for the first time. "Get ready, riders. Because it's my turn to be the monster. And your turn to be the prey."

Ice-cold horror flooded Gold-01's blood. His senses reeled back, and as he found himself inside his own capsule again, his racing mind realized a terrifying truth.

The enemy was hiding inside Gold-10's dragon. And he had Gold-10 with him.

"Gold—" Gold-01 bit back a scream. "Gold-Primary! Pull back! Everyone pull—"

But it was too late. Far too late. A tremor of mana resonance passed through Gold-01's dragon as a shroud of gold ignited inside Gold-10's dragon. Gold-01's dragon reacted, forming its own temporal shell, but without 01 directing specific commands, it rushed in for the kill, moving on bestial instinct rather than a rider's intellect. And through the windows of his capsule, 01 could see the other dragons in his squadron reacting the same way.

They were closing in on the enemy—on an enemy that could physically tear a dragon apart.

“No—no!” Gold-01 cried, trying to fight through the building tidal waves of pain. “Stop!” He cast his thoughts at his own dragon. “STOP!” That telepathic message went across. His dragon halted. The other dragons in his squadron didn’t. They just kept closing on where 10 was. Where the Heroic-Tier enemy was.

Then—and for no obvious reason at all—Gold-10’s dragon slammed torso-first into Gold-08.

And that was when the slaughter started

Chapter 112 (II) Surface [IV]

Skill Gained: Deception 1 (Common)

Psychomancy 12 > 13

Dread Aura 89 > 91

Shiv triggered his Song of the Vigilant to focus through the pain. He ripped his Psychomancy out from the rider—Callsign Gold-10. Real name Dignity Huevero. Shiv groaned as he tried to shake off the memory spillover. Uva had warned him about stuff like this. It made him feel like he was himself and not at the same time. Good thing I got to practice believing I was a potato for a while earlier. Re-focusing my mind might have been a bit harder otherwise.

A Woundeater snaked across his body and consumed all his current injuries. At once, the bulk of Shiv’s pain faded, but Gold-10 kept screaming as the Paindrinker continued affecting him. Shiv stopped time.

Gold-10's screeching went silent. Pressing himself against the open chasm of mangled flesh he made of the dragon's left arm, Shiv stared out from his personal "stabbing port" and tracked where the other enemies were with his Biomancy. Two more dragons got within two hundred meters of him. That left just one dragon outside that distance.

Good. I can work with that.

Shiv stopped time. As soon as his temporal shell fused over his body, the dragons triggered their Chronomancy as well. He felt their Strider of the Unbending Path Skills activate in tandem with his. A shuddering vibration passed through Shiv's time-armor. 10 seconds—no, 9. I still have an anchor back at the Surface Gateway. Let's see how many dragons and riders I can kill in 9 seconds.

He seized the dragon he was in and spiked it into its nearest counterpart. A massive collision shook the dragon's insides, and Shiv let out a shout of exertion as he worked to get his stabbing port in line with the dragon he was trying to stab. The body of another dragon came into sight. It was still twenty meters away from Shiv.

Twenty meters was nothing when you could change the size of your knife.

He pushed his upper body out from the wound and slashed. The Skysplitter's Size-Shifting Enchantment activated. It expanded from a thirty-five-centimeter dagger to a hundred-meter-long blade and crashed against the other dragon's neck.

The beast's scales shattered but held together. The softer tissues they were supposed to protect did not.

Shiv's Deepest Edge carried the cut through veins, tendons, tissues, and more. Blood erupted from the dragon's jaws. He cut it twice more for good measure. The bones in its neck parted then. The dragon's head slumped over at an awkward angle as it fell from the sky, trailing blood from between its serrated fangs.

Another dragon accelerated toward him. Shiv spiked his gravitic field twenty times. Gold-10 combusted and then turned to bloody mist beside him. Something inside Shiv cringed. Shit. Adept-Tier Toughness. Godsdammit, I wanted to keep him as a prisoner...

Shiv twisted the dragon he was in to face the dragon that was coming at him—and cursed as a stream of Necromancy exploded just a few meters under him. The dragon Shiv was inside of turned black inside and out. Its organs withered. Its scales darkened. A piece of its soul broke. Suddenly, its Chronomancy winked out, and it went still. Shiv realized what had happened in an instant. The thing that shattered inside it was a skill—its strongest skill. Chronomancy was lost to this dragon. It would never be able to stop the pace of time again.

A terrible feeling churned in Shiv's gut as he extended his blade to two hundred meters and drove it into the chest of the dragon that had unleashed the beam. The tip of the Skysplitter sang out as adamantite greeted adamantite. But where he failed to pierce the dragon's barding, its insides were punctured by his progressing stab. The golden-scaled behemoth reeled back, clutching its chest. But it didn't die. Not until Shiv dragged his blade across its throat.

"GOLD-01! GOLD-01! MY DRAGON—MY DRAGON'S DEAD! I'M FALLING I'M FUCKING FALLING—"

"GOLD-8! NO!"

Screams exploded over and over in Gold-01's mind as he watched the disaster unfold. A massive, gleaming blade had materialized and had burst free from Gold-10's dragon—from the wound where its left arm used to be. Gold-02's dragon fell. And now Gold-08 was going down too. An explosion of force deformed the insides of Gold-10's dragon as it was unnaturally ripped out of position. The enemy Pathbearer was dragging it around from the inside.

Dynamancy, Gold-01 guessed.

An entire patch of the dragon came apart in spilling chunks of festering flesh. Gold-01's heart screamed in pain. Gold-01 loved dragons. They were great and terrible creatures, and Gold-10's dragon was as mortally wounded as any dragon could be. Its Magical Resistance had been broken at some point, and a subsequent beam of Necromancy carved deep into its soul.

Gold-01 couldn't feel Gold-10's mind either. Gold-01 tried not to think about that.

The squadron had been drawn out of position trying to save one of their own, and now they were paying the price. Two riders dead. Three dragons slain. They couldn't afford these losses. Not with the siege of Blackedge still ongoing.

There will come a time, Henry. There will come a time when you must sever your arm to save your body. It will maim your heart forever. But you must do it. This is the darkest part of being a leader. This is where Pathbearers are broken. Master Irene's voice surfaced in his mind.

He hadn't thought about her in years. He hadn't thought about her since the Stygia Raid... Since he shot her down over the skies of Vulketh. He tried not to think about her. Gold-01 thought she was his wound, his severed limb.

He was wrong. This was the moment he cut off his arm and mauled his heart. This was the time he sacrificed one to save the others.

"Gold-10... I'm sorry..." Gold-01 said. He didn't realize when he started crying, or if Gold-10 could hear him, or if—

It didn't matter. He cycled his Necro-Thrower and fired. He struck Gold-10's dragon in the back. More corrosive foulness consumed the dragon's golden scales. Gold-01 felt like he just tore out his own heart. "Gold-Primary. Break contact and fire on Gold-10!"

A flood of reluctance and trauma washed through Gold-01 from the other riders, but they listened. They were good riders. Good soldiers. They knew. They just refused to accept until he ordered it. They had fought together for years, starting as little more than wyvern riders. The dragons had been with them for a decade as well. Gold-Primary was a squadron of Master-Tier riders, and now, for the first time in years, they were going to need to train new riders to make up for their casualties.

The massive blade swaying back and forth through the air shrank until it vanished from sight. A half-second thereafter, a small shape exploded out from inside Gold-10's dragon and slammed hard into Gold-06's dragon. 10's dragon came apart in a blossom of viscera and decaying flesh—but the pieces promptly combusted and dissolved as the small shape accelerated even faster. It tore clean through the neck of Gold-06's dragon—beheading it before Gold-01 could react.

Only then did Gold-01's Divination Matrix respond. It highlighted the target. They glowed a deep violet, and Gold-01 snarled as he tried to turn his Necro-Thrower on the target.

It's him! Gold-01's mind screamed. The enemy Hero—

He didn't get to finish that thought, as everything around the target blasted outward in a cataclysmic explosion. A wall of flame and force crashed into Gold-01 just as he fired his Necro-Thrower. His dragon was launched backward. One of its wings dislocated from the sheer whiplash. The beam cut skyward and struck nothing, and that was the last thing Gold-01 saw as another three waves of crushing force smashed into his dragon and drove him headfirst into the ceiling of his capsule.

4 seconds ago...

Strider of the Unbending Path 123 > 124

Adamantine Adaption 156 > 157

Inertial Overdrive 106 > 107

It didn't take long for the dragon to start rotting around Shiv. Necromancy was horrifying in the way that it made you less with each hit it inflicted. Gold tarnished and withered into flaking blackness. Organs shriveled. Blood dissolved. Bones crumbled away into ash. In seconds, Shiv's meat shield started decomposing around him, coming apart in body and spirit. He'd expected them to hold back a little longer since he was effectively using one of their own as a shield, but once again, the other riders adapted.

And that was the biggest difference between these Pathbearers and the ones he'd fought before. They learned. Constantly. This entire exchange wasn't a clash of force against force or strength on strength, but choice against choice. Shiv had his speed and surprise going for him. They had numbers, Chronomancy, and Necromancy.

Necromancy that was about to punch through the flesh of this dragon and set Shiv off like a mana bomb at any point.

Guess we all have to make ugly choices at some point, Shiv thought. Now. Time for me to make mine.

He cast his Skysplitter in the distance again. He didn't care where it went, so long as it was away from here. The glow of Necromancy faded, but the dragon was still falling apart around Shiv. Time for a new plan: Shove myself down another dragon's throat after stunning them with my inertial detonation. Yeah, this is gonna hurt...

Shiv spiked his gravitic field fifty times. He started breaking apart like the dragon he hid within. The air around him exploded with fire and displaced kinetic energy, and he burst out from the dragon's body in a rush of speed. Blood gushed out from his eyes and ears as he sailed through the air toward the densest concentration of dragons. Darkness and crimson danced around the corners of his vision. Shiv groaned as he fought hard not to black out.

Five dragons reacted to his sudden appearance. He could see the Necromancy crystals on their backs brightening. But that was as far as they got. Shiv burst his inertial sheath. A solid wall of destruction surged out in a rippling wave. The sheer amount of force released also folded Shiv in half at the point of his lower spine.

The Deathless let out a ragged cry of pain—and then reverted time to a second ago and repeated the same action.

He detonated his sheath again. His body broke again. His temporal shell reached the breaking point. He cast himself back in time once more. Shiv shot forward and burst his sheath again. His Chronomancy broke, but before it came apart entirely, he activated his Outside Context Problem.

A rush of coldness passed through Shiv as he focused on his senses. Everything around him was on fire. His inertial detonation spread wider and wider, displacing clouds and dragging dragons along in its wake. Shiv himself barely looked human—felt more like a mangled bag of flesh containing shards of displaced bone. He was so badly injured that if his Song of the Vigilant wasn't active, he wouldn't have been able to finish the spell.

A Woundeater passed through him, swallowing injury after injury as his body snapped back into shape. Shiv let out a slight groan as he looked around. The time dragons had been ragdolled in different directions. Most of them seemed to have broken wings. A few weren't responsive at all. It was a testament to just how tough they were that they didn't die outright. Maybe the same couldn't be said for the riders.

The warrior in Shiv called out to him, demanded that he keep pursuing them—that he finish off each and every one now that they were scattered and vulnerable. But he could hear Adam's voice in the back of his head. Uva's, too. The Necrotechs had responded fast, and if they could send out one team of dragons this quickly, they could unleash another.

Time to vanish, Shiv decided, triggering his Skysplitter's Spatial Anchor. He teleported to the blade in a blast of displaced space and promptly smashed through a verdant hill. Grass and dirt exploded over Shiv, and he spiked his gravitic field up to right himself. As he sailed through the air, his helmet broke apart, and Shiv cursed.

Time to replace this suit of armor too. It's done. The inertial detonations are hell on my Toughness, but damn if they aren't powerful as all hell.

He triggered Chameleon and Silhouette as he decelerated to avoid environmental destruction and kept flying low, waiting to see if dragons would catch sight of him again.

Seconds passed. Everything was quiet. Shiv let out a breath and came to a stop. “Well. Guess I finally managed to lose them. Time to keep—”

Just then, he caught something in the corner of his vision. A star glowing brighter than most, just over the Tidewall.

He turned. The star grew even brighter. Shiv's eyebrows made it halfway up his forehead before what he'd assumed to be a star arrived right in front of his face, and then he found out how it felt for one's body to be reduced to its component atoms.

Revenant 41 > 42

Shiv blinked as he respawned.

The world was burning. A column of blinding fire drilled clean through the land and swelled out, scouring everything between the clouds and the earth to the edge of the horizon and beyond.

Everything in sight faded into the blinding dawn of an exploding sun.

Shiv's mind remained blank for a moment. Then the cold started getting to him. He needed to drain vitality, but—

What the fuck was that? What in the Broken Moon just killed me?

10 seconds ago...

Roland's eyes narrowed as he watched the figure emerge victorious from their battle against the squadron of dragons. A massive shroud of destruction was birthed from their body every time they released all the kinetic energy they had built up. Roland wasn't exactly sure what kind of Reflexes Skill that was, but he knew it was Heroic-Tier at the least, and that this Pathbearer wasn't friendly to Sullain.

They were fighting the vicar's patrols, tearing across the land and air like a fast-moving mana bomb. It was like they were deliberately drawing attention, trying to provoke notice.

They're a distraction, Roland realized. I knew they couldn't be operating alone. It wouldn't make sense. Singleton Pathbearers are usually Shadows or Assassins. This one seems like a Heroic-Tier Vanguard...

The Pathbearer vanished from the sky just then. Roland thought they used their Chronomancy again, but the Town Lord noticed a pulse of spatial magic about four kilometers away. He sent one of his arrows on approach. Whoever this stranger was, he wanted a better look at them. If this was another one of the Inquisition's special operatives, he wanted to know why—

Then, as the unknown Pathbearer launched themselves across the land with a pulse of force, their skull-shaped helmet broke apart.

Roland's heart skipped a beat. His stomach rebelled. For a moment, he thought he was looking at Harlon—but no. Harlon was dead. This was his son. This was the Omenborn born from the ritual that killed Rose, that took from Roland his daughter.

This was Tanner Lowe. The boy who called himself Shiv.

He looked different. His irises were a brilliant white now, and he was practically twice as large as he used to be. He had skills. Skills meant a Path. And that meant the reports—his Biomancers claimed to have recovered multiple bodies that belonged to Shiv, but Roland had been occupied every second since the battle had begun—he had constantly—

Roland's heart plunged into an abyss of cold terror. This couldn't be happening. He refused to even entertain the idea.

Tanner was accelerating toward the Tidewall, clad in the vestiges of death. That meant—that could only mean one thing—

Necrotech. But how? Could he have been in league with the Necrotechs all this time? Another Abyssal Lord trying to undercut Sullain?

Roland gritted his teeth. He couldn't allow this. He wouldn't accept this.

The Starhawk's light spilled out from Roland as his eyes began to glow. He had been a fool. Too soft. Too weak. Too—he just couldn't do it. He couldn't just murder a child. And now he was paying for his mercy. Now, the Omenborn was on his way home.

"No," Roland growled.

"Lord Arrow?" his personal Psychomancer said, taken aback by the sudden spike of terror she sensed in the Town Lord.

Roland's soul was his arrows. But they also contained the boundless power of the Starhawk. The promise of a dying star's last glow. And in a fit of dread and fury, Roland primed 244 of these arrows and directed them down to Old Santabar.

And so they fell. Like shooting stars, traveling from the upper atmosphere to the earth in an instant. He felt three of the Solar arrows hit Tanner. He felt the Omenborn's body break, burn—but also endure for a moment. Roland's eyes widened.

Adamantine Adaption?

Then the other 241 arrows crashed into him.

In a flare of radiance likely visible all the way from the broken fragments of the moon, half of the Old Santabar region vanished beneath a blinding pillar of purifying flame.

Roland fell to his knees, more emotionally shaken than magically exhausted. As his personal guard and aides rushed to help him back up, he wasn't focused on them. Rather, he stared down from the other arrows he left in the void, and he watched. Watched and made sure there was nothing left of the Omenborn. He watched.

And kept watching...

He has to be dead... He has to be... He has to be...

Chapter 113 (I) Block

Let me tell you something, Sijik. I hate Roland Arrow. I've hated him since the first time I laid eyes on him. I hated him when we were in the same class. I hated him every time he humiliated me during sparring. Every time he humiliated me during small group battles. Every time he humiliated me during the mock war engagements we waged over and over again.

You cannot conceive of the depths of my loathing. You cannot understand what it is like to hate someone so much that it builds up like sediment in your bones, like particulates in your blood.

You wake up hating this person. You sleep hating this person. You eat with the weight of this person on your tongue.

Hate, hate, hate is what I feel for Roland Arrow. But I also understand him. I respect his skill and the danger he poses as a Pathbearer. So no, we're not just going to walk up to Blackedge and simply

demand that he drop the wards and let us in. We are not going to send 100,000 Pathbearers to their deaths against the single most dangerous man I've ever seen pick up a bow.

Do you know how brutally Roland Arrow humiliated our combat instructor? The man was a Master. The man was a legend in his time. A legend in his own mind. And he resigned. He resigned before the semester was over. Roland made a mockery of him.

You were not there at the Battle of the Eclipse. At the battle above the chasm. But I was. For all my hatred, for all Roland represents, for the one he serves, for his arrogance, his hubris, for leading my wife and my brother into a slaughter in the depths that they never came back from, for a war that should have never taken place, for an Ascendant that seeks to betray us all, I understand what he truly is. I understand the threat he poses. I understand that he is a Pathbearer without peers.

Never bring up this suggestion to me again, Inquisitor. You may not value the lives of these Pathbearers, but I do.

I come intending to inflict righteous retribution on Roland Arrow. And I will give anything to see it done. I will give anything to see my daughter retrieved. I will give anything, anything. I will sacrifice myself, not them. Not meaninglessly. They are good men. Good women. Good bots. And you will not waste their lives this way. We do this strategically. Carefully. Properly.

I will give Roland Arrow nothing for free. Not another second of my time. And not the lives of the lowliest mercenary.

-City Lord Havel Van Stormhalt to Inquisitor Sijk

Gold-01 awoke with a scream. His flesh was frying, his legs felt like they were folded the wrong way, his tailbone felt like someone had been working on it all day with a chisel, and his insides—Great One—his insides felt like they were liquid. Searing pain flowed through his body, and he wished he were unconscious again. As his vision stopped spinning, he realized the inside of his capsule was glowing with heat. No wonder he was in so much pain; he was being cooked alive.

Veins of the Stormdiver 88 > 91

"Godsdamn it," Gold-01 growled. He drew upon his feeble Aeromancy, and he circulated a gust of wind around himself. It was moments like these that he wished he had Cryomancy; moments like these, he wished he'd also devoted more time to improving his Toughness. He tried to unbuckle himself from the capsule, only to let out another bark of pure agony as his broken ribs sank into a ruptured organ.

"Great One," Gold-01 whimpered. His words slurred into incoherence. His mind reeled. How did he end up here? What just... And then his memories returned to him. It was a massive blast that smashed into him and his dragon, that tore him across the world, that drove his head high against the ceiling of his capsule, knocking him out.

He ripped off his flight mask and felt at his head.

Blood trickled down Gold-01's skull, soaking his hair red. But that was how he knew he was still alive. Gritting his teeth, Gold-01 fought through the pain and reached into the emergency compartment within his capsule. It was badly dented. The capsule was practically curved in on itself. The left side of the entire compartment was folded inward.

Gold-01 simply stared in disbelief. He didn't know anything that could have done that to Adamantine. Frankly, he didn't believe it was possible. Adamantine was supposedly unbreakable for most Pathbearers. But he had been fighting a Hero. A Hero at the very least.

And then other memories returned to Gold-01. Torturous memories. Memories of his squadron being cut down. Of other dragons taking cuts along their neck, blood gushing out from their eyes and jaws as they fell. He remembered the dragons caught in the immediate vicinity of the blast. He was sure that he saw one vanish altogether, flayed out of existence by the blast. The others were flung across the world, cast like insects caught in the grip of a hurricane. And his comrades, his fellow riders... He didn't know what their condition was. He needed to find them.

But first... Gold-01 bit back a snarl as he finally managed to open the compartment. He pulled the dented cover off, but the sudden motion made him double over, and he puked all over himself. Blood mingled with half-digested chunks of this morning's breakfast. He was bleeding internally.

He needed the potion. He needed it now. He picked up the healing potion, and he found his hands were shaking too much. He controlled his movements. He bade his quivering fingers to slow. He remembered drinking potions before while badly injured during a prior mission, spilling half of them down his chin and chest, wasting precious resources. Gold-01 focused. Gold-01 carefully placed it against his lip and tipped it backward.

The potion was foul-tasting. It was like what one might think a slug would taste like if it had been ground up and laced with bitter acid. The healing potion crawled down his throat, making him choke for a moment just from how thick and viscous it was. But slowly, it worked through his body. It flowed through his veins, and his natural healing accelerated dramatically. That didn't do much for the pain, but he did feel parts of him knit back together inside.

Wounds closed, and there was a gradual itch that grew and grew, an itch he knew to be the mending of vessels and the regeneration of his bones. The broken pieces that still remained inside of him would need to be extracted by a Biomancer later, as that was to take place alongside a cancer examination. No matter how badly wounded he was, he gave it good odds that he would probably develop more than a few tumors.

He leaned back against his seat, then hissed as the heat returned. The moment without the Aeromancy circulating the air returned the temperature within his capsule to an unbearable level. He needed to get out. He wouldn't be able to rest inside here. So, Gold-01 reached down. He found the latch meant to pop the top part of his capsule. He pulled. The latch was stuck. Gold-01 let out a whimper. He didn't know if he had the strength.

But then he mustered himself. He mustered himself as he remembered what Master Irene said to him. If you don't have the strength, you will die. You will die alone. You will drown inside your capsule. You will be pulled under the water while riding in your harness. You will die, and you will fail your squadron. Remember this. If you do die, die making a difference. Do not let the Great Enemy take you freely. Don't let your death become an avalanche.

"It won't," Gold-01 said. He was replying to a woman long dead. A woman he'd killed. But he still had to tell someone. He still needed to talk to someone. Gods, he wished she were here. He drew in a deep breath. His lungs ached. The hyperheated air burned his lungs and boiled his stomach, but he needed the oxygen for one last burst of strength.

Gold-01 reached down with both hands. He pulled hard. The latch clicked, and then something inside it broke. But just as hopelessness threatened to overtake him, the top part of the capsule burst off. The bolts holding it in place shot into the air. But with how deformed it was, it snapped off to the side and clipped Gold-01 along the left temple, opening a gash, and it slammed him face-first against a piece of hyperheated metal. Gold-01 let out a shriek. He pulled his face back. But the damage was done. It seared clean through his flesh, parting skin, muscle, and touching bone. He let out another groan, a groan that almost became a sob until he mastered himself.

"Can't touch it," Gold-01 slurred. He slowly rose on shaking feet, and he clambered upon his seat as he stared out over the blasted horizon. Gold-01's eyes widened. "This... Am I in hell?" he whispered to himself, and it was a proper question, for the horizon of Old Santabar had been changed.

Where there were once rolling fields of green and mountains running across the land like frozen tidal waves, ranging for kilometers beyond, now Old Santabar resembled a desert of glass. Ash rained down

from above. A shroud of smog blocked the sky and the fragments of the Great One's egg from Gold-01's gaze. Up to his right, he saw the landscape running downward in a gleaming slope, a slope that curved and rose again. He was in a crater.

A crater.

Gold-01's mind spun. The blast the Heroic-Tier Pathbearer unleashed earlier had been massive. But could it have been this massive? Could they have had this much power within them? If they did, then what was the point of the chase? What was the point of any of it? If they were that powerful, why didn't he just finish them all instantly? Why bother with the chase at all? Just who the fuck was he?

Gold-01 felt sick. Did the enemy Hero do all that just to toy with him? Toy with the riders who fought alongside Gold-01? What was this? What kind of monster did the System make Gold-01 face?

Gold-01 looked out across the desolate wasteland, and he cast his Psychomancy mana outward, a pulsing ripple that spread far. "This is Gold-01," he stammered mentally. He watched as his translucent mana crawled across the land. It kept going, but he couldn't see anything for miles. He couldn't see.

And then he did see something. He saw something he didn't want to see—he didn't want to accept.

He saw the glistening golden scales of a dragon, but it was half-melted, half-fused to the ground. Its lower body was gone. Just gone. There were no remains. No blood. It just ended. Fused into the glassed ground, the dragon's eye sockets were hollow. There were small embers burning within, and smoke seeped out between its remaining scales as well.

Its ribs were showing, and on its back was a capsule, or what remained of one. It was little more than a melted funnel. Nothing but metal slag. If there had been anyone inside, there wasn't anymore.

"Hello?" Gold-01 called out. Psychomancy pulsed out from him. He strained his Master-Tier Psychomancy as hard as he could. "Hello? Anyone? Gold Primary? Anyone? Gold-02? Gold-7? Gold-03?"

He was calling out to dead comrades now. And Gold-01 felt himself on the verge of breaking. He prided himself on his focus and iron will. But the hell before him, the sudden isolation, it was getting to be too much, too much. And then as he turned, he saw something else, a jutting curve, a series of ribs folded over his capsule. And then Gold-01 remembered. He remembered that he had a dragon too.

His dragon was gone. His dragon was... He found himself staring at three broken ribs, three broken ribs that were burned, scorched clean. Suddenly Gold-01 looked away, sinking fully into shell shock, doing everything he could not to consider his own dragon's death. The dragon he had fought alongside for so long. His dragon's name... His...

Gold-01 crushed that chain of thought with his Psychomancy. A trail of drool dribbled down his chin as he took his first shaky step out of his capsule. As his foot greeted the ground, a series of cracks sounded, traveling from his ankle up through his body. He could feel the broken bones left within him rattling. Gold-01 flinched at the sensation. He cast out another pulse of Psychomancy.

"Anyone, please, someone respond! Fucking someone, someone, somebody!" Gold-01 was screaming at the end. He wasn't just calling out with his mind. He was calling out with his voice, his hoarse, burned voice. "Central! Gold-02! Anyone! Anyone!"

He fell to his knees, and the glass was burning hot as well. It seared his flesh even through the enchanted leathers he was wearing. It was supposed to modulate his temperature to suit any environment. This was an environment that no one could survive in. Gold-01 held himself. He hugged

himself as he swept his gaze across the land. He hugged himself as he strained his Awareness, trying—hoping that there was another survivor, as he looked, as he searched for any sign of life, any sign of life at all.

But there was nothing, nothing but him and a half-melted dragon four hundred meters away. Nothing. And it was all because of one Pathbearer, that Hero, that cruel monster that toyed with him and butchered his fellow riders.

Gold-01 slowly lifted his head. His sorrow was overwhelming, but deep in the waters of his misery came another emotion, came a dark and building sensation. Gold-01 didn't know hate before this moment. Gold-01 didn't know the urge to commit himself completely to a personal quest, to give everything he had to murder one other man, one other Pathbearer, one that took so much from him—

Gold-01 cried out as he felt his life force get ripped out of his body.

The world around him blurred and went gray, and the remnants of his strength whistled out of him like air from a balloon.

"Godsdamn, I got lucky," Shiv thought to himself as he drained the only surviving rider he could find. "And godsdamn, is this poor bastard unlucky." As the rider spasmed, Shiv genuinely felt bad for him.

Judging from the few dragon bones remaining nearby, this guy likely survived because his dragon crashed back-first into the ground, pinning his capsule in place, while the dragon took the brunt of the blast.

Adamantine Adaption 157 > 163

Woundeater 85 > 86

Strider of the Unbending Path 124 > 128

Inertial Overdrive 107 > 111

And what a hell of a damn blast that was. Shiv barely felt any pain when he died earlier. His Adamantine Adaption responded to the first few hits, but all the ones that followed were immediately too much. He had no chance of surviving that, not a single damn bit.

That was probably why he gained so much of a massive leap in terms of Adamantine Adaption. But why did he get a leap for Strider as well? For Inertial Overdrive?

Shiv's paranoia was at an all-time high as the rider groaned and began to seize. The Deathless kept his gaze high, staring at the skies above, waiting for another salvo to descend to obliterate the land once more.

If that attack came from Vicar Sullain or his Necrotechs, Shiv didn't know what to say. Their dragons were here, as were their observation posts. If they had that kind of firepower, why didn't they use it on Blackedge? Why were they wasting it on him? Was he that much of a threat? Did they really have that powerful and potent of an arsenal that they could just casually expend?

Parts of him wanted to say no, but after what he'd just experienced...

Shiv felt a shudder run through his body. The Abyss had been portrayed as a place of deep mystery, of nightmarish danger. Shiv believed that for most of his life, he never doubted the fact that few Pathbearers had managed to venture more than a few kilometers deep than the chasm.

But after less than ten minutes on the surface, he'd encountered an observation post, was ambushed by ten time-jumping dragons and their riders, and then was immediately killed as a series of arrows infused with what felt like the power of small stars. Arrows that turned his body from a matter of biology into a function of physics.

A shadowy cocoon formed over Shiv as the last trickles of vitality were siphoned out from the unfortunate rider.

Yeah, sorry about that, Shiv thought. The rider went limp. He crashed down against the glassed surface of the ground that used to be rolling hills, soil, dirt, nature, and all that. Now, now it was just a blasted wasteland. Shiv had made some decimated wastelands in his own time, but this was on another level.

If Inertial Overdrive is Heroic, then is this the power of a Legendary Pathbearer? Shiv thought to himself. The revelation was as terrifying as it was inspiring. If this was what lay ahead, well, he couldn't wait to be able to break things on this magnitude.

Chapter 113 (II) Block

Shiv paused as he considered what his skills would be like when they became Legendary. Inertial Overdrive came with its own consequences. He became aware of one of those consequences when he

overspiked himself right beside the rider he'd wanted to take hostage. Shiv just wanted to move faster, but the poor High Adept dissolved into nothing but bloody mist.

Should have shoved the felling bastard into my cape. Still, Shiv thought, this was an awesome display of destruction. I just hope I don't experience it myself again. I still need to get to the city. How the hell am I going to do that? He looked up at the sky and frowned. Maybe I should just keep traveling underground, just keep going slowly for a long while. Maybe...

And just then, a Veilpiercer slammed down on the ground next to him. A dimensional rift opened, and Adam zipped through. He came to a sudden halt immediately beside Shiv to see the Deathless fusing a new set of armor around himself.

"Adam," Shiv breathed. He gestured at the surrounding devastation and winced. "I didn't get hit by Necromancy. I was trying to—"

"I know," Adam said. "That was Father."

Shiv's eyes widened. "What?"

"That was my father," Adam repeated, his heart pounding fast. "I saw the same skill recorded in the Educator's tome. I saw..." Adam trailed off. "This was done by my father. I'm sure of it. I was—I barely managed to avoid it by dashing back into my rift. But this was—"

His eyes widened. He looked past Shiv, and then he turned as well. There came a flash of color from the dense blanket of ash and smog above them. There came a blinding pulse. Just then, a brilliant needle

tore through the clouds. It was followed by a few hundred other needles. No, not needles, arrows. They zipped across space in a blinding instant. Shiv activated his temporal shell.

Time froze. Most of the arrows stopped. Some of them kept going.

The arrows that hunted him still were golden, and they tore across frozen time at twice the speed Shiv could move. He only managed ten spikes before they reappeared around him. The arrows collapsed around his person, and they came within a centimeter from striking—when they suddenly stopped.

Because they lost track of Shiv's existence.

Outside Context Problem 60 > 61

"Fucking Roland," Shiv snarled. "I knew he was planning to do this shit."

"Roland..." Rose breathed. "Oh, my love."

Shiv shot her an annoyed glare, but then noticed how one of the arrows turned and faced Adam.

Roland's trance broke. He took a moment to focus—to truly observe the other Pathbearer and—

Roland gasped and stumbled back. His guard captain caught him before he could fall.

Adam? My son. I almost just killed my own son... Why is he there? How is he here? Why did I fire at him?

An ill feeling fell over Roland, but just then, a massive shape twisted over the sky, its mouth opening a thousand times over like an impossible fractal as it descended to swallow Blackedge whole. It crashed down against the town's wards, and some of the spell patterns flickered out.

Roland saw some of the town's Dynamancers collapse as they struggled against the eldritch beast's weight. They stood on the borders of Blackedge, and they strained themselves to the limit and beyond. They needed him. He couldn't afford to be distracted. Not now.

Roland hissed and took more levels out of his Toughness, Navigation, and Memory Skills, dedicating them to his Parallel Thinking.

Parallel Thinking 81 > 201 (Skill Evolution Imminent)

Skill Evolution: Parallel Thinking (Adept) > Stacked Consciousness (Heroic)

Suddenly, he could focus on multiple things at the same time. And he nearly dropped dead as his organs started failing from overstrain.

“Biomancers,” Roland gasped. “Attend me.”

Shiv let time resume as the arrows pulled away from him. Adam stared at them for a moment, and he swallowed.

“Father?” Adam said.

One of the arrows shivered in the air, and then it motioned a nod.

The Young Lord bit his lip. And Shiv started getting cold again. He immediately positioned himself behind Adam, drew in a steady breath, and glared at Rose.

“If he shoots me and kills Adam, you'll be my witness.”

Rose frowned at him. “Roland would never harm our boy.”

“Yeah, well, I’m here right now, so we can see if he wants Adam alive more than he wants me dead.”

Shiv re-emerged into existence. The arrows around him flinched in a surprisingly human way.

“Shiv?” Adam breathed. He did a double-take just as he remembered Shiv’s existence. “What are you—”

“What?” Roland spat. He must’ve been going insane. A dying shriek came from the massive eldritch titan as a flood of brilliant arrows tore it apart from the inside. But while he handled the monster, the Omenborn... How did I lose track of the Omenborn?

For a second, it was like... like he didn’t exist at all...

Shiv stepped behind Adam with his hands high. “Don’t godsdamned shoot me, Roland. Or you might cook your precious boy too.”

Adam noticed Shiv maneuvering behind, and he scowled at the Deathless. “Really?” he breathed.

“Yeah, really,” Shiv growled. As he looked at the many arrows, Shiv held up a finger, one in particular.

"Shiv," Adam hissed.

"What?" Shiv growled. "Your dad felling smote me from existence using the power of the sun. I'm allowed to be a little bit pissed off." One of the arrows drew a little closer to Shiv, and he immediately ducked behind Adam.

"Shiv, there's no point to this—"

"If he wants to blow me up again, I'm going to have to rely on your Legendary armor of unbreakable nepotism. I'm not taking that shit to the face again."

"I thought you enjoyed dying."

"Yeah, when I have someone to drain. Who was I going to drain if I didn't come upon that unlucky asshole over here?" Shiv said, gesturing at the dead rider.

"Me, you idiot," Adam breathed. Shiv paused. Adam folded his arms. And he looked slightly embarrassed. "I wouldn't have just let you vanish from existence. That's the entire reason I came. I rushed over because I thought there weren't any survivors."

Shiv stared at Adam for a moment. Then he grunted awkwardly. "Yeah. Uh. Yeah, I guess. I guess that's right. So, uh, what the hells do we do now?"

"Now?" Adam stared at his father's arrows. "Now we..." And then the arrows receded. They shot back into the sky, moving so fast that Shiv could barely keep track of them. Barely. But as an experiment, he spiked his field more than a few times. Adam let out a cry as the force swept over him. Shiv went faster, faster. He spiked himself over sixty times.

His body was on the verge of breaking apart in an instant. His heart burst open, and Shiv cast himself back in time a second. He undid all his spikes of gravity. He returned to an unmoving state. His wounds were gone as well.

The arrows were still more than a little faster than he was while he was near death.

What the hell kind of monster are you, Roland? Shiv thought to himself. As he considered that question, he clenched his fists and his fingers tapped on his blade. Whatever kind of monster you are, though, I'm still coming for your ass.

One of the arrows slipped back through the clouds as if threatening Shiv, and he ducked behind Adam again. The arrow retreated once more.

"Yeah, that's right, piss off, asshole," Shiv growled.

"My father is not being an asshole," Adam snarled. His eyebrows were furrowed, small, patchy arcs of red hair climbing towards his forehead. "He clearly had a good reason to shoot at you, and... and..."

"And what kind of reason was that?" Shiv spat. "I was trying to get away from the dragon cavalry—I did manage to get away from the dragons. I avoided all those beams of Necromancy just for him to obliterate me and an entire section of the landscape. Actually, if he could do that, no wonder he's been holding off Sullain so long. No wonder he's been able to defend Blackedge for two weeks on his own. He doesn't need us! Let's go back to the gate. Let's close it and just wait for him to win on his own while we kick up our feet!"

Adam took a step toward Shiv, and his eyes simmered with unbridled rage at even the suggestion. "We are not doing that," the Gate Lord snarled.

Shiv frowned at Adam, but then he let out a sigh. "Godsdamn it, all right, fine. So, what now?"

"Now we keep going," Adam said. "The observation posts here are either completely destroyed or buried beneath a tide of glass. We have an opening." And Adam held out a hand. "I managed to capture one of their dimensional ships earlier."

"Dimensional ships?" Shiv blinked. "Is that a thing?"

"I don't know exactly what it is. It's a ship that has a dimensional gate. I boarded it. I managed to capture the people aboard it. And then I piloted it back over to our gateway." Adam briefly looked at his current dimensional pathway. It was slowly closing. "What happened just now between you and my father might have been a misunderstanding. Were you wearing your armor?"

"I'm always wearing my armor," Shiv said.

"Were you wearing your helmet?"

"Yeah." Shiv paused. "Well, no, my helmet fell apart in the last fight."

"There we have it," Adam said. "He probably thought you were a Necrotech soldier. Why don't you just change the design of your armor, huh?"

"What do you mean, change the design of my armor?" Shiv folded his arms. "So I'm going to have to change my design just because they happened to copy my style."

"They looked like that first."

"Well, how was I supposed to know that?" Shiv replied.

"It doesn't matter anymore," Adam muttered, waving him off. "He knows now. It won't happen again. Just get moving. We have an opening, and my father's watching us. And since he hasn't struck you again..."

"Yet," Shiv said.

"Yet," Adam begrudgingly agreed, "you can continue on. You can fly. You can reach Blackedge, and you can finish your scouting run. But the fact he can reach us this far is..." Adam narrowed his eyes. "Far beyond Master-Tier."

"Yeah." Shiv shook his head. "More like Legend. Your father's a damned monster. And Adam. I'm still going to kick his ass down the line. For this and everything else. I'm stating it plainly for you. I'm not letting this shit go."

The Gate Lord just stared. "Do you think you even can?"

"I'll just have to keep dying and find out."

Adam scoffed, but he clearly didn't like what Shiv just said. "Go. Go, now. Finish the scouting run."

Shiv let out a sigh. "Fine." But he briefly looked around him. "I'm going to probably take an alternative route instead of going straight over. I expect Sullain's people to come investigating real soon."

"Probably a good expectation," Adam said, nodding. "Alright. Well..." Adam awkwardly looked down and licked his lips, then his expression softened. He promptly patted Shiv on the shoulder. "Glad you're not dead for good."

Shiv chuckled. "Yeah, me too. Thanks for... coming to get me. I appreciate it."

"I'll keep watching you," Adam said, smirking. Then he looked up as well. "More than just me will be watching you now, I think." Adam's expression, however, was wistful, hopeful, even joyful. That wasn't anything Shiv felt towards Roland Arrow.

They parted then. Adam vanished back into his dimensional pathway before it closed entirely, and Shiv launched himself into the air. He pulled his gravitic field, and he flung himself forward, sailing high into the sky.

Trailing particulates of ash washed over his body. But as he accelerated, they burst apart, and as he climbed his Inertial Overdrive, he thundered with energy. Soon, the horizon blurred towards Shiv, and his bones began to fracture. But he needed to get out of here. Anxiety built up inside him like a lump. It grew more and more painful, tighter with every second.

He waited for Roland to strike him down after all, now that Adam was gone. He waited for another of the arrows to descend from above. He waited, and Shiv prepared to spike himself more than ever. He tried to trigger one of the plagues he had stored in his body, but then he realized that piece was lodged in his old corpse.

Shit, Shiv thought to himself, I really need to figure out how to give myself diseases without using the Court Leviathan as a flesh donor..

And as he burst through a layer of blackened clouds, a cocoon of searing heat and breaking ash peeled away from him like surface tension. Once more, the naked night sky greeted him. The glistening shards of the moon danced above, and in the distance, brilliant gems flashed and dimmed. Perhaps they were true stars, perhaps they were more of Roland's arrows. With how many scintillating constellations there were blanketing the sky above, pockmarked with clouds, Shiv couldn't be sure.

"Hey, Roland," he cried out, "if you're listening to me right now, asshole, I'm not here to kill you or anything. The Omenborn Curse died the day I did on Blackedge. You're welcome for me dying to protect the town, by the way. You're also welcome for me helping your son out while you were sitting on your ass here for weeks. I guess you couldn't spare a few arrows for your own boy."

A part of Shiv knew he was being petulant, foolish, even, for taunting someone so powerful for no real reason. But he couldn't let it go. The bastard just blew him to pieces. Shiv didn't even have a chance to defend himself.

Master Roland Arrow... Shiv sighed. He imagined himself having good odds in a fight against just about any Master-Tier Pathbearer right now. Shiv thought he was going to show Roland the what-for when he got his Momentum Core, but now...

Shiv couldn't help but laugh. He had been delusional, and Roland Arrow was bullshit. If he tried fighting Roland Arrow now, he would get killed in an instant.

But I'm still coming for your ass, Shiv thought to himself. I am going to punch you in the face, Roland. I am going to beat your ass someday. We're going to have it out.

And then Shiv detonated his inertial sheath for the first time as he sped toward the Tidewall, toward Lost Angeles, toward a fast-approaching horizon.

Back at Blackedge, atop Starhawk's Perch, Roland Arrow was shaking. The bulk of his minds fought on. The bulk of his minds were still dedicated to defense, to bombarding the literal tide of eldritch entities Vicar Sullain had summoned today. They were new creatures on the field; strange, sinuous nightmares that consumed pockets of space.

And from those pockets leaked more of the Outside. More of the Outside that spontaneously died as Chronomancy arrows exploded into existence and lit up the night.

The System allowed the eldritch in right now for some reason. The System wanted the vicar to have this power. Most mages—even Heroic or Legendary Dimensionalists—couldn't reach the Outside so easily.

Something was happening. The world was scheming for a grander war. Just like it always was.

But a part of Roland, that very foundation of who he was, that small bit of him that was utterly human, knelt within his personal chamber, shaking. Knelt as his Psychomancer tried to hopelessly fix whatever was broken inside of him, as his Biomancers gave what little bit of magic they had left to keep his heart from stopping.

"It's not you," Roland whispered, "it's not you, it's not me, it's not..."

"My Lord, my Lord," Chris, his personal Psychomancer, breathed. "What's wrong? What's happened? What have you seen?"

He stared at her. His mouth opened and closed several times, but even as he stared at her, he wasn't staring at her. He was staring at another scene. He was staring at his son standing next to the Omenborn...

Harlon's son... Vera's son.

Tanner. Tanner was beside Adam. And they looked...

They looked just like Harlon and Roland so many years ago. The thought almost made him throw up. It was like a taunt inflicted across history.

And Roland couldn't take it. He shouldn't remember their faces. He shouldn't remember—

"Chris," Roland whispered. "The memory blocks you put in me have broken. I remember his face again. I remember her face again... I remember..."

Chris paled. "My Lord, I—Forgive me, this—"

Roland clenched his jaw and let out a breath. "My son is coming home to aid us, and I think our doom might be coming with him." He closed his eyes and looked up. Starhawk, is this the aid you promised me? Why? Why him...

Chapter 114 (I) Scouting

It helps to understand the battlefield as a living thing when you are campaigning in a field.

Scouts, Assassins, Thieves—these are your diagnosticians. These are your first resorts. They are the ones you deploy to properly understand the conditions of the battlegrounds, the environment, what is hidden, and what is seen. More importantly, these are the ones you use to detect the pathogens, the diseases that you must treat.

What are the diseases? They are structural abnormalities and functional maladies that prevent you from getting your desired outcome. The battlefield is a living thing, and that living thing is shaped to the nature of your victory. Anything that denies that is a disease.

But this is a clever disease; it is an adaptive disease. It is a disease that is much like you, that understands the nature of conflict. It is a disease that comprehends you the way you understand it, and it will send its own pathogens, mirroring your scouts—your diagnosticians—to identify your structures, to assess you, and to bring you down. And so it becomes a dance of mutual deduction.

First, what do you see of them? What do they see of you? What can you keep hidden? What can they keep hidden? Anything that you show them will be used against you at a later date. They will find a way to adapt to it, to infest it, to turn it against you. And it is your duty to be better at that deep task than they are, to be better at understanding them than they understand themselves. It is this way that the truest victory is ensured.

But do be warned: everything you do, every action you perform, every treatment you administer, the disease will start to learn, and the disease will adapt accordingly. You must be more than a direct adversary. You must be more than clever.

You must learn. Always learn. Let your evolution outpace the disease's mutation.

-Anatomy of a Battlefield, Legendary Surgeon Phillina Washington

The tension never left Shiv; neither did the paranoia. The skies belonged to Roland Arrow, but the horizon? That was anyone's game. As he flung himself again, his gravitic field pulsing wide and splitting the ground beneath him, Shiv strained every one of his senses, keeping an eye out for any incoming attacks.

He was well past the ruins of Old Santabar now. The ground was no longer characterized by curving pits of cracked glass. The Tidewall drew close, but beneath its shadow, there were other mountains, other shapes, and structures. The first buildings of the Lost Angeles ruins appeared behind a series of rolling hills. And just as teleportation anchors, observation posts, and ambush bunkers could be built into mountains, a ruined building could serve much the same purpose without any additional modifications.

As Shiv dashed higher into the air for a heartbeat, he took a peek at the edge of the Lost Angeles sprawl and frowned. There were many, many buildings to worry about. Many points of attack. He had maybe ten kilometers before he crossed over into the periphery of Lost Angeles. That gave him only a couple of seconds to prepare for what was to come.

His Creeping Void was inactive. It hadn't helped him earlier against the dragons and their riders, not truly. They missed a few times as they fired their Necromantic weapons at him, but the blackened patch that spread out from him always hinted at where he was. And what he suspected was some kind of Divination Skill on the end of the riders allowed them to pinpoint him thereafter.

He knew Adam had a Divination skill as well that allowed him to keep track of people, even something like the Recollector. If his enemy had anything like that, Shiv wouldn't be able to avoid them for long.

Stealth and concealment were potent layers to his survivability, but it wasn't a surprise that a proper army had ways to penetrate them.

So he flew low and detonated his sheath regularly. He didn't go as fast as he could because it made turning hard, and right now, he might need more maneuverability than just speed. But he didn't render his inertial sheath inactive altogether. He needed the Reflexes.

Since he emerged from the surface gateway, he spent practically every passing second under attack. Under attack by Necromantic arrows, under attack by Necromantic spells, under attack by Necrotechs specializing in Necromancy—specializing in the very thing that would make Shiv go off like a bomb.

Then, there was Roland Arrow, who didn't need Necromancy to resolve Shiv's existence. Who apparently had infinite arrows hiding just beyond the clouds, waiting to crash down at any moment to glass an entire section of the land.

"What is this bullshit?" Shiv grumbled to himself. Roland Arrow was powerful, more powerful than practically any person Shiv had ever met. Shiv had thought Sir Marikos to be absurdly potent, vaporizing a mountain with a single Pyromancy spell. Roland Arrow could do that without even being present.

The man was in Blackedge—still around fifty kilometers away. Shiv was moving fast, even at the low end of his acceleration, but Roland's arrows crossed over from the void in a scant second. Shiv had to spike his Overdrive to a fatal point just to track the arrows' movements.

The only thing I really have to counter him, Shiv thought, is Outside Context Problem. And I can't use that without draining someone after.

As Shiv continued on, his thoughts briefly drifted as he saw something in the dark. It was a massive, rusted shape sticking out from the Tidewall. The uprooted continental plate rose high like a mountain of mountains, but where it seemed flat and square on the side that faced the Grand Pacific, the part of it pointing toward the land, toward Lost Angeles itself, was jagged with rock and embedded with pieces of metal. Not just pieces of metal, but structures; jutting towers and massive buildings, akin to metallic bones sticking out from dense clumps of stone and soil. There were also vines, patches of vegetation in between, and at the very center, there was a large, dome-shaped thing.

Shiv didn't recognize what it was for a moment, but as he observed it, he realized the dome-shaped object had a large, cracked glass eye at its center, and limbs sticking out from it, kilometer-long appendages of metal that swayed and dangled. It had a drill attached to one of those limbs, or something that looked like a drill at least. Instinct guided Shiv's understanding. This thing had been an automaton, or maybe just a large and complicated machine.

But it didn't resemble any automaton or machine Shiv knew. The bots of today weren't anything close to that size. They would need to advance their skills to an absurd degree to do something like that. The System wouldn't accept it otherwise. So that only meant one thing: the machine he was looking at probably predated the System by a long, long time.

"Who the hells were we?" Shiv wondered. His paranoia was still there, but his curiosity was kindled as well. For all the years he spent hunting vampires in the Lost Angeles ruin, scouring the wrecks and husks of old buildings, finding magazines and trinkets for some customs agents, he always had a feeling he was walking in the shadow of ghosts greater than anything he could ever fathom.

Talking with Can Hu only increased the feeling. And now, an urge came over him... An urge to discover who humanity was, how they achieved such creations even without the aid of the System, and what they had been using machines for in such depths, below the foundations of the continents themselves.

"Who are we?" Shiv asked himself again.

His question was interrupted as he noticed a shimmer on the horizon. Over a series of verdant hills, there was a patch of quivering light. His increased Shadowsense, granted thanks to his improved cape, let him notice the discrepancy. Just then, one of Roland's arrows quickly started circling above as well. Where once those gleaming needles incinerated Shiv and cast him into death, now they highlighted oncoming threats. Oncoming threats that Shiv adapted to immediately.

He'd expected this. It was either another dragon patrol team or perhaps something even worse. Whatever it was, Shiv didn't intend to stick around and fight it. Move, evade, scout, lure out more adversaries, and reach Blackedge—those were his goals right now.

That would help Adam the most, or let them understand the composition of their enemies, the layout of the geography, and plan their coming operations to aid Blackedge.

But he didn't need to do this stupidly. His fight with the dragons had taught him a few things.

First, Divination wasn't perfect. Even if they could eventually pinpoint his location, jumping in time and space with his Skysplitter and his Strider quickly threw them off, at least for a while. Also, casting out his old corpses worked. Usually, someone was looking for something to shoot at, and if he gave them a reason, they would respond to it.

His old bodies were a perfect supplement for his stealth capabilities and formed the foundations of his new strategy. He was more than a brute. He could be tricky, cunning, deceitful. The Deception skill he'd gained was a message from the System, another part of his overall skill set taking shape.

They're coming for me, so I might as well give them something to attack. Something that will pull them out of position and show their defensive and offensive capabilities, he thought.

He accelerated suddenly, blasting across the land as he pulled on his gravitic field twenty times. The ground split apart beneath him. The air flickered as the first embers of combustion danced around his body. A contrail of heat and force followed behind him. And just then, he saw a flash, a flash of corrosive green pulsing just over one of the hills. Shiv grinned. "Here we go."

He stopped time. He charged his gravitic field another thirty times more. His body snapped. His ribs folded inward. Some of his organs were drawn down into his pelvis. The prolapse was painful, but it was also useful. He had chucked out a body from his cape, launching the corpse straight into the ground.

At the same time, he detonated his inertial sheath, discharging all the kinetic energy he had and flinging the body even harder against the parting soil. It was like someone was pressing a massive boulder into sand. A smooth curve carved grooves into the earth, and his corpse was pressed deeper and deeper still.

But then Shiv reverted time. He returned to where he was a few seconds ago, before he accrued all his wounds. He took another route, and as he did, he threw his knife as far as he could, watching it sail into the horizon. The first crack spread across his temporal shell. He let time resume, and a series of blasts followed, cleaving at the horizon and shaking the air where he had been before he stopped time.

Immediately, jet streams of Necromancy struck the ground. They cleaved through the space he was just in as screams of corrosive energy filled the air. Screens of festering decay expanded, and from them, a swelling tide of green, boiling mana swallowed patches of the world.

It was all absolutely wasted.

The Necrotechs missed him by a good 400 meters as he accelerated in a new direction for a few seconds—then teleported to his knife. A few seconds later, the second patch he was at vanished in a storm of Necromancy mana as well.

"Keep moving," Shiv muttered to himself. "Always keep moving."

He stayed as low as he could, but even at his controlled speeds, the ground was being ripped apart. Grass was practically being flayed out from the soil—and then grass was replaced by debris and dust as Shiv entered Lost Angeles.

Shiv counted the seconds, but then he triggered his Outside Context Problem as well. Another spike of cold entered him. He wouldn't be able to do this again until he drained some vitality. That was fine. He exploited this moment to go a bit faster and to throw his knife once more, arcing it over the horizon. He watched it spear through the air and sail past a series of half-collapsed structures, their bones sticking out from the ground like broken incisors.

The Necrotechs might have been hiding among those ruins, but they wouldn't be expecting Shiv to suddenly appear there. He teleported, and as he did, the world seemed calm, but his Biomancy revealed more truth than the eye could see. There were dozens of life forms around him, ones that weren't vermin. They were human, or at least human-like, and they were scattered all around, hidden inside the structures. A few were posted against the windows, and some nested deeper inside.

Shiv considered stopping for a moment to drain some of their vitality, but he didn't.

Instead, as soon as he returned to the world, he resumed his Chronomancy, and he accelerated forward. Same strategy as before. He accelerated sixty times, dashing over and over again until his body was practically coming apart. Then he discharged his kinetic energy.

A bomb went off: a time-frozen bomb set to devastate an entire section of the ruined city. But just then, he reverted time once more, time back to where he had been five seconds ago. His temporal shell cracked again. He let the present return.

Time resumed. Shiv took a new route that arced off at an angle, and he continued along that path, discharging his inertial sheath at the same time that the previous inertial discharge spread across the outer section of Lost Angeles.

The blasts came seconds apart for him, but to the Necrotechs, it must've seemed like a series of mana bombs were going off at the same time. If he was lucky, they would even think artillery was falling from the sky.

Deception 1 > 3

A massive sphere of destruction spread out kilometer by kilometer, ripping the outer section of the ruined city apart. Buildings vanished. Streets shattered. But not six hundred meters away, a smaller detonation happened at the same time. Shiv smirked as he felt his Deception level. He threw his knife and teleported again.

He reappeared deeper within the megacity, and behind him, a hailstorm of Necromancy crashed down, splashing down from where his inertial discharges ballooned outward.

Shiv chucked out one of his corpses just to confuse them more.

He narrowed his eyes at the trail left by a hailstorm of attacks and saw it arcing from the distance, right over the horizon. But that wasn't the only source of the attacks. There were Dimensional rifts that pulsed open in the skies above to unleash a torrent of elemental destruction and other skills.

Dimensionals flooded out from those torrents right after. First came dimensionals of air, near-invisible aside from their vaporous forms and their gleaming, white eyes. Then came dimensionals of flame that

soared through the sky like missiles, their bodies spiral-shaped, their arms numerous and infused with magma. But more than dimensionals, there were other creatures supporting their effort—monsters made of so many mouths layered within other mouths that his head spun from looking at them.

Shiv's mind twisted upon seeing them. Eldritch, he realized. Gods damn it, can't seem to get away from those Outsider shits.

Shiv ignored them. He continued on, deeper into the city. He ignored walls as he sped forth, smashing through buildings. Debris peeled around him; plaster, plastic, glass, and concrete exploded off his armor. Then came the first splash of something wet: blood. Red painted the metallic white of his bone armor, and he knew he'd just killed a Necrotech—another unfortunate bastard pasted for nothing more than being in Shiv's way.

But as soon as he killed them, he halted time. He threw his knife again, but not forward—to his left. He teleported to it instantly, changing his strategy. Shiv didn't know how Divination worked, but randomness clearly threw it off. As he blinked to where his knife was, he spiked himself 70 times, nearly died, discharged his kinetic energy in place, then reverted time two seconds before.

He reappeared in the building, and he dove straight down. As he did, he chunked out another corpse, launching it high into the air. He impacted the earth before his temporal shell cracked. Time resumed.

And the blasts unleashed by his prior inertial discharges surged toward Shiv.

Strider of the Unbending Path 128 > 129

Deception 3 > 6

Tsunamis of heat and force crashed forth. But this was about to be part of Shiv's strategy too. Let's see if I can pull this trick off...

He planted himself in place and increased the size of his Skylitter. It grew a hundred meters, and he slammed its flat side against the oncoming blasts before they could reach him. Shiv's boots sank into the ground. Concrete cracked around his feet. He snarled as he drove his gravitic field against the blast. But he wasn't trying to overpower the discharges—he was trying to redirect them. He angled his blade off by the side. His block turned to a parry. Frictionless Vector activated, and he diverted the blast toward where the bulk of the dimensionals were descending from the sky. An avalanche of shattering devastation cleaved through a series of half-collapsed skyscrapers, and Shiv spiked himself beside the crawling tide of ruin, using it as cover.

Frictionless Vector 61 > 62

He had been considering such a combo before, but he didn't know if it was possible. Now he did. Definitely going to do that again.

Chapter 114 (II) Scouting

Chaos unfolded.

The weaker dimensionals simply vanished. The flame dimensionals were extinguished. The air dimensionals parted into fading mist. The eldritch beings splattered apart but quickly began to reform. Shiv didn't want to deal with that nonsense now. The Outsiders were stunned, and that was all he needed.

What was better was how one of his old corpses sailed through the air, tumbling over and over again. In an instant, he watched as a dozen corrosive arrows smashed into it, blowing apart the body. That made his bone armor decay and wither. Then came a true flood of other attacks. He watched the body ignite with gold mana.

Someone was using Chronomancy on the corpse, pinning it in place, as a series of elemental cataclysms poured down upon it as a dimensional rift opened behind. A flood of flame came first, then a massive anvil shaped from water. Electricity flowed through the water, and then fire returned again, turning the water into steam. This was followed by a massive hammer shaped from Dynamancy, from the power of gravity itself. It smashed the broken, mutilated corpse apart, driving it deep into the ground and devastating the world around Shiv for leagues.

As he shot a brief glance upward, Shiv noticed something curious. Three large airships with rings at their cores trailed over the sprawl's airspace. Within those round circles were shimmering portals of Dimensionality mana.

As the last of the elemental cataclysms faded, Shiv watched as the portals continued to shiver. They were still active. Those must be the dimensional ships Adam talked about. He captured one, but he didn't say anything about knowing what's on the other side. I could take a peek myself. No risk for me. I can root myself in the present. Revert time to where I am. Leave my knife here too...

And it suited his current strategy of confusion and deception. Yeah. Why not. Let's keep them guessing.

Chaos was his ally. His enemies were quick to respond, and while their Divination was potent, it wasn't perfect. It was confused by randomness. And even with all the Necromancy and firepower they had—enough to probably kill Shiv even with his Adamantine Adaption—they couldn't kill what they couldn't hit.

Predictability was a death sentence, and if he gave his enemies time to set up their strategies, he would be facing all manner of spells and skills he had no experience with. That couldn't happen. Everything he did needed to pivot into an attack.

Intellectual offense is defense, Shiv realized.

Philosophy 4 > 5

He froze time and blasted up into the air toward one of the portal ships. A kilometer in the distance, he saw gold-layered figures. Enemy Chronos...

Most of them were eldritch, but there was a squadron of dragons with them as well. Shiv ignored them and accelerated. He had Chameleon active; he triggered his Minor Illusion and threw out a corpse as well. A mirage version of himself blinked into space some two kilometers away.

The dragons responded immediately, firing lances of Necromantic energy. The beams cleaved through the mirage and consumed his actual corpse. Then, as they figured out the Minor Illusion, they turned all their beams on his corpse.

The poor fools must've thought they actually hit him.

Deception 6 > 8

Just before he passed through the dimensional ship, Shiv imprinted a temporal anchor where he was and threw his knife off into the distance. Should be enough as insurance, he thought as he vanished inside the dimensional rift.

A squeezing sensation passed over his body as he felt himself travel through distorted spaces. The transition took another second. Cracks spread around his Chronomantic armor, but Shiv guessed he still had around six seconds.

When he emerged, he found himself inside what looked to be a brightly lit hangar. For a moment, he thought himself inside the dimensional ship, but with how wide everything was and how there were windows on the ceiling that uncannily showed a bright and resplendent courtyard, Shiv realized he was in another place altogether.

Through a massive set of doors, Necrotech soldiers, psionically-leashed primal dragons, lesser vampires, dimensionals, and more were gathered in different formations. The fastest among them noticed something was wrong. But their ability to respond was crippled as Shiv unleashed a flood of Creeping Void and dashed toward the center of the room.

Then, something struck him. A rippling wave of gold smashed against his temporal shell. His armor cracked, nearly breaking off of him entirely.

Wards! Shiv realized. There were Chronomancy wards here, like in the Leviathan.

Another wave shot towards him. Shiv cursed—He spiked his Inertial Overdrive to the limit. As he got to 50 spikes, blood vessels burst in the back of his head, and he triggered his Song of the Vigilant so that he could actually finish the spell before dying of an aneurysm. He discharged his kinetic energy. The room shattered apart. As did almost everything around Shiv. The dragons were blasted back without severe harm—as were some of the stronger Pathbearers.

Being Plaguefueled made a staggering difference.

Adamantine Adaption 163 > 164

He reverted time. His temporal armor shattered. He reappeared right underneath the dimensional ship and caught onto it. He twisted himself above it using his gravity field, and before he could fully gather his bearings, a tide of force slammed into him.

Shiv was launched forward into the ship so hard that he caused its outer shell to fold inward. He tried to respond to the attack—then he realized that it wasn't an attack. It was simply the blast wave from another of his earlier inertial discharges.

Shiv grunted. Chronomancy made things pretty messy, even for him.

He teleported to his blade and abandoned the ship to its fate. Once more, he found himself crashing through the ruins of Lost Angeles.

A massive spread of corrosive energy crawled across the sky above. It was a larger Necromantic explosion than Shiv had expected. But then it kept going, and then droplets started descending like a waterfall... and Shiv's stomach went empty in horror as he realized it actually was a massive waterfall; the corrosion took on the qualities of heavy rain.

"Shit, shit, shit," Shiv snarled to himself. He detonated his sheath again, and he dove inside a building before the first droplets could hit. Outside, needle-thin droplets of Necromantic energy tore holes through the world, stripping chunks of matter and leaving channels of rot lining everything they ate through.

In seconds, the building Shiv hid in began to dissolve. Every droplet of Necromancy left its mark, and soon holes began to appear all around Shiv. He spiked himself ten more times just to get his Reflexes fast enough to avoid the droplets.

What saved him more, however, was his Hydromancy. He could feel them coming, feel the Hydromantic mana infused in the magic. He didn't realize Necromancy could be mixed with Hydromancy this way, but still, there was enough Hydromancy left for him to push the smaller droplets aside.

Shiv tried shaping something of a water-displacing shroud around himself, but he didn't know how; he didn't have nearly enough practice with Hydromancy. So Shiv went down. He plunged into the ground and tore through the earth.

This was the most surefire way to avoid—he crashed head-first into something hard. Something he couldn't just muscle through. Shiv cried out as he felt his body jolt still. Around him, the earth solidified. It turned from soil and rock to something far harder, something of a similar hue to his own body: adamantine.

The alchemization happened in an instant. It spread all around Shiv, and immediately it began closing on him, crushing him. He felt something seize his armor as well, pressing at it, but not fully controlling it. A wave of energy made the ground around him tremble. He realized that he was in the grasp of a Geomancer.

Shiv pushed back with his gravity field, but he couldn't stay here. If they kept him pinned for any longer, they would find him, and they'd kill him with Necromancy or something else. He couldn't risk the Outside Context Problem—not enough vitality. Even if a Necromantic spell hit him, he had a chance of coming out of that simply with an enduring injury rather than a certain death.

But with how cold he felt, he didn't like his odds.

Another second passed. The adamantine walls crashed down on him tightly. Shiv cursed as he actually felt the grinding pressure. Shit. To hells with this. He activated his Chronomancy. His temporal shell hadn't fully regenerated, but it was more than a little intact. Without a good choice, he reverted time to a second ago, to where he was still above ground. He reappeared inside the structure only to find it entirely dissolved.

His mouth dropped open in horror as he found himself trapped under a canopy of falling rain, with a downpour of Necromantic fluid gliding through the air like a shower. He was right in the middle of it. It was this or being held in stasis underground.

There wasn't any way he was going to be able to avoid that much rain, and he didn't have that much time either. His armor was breaking apart again already. It hadn't regenerated, and he strained it once more with his temporal reversion. So he got up to an old trick. He threw his knife out, doing his best to aim its trajectory. He avoided most of the rain, and it sped out, shooting through another building and continuing onward.

Shiv teleported, and just as he reappeared holding his knife, his temporal shell approached its limit. He dismissed it before it could crack, and he continued on. He smashed through another building and chucked another body behind him. No more time for subtlety. No more time for anything.

"Second layer of stealth, let's go." He activated his Creeping Void. Blackness spilled out around him, consuming an entire section of Lost Angeles.

He spiked his field up to forty times, and he felt the initial harm of Inertial Overdrive befall his body. His skin tore. His muscles ruptured. His bones fractured.

He traveled kilometers in a few passing seconds, and the surrounding city dissolved into anarchy and disarray. All manner of spells slammed down around him, bombarding the positions he used to be at. His strategy of confusion and rapid, random movements worked. They attacked all the strange positions he once occupied; some were even still striking far beyond the horizon at the point of the Tidewall.

But there were more than just a few observation posts in the city, and soon Shiv felt something, a cloud of Dimensionality swirling around him, condensing around his body. "Shit," Shiv hissed. "Not good."

He had been detected by a Jump Mage or Dimensionalist, one that—

Shiv's thoughts didn't even manage to finish before he was teleported. Someone forcibly wrenched him across space itself.

Pressure squeezed around Shiv. His eyes widened. A rush of corrosive mana blasted toward him. He reverted time to counter the spatial magic. He reappeared where he was a second ago, at the cost of his shell. His Strider shattered. Time resumed in a jolting instant.

Nearby, a pocket of shadowy distortions collapsed inward like an implosion, and Shiv continued on, but once more the particulates solidified around him. Something whistled over his head, barely missing him. It was blind luck that spared his life that time.

A Necromantic arrow appeared a meter to his right. It was flung off course by his sheer acceleration, but its tip glistened with corrosive energy. If that hit me...

Necromancy left permanent wounds, and Shiv didn't know how many permanent wounds he could take before he simply entered a cycle of death after death. More importantly, however, he didn't have much vitality left at all if he died now.

Suddenly, the dimensionality burst apart around Shiv, popping as if in a bubble of darkness. Shiv blinked. He didn't know what had just happened, but he threw his dagger out again. It punched through a building. He teleported. He threw it again. He teleported. He threw it again. He teleported.

Shiv repeated this over and over, trying to keep his movements random, ejecting bodies from his cape to leave a false trail. As he emerged from the crumbling walls of a building, he saw the true sprawl of Lost Angeles rushing beneath him. Skyscrapers rose. Broken highways greeted him. Blocks and blocks of rusted, cracked, and decaying structures rolled under him as hills once did. But a section of the city rose. It rose like a climbing pyre, a pyre that sailed high into the sky, becoming a pillar of purest white. And then an envelope of flame spread out, a flame so bright it seared Shiv's very eyes to behold.

He hissed and looked away, and he realized what this was. Roland had sent one of his arrows down to devastate the area. A shockwave of force followed, and this was but one arrow. One arrow exceeded the entire destructive yield of even the strongest of Shiv's inertial discharges.

"I'm gonna need a lot more levels before I can match that," Shiv whispered. But then he realized no one was attacking him either. He stopped his Creeping Void, released another body, and descended. He flew low to the ground with Chameleon active and a Minor Illusion projected, and he flung his knife again, teleporting to it.

Shiv did his best not to crash into any buildings. He didn't want anyone to spot him just yet. But for now, it seemed like he was in the clear—

Something exploded out of the ground below and smashed into his chest. Shiv found himself dragged high up into the sky. He grunted as a massive hand closed over his head. He gripped the hand and twisted. He pulled his field—tried to break the fingers holding him. The hand released him, then something smashed against his helmet, cracking it slightly.

Shiv twisted back and soaked the moment of the impact. At the same time, he threw his blade out and teleported to it.

Marksmanship 11 > 12

As he turned himself in the air, as he used his gravity field to pull against the direction he was flung, he tried to find his adversary.

And then, in the distance, just over a wall of standing mega-buildings and a swath of brutally glassed craters, he finally saw Blackedge hanging in the sky.

Blackedge, veiled by circling spheres of interweaving spells. Blackedge, bombarded by artillery and magic.

Blackedge, surrounded by monstrosities and nightmares.

All around the town fell a constant rain of destructive fire, beams of light, and rolling arrows, christening the ground with purifying flame. And from the Abyss chasm flooded an endless tide of nightmarish horrors, dimensionals, and more.

Shiv saw another shape then, moving in the moonlight. Hovering over Blackedge with the broken moon as a backdrop was a massive, skeletal serpent that wove incomprehensible magical shapes between each of its countless hands.

But then Shiv couldn't focus on the silhouette anymore, because someone else rose just before him, standing on a metallic platform. That someone was grinning at Shiv.

A breath of exasperation escaped the Deathless. His features twisted into a snarl. "Fuck me. I was wondering how you bastards kept finding me so fast."

The enemy Pathbearer's massive form was coated in a full set of adamantine-crystal armor. He was over three meters tall, standing with his hands clasped behind his back. A small armory of weapons hovered behind him, shaped from liquid metal, and the platform below his feet was an enormous slab of adamantine. More importantly, it was an enormous slab of adamantine that had a series of spell crystals embedded underneath. A magic-booster.

The spellcaster wasn't a human. It wasn't an automaton. It wasn't an elf or an Umbral, or even a Vulteg. No, it was the race Shiv hated the most.

The massive orc greeted him with a nod. He had his helmet's visor lifted, showing a face of green-gray skin between the metallic white of his armor. His eyes were of a slightly brighter yellow than 811's, but that cruel smile and that strange, perceptive gaze were just the same.

"You should have known that this would eventually happen," the orc said. His voice was higher than 811's. It was nasally too. "You have been Cursed and Blessed by the Challenger. You cannot evade us, Deathless. Stand and fight. Give me a taste of what I am due."

Shiv clenched his Skysplitter tighter as he scoffed. "Yeah, well, I got a question for you."

"And what's that?" the orc asked.

"You got a Chronomancy skill?"

The orc frowned. "I—"

Shiv paused time.

Chapter 115 (I) Adamantine

After an orc is slain, his soul is cleansed by the System as he passes through the Challenger and returns to the Tutorial. He is stripped down back to zero, but he does retain one skill, one and only one, and that is the skill that matters to them above all others.

Perfect Memory.

Orcs possessing Perfect Memory meansthat they will never forget anything they don't want to forget, no matter how much time passes, be it a face or a number of uncountable digits.

If an orc claims to have forgotten something, he is either lying or brain-damaged beyond repair.

Psychomancers have, of course, tried to rip out an orc's memories. The outcomes of these attempts are usually mixed to the extreme, for though you can shatter an orc's mind, the memories still pass on to their next incarnation. The memories they want to mark as "perfect" are bound to the soul. It is like a story ingrained within them, woven into their fundamental existence by the System to ensure they retain all of their past experiences.

And that is the worst of our problems: With every death we inflict upon them, they learn more and more. They understand our patterns. They know where they were bombed to death.

Over time, they will know all of our strategies. They know half of our damn names already. I've been greeted by them more than once.

Our only advantage is that they don't like sharing this information with each other. They don't care about each other. They're not an army; they're a group of violent, hyper-intelligent sociopaths who are competing with each other to finally breach our walls and kill us all. Cooperation doesn't exist between them. That's all we got. But individually, they're still advancing. They don't forget.

With every passing summer, it's getting worse. Our finest Artillerists are getting their throats slit in the middle of the night. Fuck. That's not even the worst of it. They turned Mara into a suicide bomber by

kidnapping her kid. We remember Captain Mara, don't we? Never needed to fire more than twice to hit a target? Yeah. Now we don't talk about her. But I need to.

The orcs are starting to use more stealth. More deception. We need to start countering now. Our artillery and bombardment strategy is not going to last. Not another 10 years. We need to beat the orcs to their adaptation before they overcome us, and that means getting better at stealth or counter-stealth before they get good enough to work through all of our leadership. Before we wake up one night with a big, ugly, green-skinned bastard wearing our flayed child's face as a mask.

They're changing, so we gotta change as well. So we gotta go on the offensive. Doing nothing is only going to make more Maras. And we cannot afford that.

-Hero-Ranger Morgan Munny to Lone Star High Command

The orc didn't have a Chronomancy skill.

What the orc did have, however, was a set of compact Chronomancy wardings so powerful that a golden ripple cleaved straight through Shiv's temporal shell the moment he surged forward.

Chronomancy burst free from Shiv's body, but a small part of it clung to him, trying to cover his entire person. Shiv growled and cast himself back in time. He reverted to the place he was five seconds ago and flung his Skysplitter into the distance just as his temporal shell shattered.

A beam of fire slashed just above Shiv's head. He spiked himself down and raised his arm in front of his face just in time to feel a Necromancy-infused arrow bounce off his Magebreaker instead of obliterating his soul. Shit!

He needed to get out of here. As his knife exploded through a half-collapsed overpass, the orc barked out a laugh. "Chronomancy!" he cried out. "Such a delightful skill, isn't it?"

Shiv didn't listen to the rest of the orc's speech. He didn't have the time nor the interest. He teleported to his knife—and promptly slammed blade-first into a rising wall of adamantine that exploded out from the cracked pavement. Shiv's blade left a dent in the wall, but he pulled his gravitic field back—

The orc burst free from the adamantine like a diver surfacing from water and roundhouse-kicked Shiv right in the side of the head.

Shiv reeled backward, his vision spinning. The orc hit as hard as an entity-possessed Confriga. But Shiv wasn't the same Pathbearer who went into the fight unprepared and underpowered either. He halted himself in place as he gripped himself using his gravitic field and then drove his head forward. He slammed his helmet into the orc's chest, and the big bastard welcomed it with a hearty laugh.

He barely took a single step back.

Both blurred into motion. Shiv shot low to rip the orc's legs out from under them. The orc jumped up. A column of adamantine shot up from the ground below. Shiv spiked his gravitic field and rolled, twisting to the side. The column slammed into the orc's chestplate. But it didn't launch him back. Instead, it splashed apart and merged with his armor.

Shiv ground across the ground, sliding to a halt as he glared at his new enemy.

"Quite the hit," the orc complimented, casually brushing dust off his chestplate. A beam flashed behind the orc—corrosive mana filled the air. But the orc just lifted a hand, and a curving wall of adamantite exploded out from the ground and intercepted the strike. Shiv blinked as a great and metallic dome hatched free from parting streets and collapsing buildings. The entire structure took up a kilometer of space. Patches of decay spread through portions of the dome, but then more layers within rose, reinforcing the whole bunker like an onion.

"There," the orc said, letting out a sigh of annoyance, "that should keep them away, at least for a little bit. Just long enough for us to indulge in this... chat.

”

Shiv studied the orc again. The brute had his faceplate down now, and at the top of his helmet a gleaming spike infused with glowing mana poked out like some kind of unicorn horn. The colors within the horn oscillated between gold and black, with static lining its edges.

That must be the source of his wards, Shiv realized. He'd probably need to target that if he wanted to use his Chronomancy freely and extract himself from the fight. And that's what he was going to try to do: get free of the orc. As much as he wanted to kick the thing's ass, he had to finish his scouting run. That, and the longer this orc kept him in place, the worse things would get for him.

The Necrotechs were probably amassing more forces this very second.

Adam was likely getting all kinds of useful information now about how many enemies there were and how they could respond to a fast-moving threat. But considering the sheer variety of Pathbearers and monsters the Necrotechs had massed to intercept him, Shiv guessed that it wouldn't be long until he faced some new breed of bullshit, like someone with a Necromancy-Psychomancy Skill Fusion.

Yeah. I don't think I have a chance of surviving that, Shiv thought to himself. New plan. Drain some of the orc's vitality, break his horn, and then try to escape this place. Maybe use Outside Context Problem to make him forget about my existence and drill through the ground to escape while he's distracted.

"I wish to see—" The orc's words went unheard as Shiv spiked his gravity field 30 times. The world around him slowed, his reflexes surged, and his speed exploded. He crashed against the orc as his inertial sheath thundered with building energy.

The orc was driven back, and Deathless slashed out at the orc. His cut flicked toward the horn—only to be deflected. A blade of liquid metal splashed out from the orc's helmet and parried Shiv's slash. It then spilled around Shiv's arm and hardened around him. A dozen liquid metal hammers exploded out from the orc's armor as well. They crashed into Shiv, impacting like heavy blows at first, but then they also turned fluid, congealing around his body. Then, they hardened into dense clumps of metal.

The orc made a pulling gesture. Shiv stumbled as a rush of force pulled him off balance. The orc made a fist—but never got to swing it as Shiv detonated his inertial sheath. The kinetic discharge flung the orc through a building, and Shiv blasted in after them. They crashed through debris as Shiv swung his Skysplitter—only for the orc to phase through the attack by turning into mist and disappear from sight.

"Really?" Shiv growled under his breath as he stabbed his feet through the ground, grinding himself to a brutal halt. "Always some bullshit with orcs." It was bad enough that the orcs were big and durable and clever. Why did all of them have to have more than one magical skill too?

The Challenger is amused by your outrage.

"Yeah, laugh it up," Shiv spat at the unseen god. He pointed his knife up into the air. "I'm gonna kill this one too."

Just then, a rush of mist condensed beside Shiv. The orc reappeared a few meters away and opened his mouth.

Shiv wasn't interested in talking.

He triggered his Outside Context Problem. He vanished from existence, slipping back into his own vitae. The orc's eyes widened, looked confused, and then Shiv advanced on the orc, his knife drawn, Creeping Void active. Darkness began to flood the world around him, a darkness that wasn't yet observable by the orc as it was layered in Shiv's vitae. But it manifested as Shiv blasted toward the brute and finally inflicted two slashes while sapping his vitality. The first sparked across the orc's throat, while the other took a chip out from the horn on the brute's head.

But the horn didn't break, not even with Shiv's Deepest Edge. A burst of white and red exploded out from Shiv as the orc lurched back, suddenly startled by the Deathless's reappearance. Shiv drove his blade into the orc's chest, and the huge bastard staggered back. But Shiv's cuts were stunning more than they were bleeding.

Master-Tier Toughness. At least.

The orc pointed a finger down. Shiv found himself pulled toward the ground by a crushing force as all the metal clumps on his body shuddered with force. The orc slammed into the Deathless, wrapping his massive hand around Shiv's entire body. Shiv brought an elbow down against the orc's forearm. A deafening ring echoed through the world as a shockwave spread between them.

The orc barely budged. He laughed. "My turn."

An adamantine spike exploded out from under the Deathless, slamming right between his legs. Shiv hissed as pain exploded in a place he didn't much enjoy getting hit. But Adamantine Adaption made all of Shiv durable, so the hit just pissed him off more than anything. He cast a bone drill into the orc's head as he blasted into the orc, driving them both through another building.

Shiv fed his anger into his Adamantine Adaption, and he spiked his gravity field another twenty times, letting it build as he held the orc's arm in place with his gravitic field. Shiv's skin tore. The orc unleashed a barrage of adamantine arrows at Shiv via his armor. Shiv discharged his Inertial Overdrive in response.

The blast wave was devastating; the air combusted, everything around him dissolved, and even the adamantine curved outward. The explosion shredded the orc's armor and sent the brute flying backward. Shiv thought he had the orc dead to rights, so he charged after his adversary, seeking to end the orc for good or at least chop the horn off his head. Yet, as he accelerated, the orc's armor turned to a mercury puddle and splattered onto the ground.

The horn atop the helmet was gone as well. Along with the orc.

Shiv blinked, confused, when suddenly an adamantine harpoon speared down from above, chipping a piece from his left shoulder. The force of the impact sent Shiv tumbling forward into a roll. He plowed through concrete, spinning head over heels several times before he finally stabilized himself with a downward spike of his gravity field.

As he ground to a halt again, he looked up, and the orc descended on an adamantine platform, the same platform Shiv saw earlier, layered with focus crystals on the bottom. "You're not the only one with many tricks, Deathless," the orc said, wagging a finger. Behind the orc hovered a small arsenal of weapons: blades, hammers, arrows, spears, even whips.

"I don't have time for this shit," Shiv muttered. "You mind doing me a favor and just killing yourself? I got a scouting run to finish and a certain Vicar I need to figure out how to kill."

The orc shook a finger. "Ah, before anything like that, I must see your measure. I am ever so curious about why the Challenger is interested in you. You bested one of my brethren, but many have done the same. So why you?" The orc cocked his head at Shiv. "You aren't even the most brutal human I've met. So why you?"

By this point, the entirety of the dome was shrouded with the miasma from Creeping Void. Shiv also had his Minor Illusion active and his Chameleon serving as an additional layer of stealth. The orc looked on in his general direction still. The damned gray-skinned beast seemed to know exactly where he was.

Shiv shifted his weight, and the orc's eyes narrowed. That meant he wasn't just aware of his location, but could sense his very movements. Shiv wasn't sure how, but then he realized that it was probably the ground.

Geomancer, Shiv thought, he can sense me through the ground. Then, Shiv felt at the clumps of adamantite that were layered around his armor. He can probably feel that too.

Shiv rose into the air, hovering slowly as he considered how to approach his enemy. The horn was harder than he expected to cut through, and the orc, well... The orc was an orc: cruel, intelligent, magically attuned with plenty of his own tricks.

Shiv thought back to his fight with 811 as he considered how he was going to solve this problem. If there was one thing common between orcs, it was that they loved picking fights. They loved coming after him over and over again. Shiv wondered how he could use that against this orc...

Alright, so he's a Geomancer. His armor can be turned into liquid metal and shape weapons from inside itself. He can apparently just vanish and reappear somewhere else—either as a gust of mist or using his metal... Wait, everything around me is adamantine. He's probably using that as some kind of close-range teleportation anchor. What kind of Skill felling Fusion results lets a Pathbearer do that? Agh. What I need to do is stop time and hit him with everything I have all at once. My maximum inertial detonation can damage adamantine. I just can't give him a chance to run.

"You know," Shiv said, pointing his blade at the orc as he continued thinking about an easy solution to his orc problem, "An orc being here certainly explains a lot. I found it pretty strange how you guys kept finding me. I guess I have my answer now."

The orc let out a barking laugh. "Oh, no, no. I didn't tell the others. I didn't want them to share in my fun. I wanted to see how you performed first. Them finding you is because you're loud. And their Diviners are competent."

Chapter 115 (II) Adamantine

"Performed?" Shiv repeated, the word leaving a bitter taste in his mouth. He wasn't here to be some orc's entertainment.

"Indeed," the orc continued on. "The way you blinked from place to place, exploiting both Chronomancy and Portomancy, was quite acceptable. And there's also how you kept leaving your bodies behind. Why, the Necrotechs are so very confused. And your speed... But it's a little too much for your body to endure, isn't it? Adamantine does have a breaking point. I know that better than most."

Shiv glared silently at the orc. "Alright, I let you flap your lips. You're clearly oh so very smart and perceptive. Any chance you're just gonna piss off and let me out now?"

The orc chuckled. "Why in such a hurry to leave? You need to impress me, after all."

"Impress you?"

"Yes," the orc said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "I'm here for more reasons than one. One is for my own pleasure. The other... Well, if the Challenger is to grant you an audience and to loan my brethren to your cause..."

"Shit," Shiv muttered under his breath. "Seriously?"

"Of course. The Challenger wants this. Nothing comes for free, you know this, oh Bruiser. The Challenger is more than willing to loan you some of my brothers to see this made into a proper war. But nothing comes easy in life, and so you will have to kill me first. Think you can do it?"

"And what makes you think I'm going to accept the Challenger's offer? What makes you think I even want it?" Shiv asked.

The orc shook his head and sighed. "Now, you're smarter than that. Don't be petulant. I can hear the bitterness, the scorn in your voice. It's even in the way you fight. You try to dominate and break things, because the world tries to dominate and break you. A poor habit. Do your best to lose it." The orc leaned in slightly. "You are a Pathbearer. You have the potential to be a proper killer. So let go of the child inside. Sink your teeth into the present, and do things for a purpose. For effect. Not spite. What use is spite?"

Once more, Shiv was reminded why the orcs unnerved him so much. It wasn't even the brutality, it wasn't the casual cruelty, it wasn't their power. No. They were like a race of perfect serial killers. But despite everything, the orc was right; Shiv did betray too much in his words.

That, and the advice was... Well, shit, it wasn't bad.

"I know you're going to accept the offer, because what other choice do you have? Mercenaries?" The orc barked a laugh. "We both know it will take time for someone to agree to a contract. And indeed, the amount of money you will need to hire an entire army capable of contending against the Vicar... Well." The orc's voice took on an amused tone. "Tell me, how much treasure do you possess? I was given over a hundred tons of mithril by the Vicar. A hundred tons! Do you have a hundred tons? Do you even have enough money to retain my services, the services of even a single Master?"

Shiv was pretty sure they didn't have a hundred tons, and that was an ugly thought. Shiv didn't know how the vicar had that much money when Confriga had jack shit in comparison.

I guess that's another difference between being a Legend and a Hero. Legends are godsdamn rich, apparently. But then again, Sullain is like a scholarly priest or something, while Confriga was a felling moron.

"Ah, the deafening silence. It reveals to me all I need to know. You do not wish this. You are reluctant. But you know this is for the best. You're going to need my kind, because there is no better option." And then the orc held out a hand, and one weapon among the arsenal hovering behind him slid into his palm. It wasn't the weapon Shiv would have expected the orc to wield, either. A long, thin rapier, gleaming with the light of the sun, settled into the orc's grasp with a grace one would expect from a musician wielding an instrument.

"Stellarite," Shiv muttered.

"I suppose that girl of yours could potentially accept a bargain with the eldritch. But that's not a real army. That's not something she can control. It's like unleashing a hurricane onto a battlefield and expecting it to fight your enemy, and only your enemy. So understand now, this moment is no distraction. It is a necessity. Perform well. Take my life from me if you can. My gods's offering is dependent on this."

Something inside Shiv hardened. The last thoughts of just breaking the orc's horn and attempting an escape died. He was going to kill this thing. Not because he wanted to impress the Challenger. Just because he was annoyed by all the talking this orc was doing.

"So, then," the orc said, flourishing his dainty blade. "Have at thee!" And then he blasted forward atop his platform.

But Shiv had learned a few things from his fight with 811. The first being to mind your enemy's skills. He ejected his own bone armor and cast away the orc's adamantine clumps with it. Shiv shot upward while he cast a corpse down from his cape. It struck the ground. The orc chased after Shiv's broken armor, and his rapier flashed with light. The orc vanished.

He blinked across space with every thrust, and he speared through Shiv's armor, stabbing every point that had a clump of adamantine molded onto it. When he was done, he plunged his blade into the corpse Shiv cast out as well. The body jerked and shuddered. Shiv hovered above the orc, studying the beast's capabilities. The rapier left small holes in both the corpse and the armor, and it took three stabs on average to pierce through.

The bigger problem was how the orc vanished between stabs—reappeared inside the target. That, and the orc seemed skilled, much better with a blade than Shiv was. He could tell that in the fluidity of their movements.

Slower than me by more than a bit, though. Master-Tier.

Shiv extended his Skysplitter. The blade grew to a hundred meters. It speared out towards the orc and impacted his armor. The orc let out a surprised cry, but then the armor splashed into a puddle of mercury, and he was gone again.

The Deathless sighed. And there's that bullshit again.

Shiv swung around, trying to find where the orc was, only for a ripple to pass through the surrounding dome. Shiv's eyes widened as the orc's voice filled the area. "Well, well. You're smart enough to use your stealth instead. My compliments on controlling your ego. Alas, there is a part of the battle you ceded to be already: Behold, a lesson in zone control!"

As soon as the orc said that, a hailstorm of hyper-accelerated adamantine began to shoot out from the dome. The surface of the curving walls flung out blade after blade, and they leaped down like raindrops bursting free from the surface of a pond. There were too many to dodge, and they came too fast.

Shiv triggered his Chronomancy in lieu of his Outside Context Problem. The hailstorm halted in place. But then came a rippling tide of Chronomantic energy from directly above.

"There," Shiv muttered as he spotted a patch of the dome that glowed with gold and dimensional black. That was probably where the orc was hidden—either within the metal or behind it. "How the hells am I going to get to him?"

As the golden tide came close, Shiv prepared to drop his temporal shell to spike his Inertial Overdrive to try and displace the incoming hits with a discharge. Something made Shiv hesitate. He considered

something. All wardings were a bit like a specific type of Magical Resistance. And they were magical fields. The Magebreaker worked against anything with a Magical Field.

Shiv let his intuition guide him. He slammed his left fist into the oncoming tide of gold, and a shuddering impact followed. His Magebreaker vibrated violently, but Shiv palmed the wave of Chronomancy and pawed it off to his side. His Frictionless Vector triggered, and it slid off at an angle and missed him entirely. "Yes!" Shiv gasped as he launched himself upward.

Frictionless Vector 62 > 63

He blasted up into the air, charging toward where the orc was. But then the second part of his problem followed. What was he supposed to do now? The orc was meshed in the metal. Alright. Time for a discharge. Let's see where you're hiding.

Shiv spiked his Inertial Overdrive to the limit. His body came apart. He detonated his sheath and saw a rupture form in the metal. He cast himself back in time, blocked another wave of Chronomancy, and detonated himself again. He repeated the sequence once more. By now, his temporal armor was nearly broken, but through the gap in the dome, Shiv saw—another dome stacked over this dome.

Godsdammit, Shiv hissed internally. This orc was going to be an absolute nightmare to pin and kill. How many layers are there to this? How the hells am I supposed to get at him?

The orc's wards glowed at the top of the next dome, and maybe the dome after that, and the one after that...

Just as Shiv was about to force his way out of the first dome and slam into the next layer of the adamantine onion he was trapped in, Shiv paused and thought. All that dragon-fighting had him introspective.

Shiv's Psychology Skill triggered as he considered another set of solutions.

Orcs were cruel. Orcs enjoyed hurting a person. Shiv was overcomplicating this fight. In fact, ever since becoming a Pathbearer, he'd been a little too direct, too brutal.

When he hunted lesser vampires, he learned their ways. He stalked them through the ruined buildings. He knew they were addicted to blood, and he knew they feared light and flame. There were things he could provoke them to do, reliable aspects of their behavior.

The orcs were clever, but they were addicted to cruelty. And Shiv could exploit that.

Let's bleed a little. See if we can lure him in close with some hurt.

Immediately, he descended into the hailstorm of adamantine arrows. He let time resume and took the hits dead on as he let his Creeping Void cease. His flesh was torn open. He exacerbated the cuts with his Biomancy. He snarled, trying to sell his pain. More adamantine shards punched into him, drilling through him.

Shiv twisted and writhed, over-exaggerating his wounds and pain as he lacerated himself with his Biomancy as well. He fell dramatically from the air, crashing and cracking the pavement.

Acting 12 > 13

Deception 8 > 9

"How disappointing," the orc called out. "I expected more. You flail, Bruiser. You twist and you writhe like a creature caught in a cage. Are you nothing more than a bear in a trap?"

At that statement, the innermost dome suddenly blasted inward and clamped down around Shiv. Its weight was massive, and it held him in place tightly. The breath was driven from his lungs. Then, he hissed as needles extended from the adamantine cave-in that held him. He was getting ripped apart for good this way. Maybe it wasn't wise to—

Shiv hid a smirk behind a grimace as the orc descended from the second dome above him, hovering on that platform created from adamantine and focus crystals. He lifted his faceplate again, and he sighed at the sight of Shiv. "This is pathetic," the orc said. "I didn't realize that you were such a simple animal, so straightforward in all your dealings. How you managed to kill another like me, I do not know." The orc held his rapier high. "I suppose the Challenger will be spared from any unworthy arrangements. But I am disappointed."

Shiv spat a mouthful of blood and finally grinned. "Yeah? So am I. But I guess even all that intellect can't stop you from being a slave to cruelty."

The orc paused. "Will you elaborate?"

"I mean, you can't help it, can you? You have to come close and kill me yourself. To do it slowly with your blade."

The orc's eyes snapped to his blade, and he realized something was wrong. "You—"

Shiv froze time again. He spiked his Inertial Overdrive 40 times in quick succession and discharged. Everything below Shiv's stomach turned into ropes of gore. The adamantine around him ruptured. Then came a Chronomantic ripple from the orc's wards. A ripple Shiv barely managed to parry with a backhand from his Magebreaker. The Deathless nearly blacked out, but the Song of the Vigilant was still running, and it let him cast a Woundeater on himself.

He shot out the deformed adamantine cage and left a corpse behind via his cape. Shiv deflected another ripple of Chronomancy, and then he turned his Biomancy on the body. He struck it with laceration after laceration, ripping it asunder, before finally triggering Outside Context Problem and letting time resume.

He twisted through the air and got behind the orc.

The orc blinked forward, stabbing through the open mouth of Shiv's newly placed corpse. But then, as the orc stared at the body, he frowned. "Who is this?" the orc muttered.

The answer came in the form of a falling blade of epic size. Shiv made the Skysplitter grow to 300 meters, and he brought it down on the orc with all his might. Just as he slammed it against the orc, he paused time again. The fractured temporal shell cracked around him. Once more, he parried the temporal warding. His Magebreaker cracked.

Shiv wasn't done.

He spiked himself 50 times over. His body dissolved into paste. He created another Woundeater and fed it well before unleashing both into the orc. Twin mana explosions joined the inertial discharge, and then Shiv reverted time to a second ago, to the moment he struck the orc with his sword, and repeated the actions one more time. A third mana blast spread out, a bright blossom of red joining the others, and a new inertial discharge exploded beside the orc.

Woundeater 86 > 87

Strider of the Unbending Path 129 > 130

Inertial Overdrive 111 > 112

Gravitic Wrestler 142 > 143

Shiv's temporal shell finally broke, and he was blasted back by his own discharge, flung through the air until he crashed against the second layer of the adamantine dome. Flame and pressure pinned him in place, and despite how much he struggled with his gravitic field, he couldn't overcome the tides of destruction.

Shiv felt his body burn, his skin boil, and his eardrums burst. As the blast waves finally swept across him and dissipated, he shaped a Woundeater again and removed his injuries. He got his blade up, prepared to face the orc in case the brute was still alive.

As the burning oxygen in the air faded to embers, he saw the towering shape of the beast just standing over the corpse decoy Shiv had left behind. The rapier was still lodged in his corpse's head. The orc was unmoving.

Shiv's heart skipped a beat. Don't tell me that didn't do anything to him. Shiv drew in a long, shuddering breath as he clenched his fists. Alright, maybe that failed. Time to try a new...

The orc unceremoniously toppled over. Shiv stared. As the orc's body rolled across the devastated crater, Shiv saw a pool of liquefied red viscera spill out from his open visor. Parts of his adamantine armor had also been ripped asunder. Gore poured free from it in ropey sinews of red.

The Challenger is amused.

Slowly, a chuckle escaped Shiv. He looked down at the body. "Hey, asshole," he mocked the orc post-mortem. "You think you know my nature? Well, I knew yours better. Guess that makes me the only proper killer between us."

Then he spat on the orc and promptly speared down into the ground, blasting through the earth to escape the dome. He had a scouting run to finish.