

Deathless 131

Chapter 131 (I) Ritual [I]

Every form of attuned magic gives off its own frequency. Every spell is an adjustment, a manipulation of that frequency, but also the structure of the field itself. To understand it simply, it is like a reshaping of personal reality, a manipulation of the rules that govern the broader aspects of existence, restructured into something you could wield within the confines of your influence.

However, when someone has a similar kind of magic, they can view what you are doing because they, too, occupy the same magical lore. They have their own field of “parareality” to wield.

And none understand this better than Dimensionalists. For Dimensionality reaches further than any other form of magic. The most important thing about Dimensionality isn't mana fields, however. Rather, Dimensionality, more than even Necromancy and Animancy, taps into the ambient mana of worlds. For it connects gains of ambient mana together to bridge different dimensions and worlds.

In other words, Dimensionality is more akin to shaping the “borders” of worlds rather than moving space itself.

This, however, also means that different dimensional gates can be hijacked. Borders can be redefined, assuming you know their exact frequency, their exact oscillating shape and movement, and that you can access them. You can connect another gate to the gate, or you can potentially even change its location.

However, this will come at a cost. A Dimensionalist needs to be strong enough to nudge these changes. And the grander the gateway, the greater the dimension they're trying to connect to, the more effort it will require. There is a limit to even the power of Legendary Dimensionalists, and thus a god's power might be required—and a ritual may need to be invoked if one wishes to replace one location with another...

-On Gates and Gateways

Shiv flicked his massive blade through the barricades erected by the Vultegs. Layers of stone turned to dust and rubble. Blockades of steel were sheared clean through. The people behind were rendered into puffs of misting blood. Halfway through his cut, he readjusted his strike. He pulled in another direction using his gravitic field and launched his 150-meter-long Skysplitter toward the Jealousy.

The blade was still growing as it sailed into the air.

The massive demon flinched back, its single eye widening in surprise. Despite this, it swung a tentacled limb, slamming it into the flat surface of the Skysplitter. As it did, however, Shiv teleported to his blade. He emerged like a missile and slammed elbow-first into the Jealousy's eye.

A colossal impact shook the gate. Shiv and the Greater Demon wrestled for dominance. The Deathless noticed they were twisting through the air at a downward angle, certain to impact the battlements surrounding the dimensional breach—battlements currently being manned by the Arachnae Order and the orcs. Shiv couldn't accept the deaths of the former. He let out a roar as he pulled the Jealousy upward. To his surprise, the titanic demon was easier to move than he remembered.

And just then he realized three things. The first was that he'd gained a great many levels since the last time he fought a Jealousy. The second was that he had Plaguefueled active. The third was that the Jealousy moved with him. It didn't want to crash into the ground, either.

And so, the two monsters struggled in the air above the gate. Shiv slammed his head into the Jealousy. The world shook. The huge demon rocked back, launched by the blow. Shiv capitalized on the opportunity to bring his Skysplitter down. But the Jealousy swatted the blade aside once again and used counterforce to flip its body over Shiv's, shifting behind him in an instant. Shiv blinked in surprise as the Jealousy repositioned itself in a stunning display of agility.

It flicked something at him. The Deathless turned, only to catch a bolt of lightning to the chest. It exploded against him. Some of his armor cracked, but nothing inside of him broke. However, the world vanished into a flash of brilliant light. And when it finally faded, Shiv blinked away flashing images. Before him, high up in the air, the Jealousy loomed, and within each of its tentacles were whips of lightning. No, Shiv realized, not whips.

They looked like dangling sticks that swung in each of the Jealousy's limbs. The Jealousy swung the sticks fast and whipped them from tentacle to tentacle. The sticks crashed with thunder, shaking the gate with each flourish.

And thus the Jealousy laughed. "Foolish little morsel, you are a thousand years too early to match me! Have been to the far eastern reaches of your world! Have studied your ways! Jealousy knows your martial arts. Mrpegia is an outer disciple of the Shandong Thunder Thief Sect!"

And just then, a quill of lightning sailed through the air. It was a small pin-prick of electricity compared to the storms that the Jealousy wielded. It struck the massive behemoth on the side of its head, and the Greater Demon didn't even react at first. But slowly, it turned to stare at Null Mont. She was barely a dot in the distance, and she quickly sank back down into her storm clouds, fleeing from the Jealousy's gaze.

"Probably better that way," Shiv muttered. Still, he blinked at the Jealousy. "Also, the hells are you using?"

"Nunchucks!" The Jealousy cackled. "We will see who is the greater Pathbearer, and who is merely a toad dreaming of swan flesh."

"Wrong metaphor," Shiv spat back. "I'm the cook. You're just the octopus that threw itself on my skillet."

Shiv blasted toward the Jealousy. A pocket of air opened around him. He spiked his Inertial Overdrive. Time and time again, his speed built. But the Jealousy didn't move. Instead, it spun its ten thunderous nunchucks in front of its body, and its eyes glistened with an unnatural focus. Suddenly, Shiv had a very bad feeling.

Yeah, maybe I shouldn't go straight at it. Maybe... maybe let's screw with it a little. He triggered Chameleon and Minor Illusion at the same time. He also flung one of his corpses at the Jealousy. As his corpse sailed through the air, the Jealousy didn't react. Neither did it look at his minor illusion. Through it all, the Jealousy's eye never lost track of Shiv.

How in the hells... And suddenly, the Jealousy moved. Its body wasn't that fast, not compared to Shiv's accelerated reflexes. However, its movements flowed, and its nunchucks swung in odd ways. Shiv couldn't predict where they were coming from. He dodged backward at the last moment, or at least he tried to. The problem with Inertial Overdrive was that once he started moving in one direction, he couldn't easily switch to another. The first nunchuck slammed into him, and it felt like a condensed storm coming down on his back. Shiv grunted as he felt his entire back sustain a bruise.

But he kept going. He accelerated toward the Jealousy—just as a second nunchuck came within a centimeter of his head.

Shiv halted time.

The Jealousy went still. The Deathless crashed into its body, and he tried to get his blade aligned with its flesh—

A golden arrow punched through his shoulder, tearing him off course. Shiv let out a snarl of pain as he gripped the Chronomancy-infused shaft. As his hands wrapped around the object, he realized it was made of adamantite as well. A second later, two more arrows slammed into him. The first skipped off his chest plate, tumbling into the air. However, it blinked back in time and slammed into him again, this time embedding itself in his armor. The third punched through his left Achilles, and Shiv sputtered with indignation.

The felling fuck is this?

He accelerated faster, trying to find where the Chronomantic archer was firing from. Three more arrows struck him. Two skipped off his body. Two rematerialized to impact where they once missed. The last one shot past him entirely, and it didn't get a chance to try over. I go back in time on impact, Shiv realized, but still, where the hell is the archer? And just then, something flashed in the corner of his vision.

Shiv cast himself back in time. Sixty percent of his time armor shattered apart. He realized that the Chronomantic arrows had done damage to his temporal shell as well. As he blinked back in front of the Jealousy, he realized his wounds were gone. At least there's that, Shiv thought to himself. But still, immediately another arrow came for him. He swatted this one aside and anticipated its reappearance. He parried it again, and this time it stayed gone. But as he did, an arrow sailed out from behind him, slamming into his tailbone. It didn't penetrate his armor, but it still fractured some of his temporal shell.

Ten percent left. Shiv gritted his teeth. Not good. He began to pump out Creeping Void for the first time. He didn't want to risk confusing his allies, but he was dealing with a hidden Chronomantic archer. Not a bad counter against someone like me, Shiv thought. As soon as The Creeping Void swallowed both him and the Jealousy, he halted the skill. Just then, two more arrows tore past him. One struck the Jealousy, embedding itself in its flesh, while another sailed high and wide, striking nothing at all.

Shiv charged a Jealousy, dismissing his temporal armor before it broke. The large demon gave a gasp of confusion as Shiv came at it. But rather than charging it head-on, Shiv activated his Outside Context Problem. He sank into his Vitae, and then a coldness bit into him. It didn't last long. He crashed hard against the Jealousy, spiking himself fifty times in quick succession. His inertial sheath roared and rumbled with excess force. Shiv could feel the heat building underneath his skin. He dragged the

Jealousy across the airspace. And as soon as they blasted through his Creeping Void, he reactivated the skill, spreading another patch of darkness in the sky.

More golden arrows slashed around Shiv. Most of them missed. Some of them struck the Jealousy, and the Greater Demon cried out. Its body pulsed with Psychomantic energy. But Shiv countered that by punching it in the face as hard as he could using his left hand. The Magebreaker rang, the vibrations upon it shuddering violently.

That's a lot of magic, Shiv realized. Still, it made the Jealousy's head snap back, a trail of blood flowing through the air. But it recovered quickly. One of its nunchucks came slamming down from above. A building shockwave of thunder and lightning flashed as it impacted Shiv. But he countered by discharging his Inertial Overdrive. Twin blasts contrasted each other, one born of a roaring storm, the other of overflowing kinetic energy.

Inertial Overdrive 115 > 116

The Jealousy was flung back. Shiv spiked his field and kept pushing forward. As he did, spears of Vitaemancy blasted out from his body. They speared against the Jealousy's form, some of them chipping through the Greater Demon's armored hide. This Jealousy felt heartier than the last one. Shiv pierced its shell, but it didn't go very deep. He still drained its vitality, and that made the Jealousy tremble. There was a day and night difference between fifty-five levels of Vitality Drain and what came before. The Greater Demon shuddered with discomfort. Shiv used the opportunity to slash out with his Skysplitter.

Just then, a golden arrow hit him along the back of the elbow. His cut went wide, and he took off a piece of the Jealousy's tentacle instead of hitting its head. Shiv cursed as he tried to recover, but the Jealousy beat him to it. It came aglow with psionic energy and shot toward him in a narrow stream of magical power. Shiv's eyes widened. He shifted right while swinging his Magebreaker up to cover his head.

A massive tide of Psychomancy smashed into him, but his Frictionless Vector triggered. The Jealousy slipped off at an angle. His gauntlet made a rattling noise. Another hit like that within the next few seconds, and it's gonna break, Shiv realized. He found himself tumbling through the air and stabilized himself with a pull on his gravitic field. As he did, he found the Jealousy rematerializing in the flesh a good three hundred meters away.

Frictionless Vector 64 > 65

In the distance, another tentacle shot out from the spreading dimensional wound that led to Vulketh.

Shit, Shiv snarled to himself, the damn Jealousy was distracting him from his actual job, and he was supposed to kill fifty thousand of these bastards. In the distance, Shiv could see a fire rising from the surface district. Several buildings were aflame, but a stream of water splashed over them. High above, Adam rose. He hovered over the Surface Gateway, and his vector-wings glistened bright like six inverted diamonds. More than anything, however, his azure sun burned with radiance, and somehow Shiv knew Adam was done on his end.

Help's coming soon. But let's make them come back to a stable situation.

"Alright," Shiv breathed. He shrank his Skysplitter. He heard something in the air and instinctively twisted his head slightly to the left. A golden arrow slipped past him. Two more came, and two more missed as Shiv flung himself a second back in time. As he jolted across space, he kept his eye on the Jealousy and activated his Creeping Void again. A patch of blackness spilled around him. But despite that, the Jealousy had its gaze locked on his actual body. It was like it always knew where he was. Always.

Shiv clenched his teeth. Ah, the felling Greater Demon can probably see my psionic signature, or something like that. It's got a counter to my stealth.

A chain of golden arrows zipped past Shiv. But the archer doesn't. They can't see me. Still. The shots are getting closer each time...

The Creeping Void 111 > 112

The Jealousy began to swing its nunchucks again. "Come out, little Corpse-Shedder. Come face your end."

Shiv didn't reply. Instead, he considered his options.

He immediately decided to make a new Vitae golem. At once, he infused the golem with Gravitic Wrestler, Inertial Overdrive, Strider of the Unbending Path, and Vitality Drain. He groaned as he deposited a significant amount of vitality within the golem, but Shiv endured his growing weakness. It's gonna be worth it, he thought to himself. A flash of gold came from behind him. Shiv cursed and spiked himself and his golem downward. A chain of golden arrows cut by, a little too close for comfort. And the archer is getting more accurate by the second. The hell's up with that? They better not be a Diviner too...

Shiv stared at his golem, and it looked back at him without any reaction. "Go for the Jealousy. Freeze time, go back in time, do whatever it takes, but slam against it and try to dig into its flesh before discharging yourself—Make sure you start breaking before you discharge," Shiv hastily added at the end.

The golem immediately moved. It shot out from his Creeping Void, a projectile of red, white, and gold leaping out of a sea of shadow. The Jealousy responded immediately. It swung one of its nunchucks, and a cascading bolt rushed towards the golem.

Fooled you now. Shiv chuckled under his breath. To his delight, he also saw where the Chronomantic archer was firing from. The golden arrow blasted up from a section of the city still swallowed in rubble. Shiv wasn't sure how that enemy slipped past his notice, and then he considered maybe they had already snuck in far earlier. We still don't know how they got inside the gate first. The golden arrow smashed into the Golem, breaking off fragments of red, gold, and white.

Shiv froze time as well. A Chronomantic field fused over his body, and he blasted toward the archer's last known location. He spiked himself fast, climbing to his top speed. He didn't need to know where the archer exactly was. No, Shiv had over 200 meters of Biomancy to work with. The moment he felt someone with Magical Resistance or the organic architecture of a Vulteg, he would cast himself back in time and slam right into them. As Shiv went for the archer, he saw his golem grind hard against the Jealousy's eye. The massive demon was being pushed through the air, but the Golem didn't make any headway in ripping through its flesh. This Jealousy's a lot tougher than the last one. Shit. Maybe I should have given it Deepest Edge as well. Next time.

Just then, his Biomancy field brushed against something, something with high Magical Resistance. There you are. He followed the pull of his Biomancy and found himself glaring into a partially crushed teleportation anchor sticking out from a landslide of rubble. No wonder I missed you earlier. Picked a pretty good hiding spot.

Shiv projected his Chronomancy back in time. He jolted two seconds into the past so he could make the necessary adjustments, letting out a groan of effort as he started spiking himself at an angle. Adjusting his trajectory was still a struggle, even with forewarning and a massively boosted Physicality.

A fifth of his temporal shell broke off then, and Shiv smashed into the damaged teleportation anchor. He crumpled some more, and he spiked himself even harder. The reinforced titanium tore. He caught sight of his enemy and found himself staring at an elf. Not a Vulteg, an elf. She wore an armor of pearlescent scales, and her bow burned bright with Chronomancy. Her eyes, however, were pulsating with violet energy. She was a Diviner—much to Shiv's displeasure. Her bow was the Chronomancer in the equation, which was unfortunate for her, because now that Shiv found her, there wasn't much she could do to save—

An arrow burst through the back of Shiv's neck and emerged out the front just as he slammed into the elf's body. Her form disintegrated. Shiv gagged as blood flooded his trachea. Confusion overtook him. He smashed deeper, tearing through the collapsing teleportation anchor, and found himself clawing into a landslide of trash and detritus.

The hells was that? Shiv thought to himself. He cast himself back in time. Another section of his armor broke away. He only had 20% of his temporal shell left. His wound vanished. As he rematerialized, he saw the elf standing high atop a nearby mountain of ruin. And she grinned at him. There was something odd about her form. It shimmered with Divination and Chronomancy mana. As Shiv's Biomancy swept over her, he didn't feel any kind of organic architecture whatsoever.

The hell am I dealing with? An illusion? Shiv glared at the enemy as he launched a bone drill at—and then through—her. The elf held out her hand, turned it over, and stuck two fingers out at him, taunting him. Shiv responded by blasting a stream of Vitae into her. The arrogant smirk on her face vanished as soon as the Vitae splashed around her form.

Now, Shiv smirked.

The elf made a mistake in taunting him. Though Shiv couldn't feel her biology, she still glowed with vitality. And vitality was something Shiv could drain. He began to siphon from her, even as the final bits of his temporal shell started peeling away. She wrestled against his Vitae, but he used it to hold her still. It wrapped around her like a chain of fluid adamantine. And that's when Shiv realized his Vitae was a direct upgrade for his cancer flail.

Whip Proficiency 8 > 9

131 (II) Ritual [I]

131 (II)

Ritual [I]

Shiv immediately ripped the archer off the ground, spinning his body and spiking both himself and his Vitae downward. She tore hard into the sky. To her credit, she managed to fire three shots from her bow. He swatted the first one aside. Two others, however, overlapped each other perfectly. And they flashed bright, briefly blinding him. By the time he realized where they were, it was too late. They were just centimeters away from his eyes.

Pure instinct saved Shiv. He formed a swirling mass of Vitae in front of his face. Chunks of his life force broke away as the arrow bit into it. Shiv felt colder, weaker, but he didn't die. And that's when he realized there was a second function for his Vitae. When desperation called for it, he could use it as an additional barrier. And it might be better than dying now, since his Vitae was solidmana. Something his enemy could physically break.

Vitaemancy 61 > 62

Shiv's Vitae settled back within his field. And two golden arrows fell away as the red and white mana they shattered, evaporating like strings of rising smoke. The elven archer slammed down upon a jutting slab of concrete. She gave an agonized shout of pain, and the shroud of Divination and Chronomancy mana that protected her cracked open as well. Shiv felt her biology for the first time. Her lower body was broken, and her eyes rolled.

Shiv tore her from the ground as he reeled his Vitae back in. But rather than draw the Vitae back into his own body, within the stability of his Vitaemancy field, he wrapped his Skysplitter in the red and white, and he thrust out. The archer refocused just in time for Shiv to drive his blade up through her chin.

Just then, his temporal shell shattered. Time resumed.

Two hundred meters away, the Jealousy plowed into the ground, displacing tides of uprooted rubble. In the skies above, a massive explosion spread, fire chased by a wave of force. The archer gagged and choked as the violet and gold protecting her faded. She dropped her bow. Shiv caught it and threw it in his cape. This is how to make Adam smile, he thought to himself. Her left eye twitched. Shiv scowled. He crushed the elven archer's head for good measure before casting her corpse aside. No half measures.

As he shot toward the Jealousy, he found the greater demon groaning, still trying to get up from the crater it was blasted into. Shiv activated his Outside Context Problem. The world went dull and grey, and exhaustion swept through him, rushing deep into his core.

Shiv bit back a groan and immediately deactivated the skill before he spent himself completely. He burst out in a splash of red and white. His vision spun. There was a cost to using that much Vitae; the physical weakness and the risk of certain death if his body was destroyed. The Jealousy turned, swinging its nunchucks wide, but missing Shiv. The Greater Demon was as disoriented as he was, maybe more. He crashed into it, spearing his Skysplitter against its eye as he magnified his blade again. The dagger expanded to a hundred meters as Shiv drove it in. The Jealousy let out a cry as black, boiling blood erupted from the back of its skull. He extended a tendril of Vitae into the Jealousy and began to drain it. His weakness started fading, but the Jealousy wrapped a clawed tentacle around the length of his blade.

Shiv snarled as he lifted the Greater Demon into the air. He spiked himself high, dragging the Jealousy with him. It swung its nunchucks, but its hits passed through open air and struck nothing. With every following second, Shiv felt strength flooding his bones, rushing through his veins. His vision cleared, the fog choking up his mind dissolved, and he remembered what he wanted to do.

He accelerated toward the spreading gateway and found a flood of new enemies pouring free. More importantly, there was another Jealousy there, and it shaped a pillar of fire atop its head, using it to slice through some of Can Hu's barricades. Shiv gritted his teeth. He could see burning corpses atop some of the battlements. The bodies of Weaveresses and Umbrals who died trying to protect the gate.

Godsdammit! Anger rushed through him, and he used that to fuel his Gravitic Wrestler. He descended, swinging the Jealousy impaled upon his knife like a meteor hammer. As he shot down, the other Jealousy looked up, and its eye widened. It tried to move away, but just then, a Veilpiercer tore into existence and blew a bloody hole through the center of its iris.

The Pyromaniac Jealousy wailed, and its screams doubled as Shiv brought his Jealousy-knife hybrid down upon the other Greater Demon. Two Jealousies collided. A massive shockwave shook the gate. Vultegs and dimensionals below were flung off their feet, but Shiv kept pushing. The inner ring of battlements shook, and some of them crumbled entirely. Shiv drove the Jealousies down against the ground, and they blocked off the gateway, choking the constant influx of enemy forces. Their large tentacles smashed into the battlements, and Shiv could hear members of the Arachne Order calling for others to fall back.

Gravitic Wrestler 145 > 146

Shiv twisted his Skysplitter inside the nunchuck Jealousy, commanding his blade to grow even larger. As it widened the wound, Shiv seized the impaled Jealousy by its head and began slamming it down on the other invader. Their armored carapaces cracked together over and over. The fire-wielding Jealousy proved inferior in Toughness, and blood sprayed out from its already mutilated eye with every following slam.

Just then, something akin to broken glass slipped through the blinded Jealousy in an instant. Shiv didn't even know where it came from. His eyes widened as the broken glass glided through the Jealousy's flesh in an instant, splitting it apart from within. The battered Greater Demon came asunder, its gore spilling down in waterfalls. As Shiv brought the Jealousy he impaled down upon its counterpart one final time, a splash of red and grayish ichor filled the air.

It was at that point he saw the strange entity emerge from the dead Jealousy. It was painful to look at. Its geometries twisted and danced, and its edges were impossibly sharp. Shiv realized that Uva's Aberrant Fractal had entered the fray.

Then, the world grew brighter. A flood of might filled Shiv—might beyond anything he ever knew, beyond what he could achieve alone. A blue sun rose above, and Shiv looked up to see Adam Arrow hovering overhead.

"Defenders, rally!" Adam called out. "Defenders, rally! The first wave is broken! We stand! They dashed themselves against us! We still stand!"

Strands of mana slipped through Shiv's mind, and at once he felt Uva, Adam, the orcs, and Valor synchronize with his thoughts.

"I started the ritual," Shiv said awkwardly. "But there's a... slight requirement."

"What kind of requirement?" Adam asked. He looked at his mana core hovering in the distance, and he made a gesture. It flared. Shiv felt something within his soul shudder. Just then, the impaled Jealousy flared with Psychomantic energy. Shiv snarled. "Hey? Toad? This swan says stay down."

He picked the nunchuck-using Jealousy up, and he slammed it down one more time. He felt his Gravitic Wrestler fuse with his Deepest Edge. A wave of gravity exploded out from his knife. It stretched wide, becoming a singularity which he could shape and wield to his own volition. Shiv's blade brought his blow down upon the Jealousy, and it didn't just split in half. It was crushed into paste.

Skill Fusion: Gravitic Wrestler (Master) + Deepest Edge (Adept) > Singularity Blade (Heroic)

Shiv blinked as blood and debris began to circle both him and his blade. He felt like a titan of unfettered might—like his cuts could reshape gravity itself... "Right. So, I was saying, we have a slight requirement. We kind of need to kill 50,000 of the Vultegs."

"Fifty what?" Adam called out.

"Fifty what?" Uva repeated. "I must have misheard."

"No, you didn't," Shiv replied. "Fifty thousand Vultegs. We're going to need to kill them."

"Fifty? How are we supposed to kill 50,000 felling Vultegs?"

Adam snarled with incredulity. "How? Not like we have a mana bomb." The Gate Lord hummed. "Wait... Shiv, make a golem right now!"

Something slipped through the exposed gateway, emerging through the spraying molten fluid, rising from the flood of Jealousy blood. Shiv smashed the Vulteg into paste with his Singularity Blade.

"Insul! What in the hells is that?" Mortar called from a distance.

"Skill Fusion," Shiv said. "Thank Adam. And give me a second... You know what? I'll just take the second myself." He froze time. His temporal shell fused over him, and he immediately began shaping a new golem. He gave it its standard four-set animated skill combo, briefly considered giving it the Creeping Void as well, but then shook his head and decided this was good. Too much vitality cost.

Time resumed. "Alright, done."

Adam did a double-take. "Good." Immediately, the Gate Lord's vambrace flared. Shiv could see the corrosive energy even from so far away. And then Shiv realized what Adam was planning to do.

"Uh, Adam, sure this is a good idea? You plan to shoot my golem with Necromancy? Won't that..." He pasted another idiot trying to pass through.

Gravitic Wrestler 146 > 147

Deepest Edge 64 > 65

"No, absolutely not," Adam replied with a humorless chuckle. "But it is a very you idea."

Shiv paused. "You know what? You're right. It is kind of a me idea."

"The only good thing," Adam continued, "is that I don't think we need to risk you directly anymore. Or so I hope. Alright, here's the plan." A screaming Vulteg shot out from the gateway. His body gleamed as he hardened, sharpening himself into an adamantine blade.

Shiv smacked him back through the gateway using his Singularity Blade. "Go on."

"We send your golem through first, and then I have to follow him over briefly to make the shot."

Shiv frowned. "What do you mean you have to follow him over briefly?"

"I can't shoot a Veilpiercer through a gateway."

"Why the hell not?" Shiv asked.

"Complex Dimensionality reasons," Adam said. "Now, the moment I do that, I want you to freeze time and drag me back across."

And suddenly Shiv was doubly unsure about this plan. "Do you have to be on the other side? Maybe you could just give me the vambrace."

"No," Adam said. "It's the most secure way. We need to kill fifty thousand of the bastards? Fine. Let's do it in an instant. Let's bomb them so hard that we vaporize most of their army. We can't fight them indefinitely."

Shiv let out a breath, and he shrugged. "Alright. Okay. Golem. Cross the rift. Smash into anyone you see. Keep your Inertial Overdrive high. But don't discharge unless you're about to evaporate—actually, don't discharge under any circumstances."

The golem responded immediately. It shot across through the open rift with a blast of acceleration. Shiv looked up at Adam. "Alright. I'm going in next."

The Gate Lord held up a fist. "I'll follow thereafter. Uva, coordinate defenses, have them lock this place down by the time we get back."

"Understood," Uva replied. "Don't die, boys."

"If I do, it's Shiv's fault."

The Deathless grunted uncomfortably as he spiked himself through the open gateway. "Thanks for the added pressure, asshole."

Ritual Conditions: Slay [199/50,000 Vultegs] to align the Dimensional frequency of the Vulketh Gateway to the Tutorial.

Chapter 132 (I) Ritual [II]

Despite the chaotic nature and requirements of most rituals, they are not, in fact, randomized actions performed to amuse the predilections of certain gods. Rather, they influence the ambient mana of the world in specific ways, which then allows said god to reach across the System's thresholds ever so slightly and deliver the conditions of the ritual.

However, that is not the only kind of ritual in existence. There are non-divine rituals. These can be seen more like formulae. They usually come with even more esoteric and stringent requirements.

However, understand that existence is an unfolding story, and everything that happens fuels and expands the world's mana in some fashion or another. More importantly, the aspects of the ritual fuel the great strife that feeds the System, for struggle and change are the primary progenitors from which mana is birthed...

-Gods and Rituals

Shiv plunged through folds of Dimensionality as he passed from the gate into Vulketh itself. A clench of pressure squeezed his body as he crossed between dimensions, and he found himself far below the surface of a molten ocean. He could see little more than a murky gleam, and the oppressive environment molded around Shiv's flesh. Yet, despite its immense heat, it failed to affect his Adamantine Adaption. Instead, his Magebreaker rang.

The ocean itself is magical, Shiv realized. Never knew that.

He also realized his blade no longer had billowing waves of gravity around it. That made Shiv's enthusiasm plummet slightly. Seemed like easy Skill Fusions weren't going to be a thing until he was back beneath the glow of the mana core.

He looked about, trying to get his bearings. There were strange shapes moving in the depths. Then, a mutilated torso fell past him. Shiv looked up. Broken bodies and severed limbs rained down from above, trailing spills of black and misting blood.

Shiv triggered his Creeping Void, Chameleon, and Minor Illusion at once. A billowing miasma of blackness expanded from him, offering him a brief moment of cover. From on high came spells and projectiles. They fell like a chaotic rain, ripping through the molten ocean and leaving pockets of air in their wake.

Shiv froze time to get his bearings and to locate his Vitae Golem. As he squinted through the burning-hot fluid, he noticed that there were hundreds of metal towers hanging in the ocean above. They looked like they were made from reinforced metal of some kind, and along their sides were hundreds of ports. Some were open, and teams of Vultegs were in the process of leaping out from the structure. At the same time, a mere few meters atop Shiv was a patch of faint blue, and from it echoed a ringing scream.

The Recollector's misery graced Shiv's senses, and he saw the faint outline of the eldritch entity writhing in that patch of blue, seared into the flesh of existence, howling in eternal agony.

An eternity of hell's not long enough for you, you piece of shit, Shiv spat internally.

As he spiked his field, he moved upward—only to feel something coming for him. Layered cascades of Chronomancy pulsed from each of the metal towers. These temporal wardings arrived as massive tides, greater than any Shiv had faced before. He dashed back as an avalanche of countering time magic surged toward him. He briefly considered parrying them with his Magebreaker, but when even more massive walls of time magic came rushing forth, he winced.

Nope. Maybe I'll manage to parry one or two before the Magebreaker pops. Not worth it. Need to be careful when I'm using my Chronomancy.

He spiked higher as he deactivated his temporal shell. Around him were broken bodies of Vultegs; a good hint to the location of his Vitae golem. As he searched, even more metal towers plunged deeper down the molten sea. From the open ports on their sides came a flood of reinforcements. Reinforcements bestowed with the task of murdering him and Adam to satisfy Lord Scorn.

Shiv watched as Vultegs used their head-tentacles to push through the waters, going straight for the gateway below without any doubt or hesitation in teams of five. None of them noticed him, so he

continued his search. Inside, a building sense of urgency consumed him. They needed to set off his soul bomb—and fast. With all the towers and Vultegs spilling out from them, there was no way they could hold the gate for long.

Just how the hells did they even breach the gate in the first place? If they always could push through, they would have done it earlier... And where the hells is that golem?

The answer to that question greeted him suddenly as the Vitae Golem was smashed through his Creeping Void before slamming into the ocean bed. It crashed beside the Vulketh Gateway against a smooth expanse of hardened metal that served as the ocean floor of this place. Against that smooth expanse of metal, the Vitae Golem lay. There was a large obsidian glaive driven through its torso, and the golem worked to pull the weapon free. A Vulteg materialized beside the glaive in a splash of Dimensionality. They wore armor made from glass, glistening with motes of black static. They didn't notice Shiv as they reached out to finish the golem off.

This left them utterly undefended as Shiv spiked himself downward. He was on the Vulteg in a heartbeat, driving his Skysplitter into their spine.

He was utterly unprepared when he was instantaneously teleported somewhere else entirely just as his blade pierced the Vulteg's armor.

A clench of spatial magic swallowed him, drawing him briefly across the length of existence.

Again, Shiv lost track of where he was. The world around him spun, and when it stabilized, a series of spell patterns lit up along his surroundings. They circled fast, and Shiv narrowed his eyes as he regarded the walls. Titanium? Wait, I know this texture. This is—

The teleportation anchor he found himself inside flared bright. The Pyromancy spells infused upon it triggered the start of the purification process. Unpleasant memories returned to Shiv, and he immediately responded by slashing across the teleportation anchor's surface. It screamed, the metal protesting. Several spells died as they were cleaved in half. The first rush of flame swallowed Shiv, growing hotter and hotter, but it failed to overcome his plague-boosted Adamantine Adaption.

Shiv chuckled to himself. Not the same guy who got fried at Passage.

He seized the chamber with his gravity field and tore his way out, only to find himself lost, trapped within an even larger structure. Within the teleportation anchor, the spells sputtered and died, the last plumes of fire curling like closing fingers around Shiv as it spilled out into this new expanse.

The larger space he found himself in resembled that of a narrow tower, and he was near the top. There were various bridges extending above and below him, but the spine of the tower seemed to be made from a chain of interconnected anchors. In a strange way, it was like looking at a rope threaded through a series of fans.

"Scorn's loathing!" a Vulteg cried out nearby. They looked down from a bridge above.

That was the last thing they did as their cyclopean eye was pierced by a surging river of Vitae. Shiv drew the Vulteg close and drained them of what vitality they had left. At the same time, he continued observing the other teleportation anchors. His was the only one that seemed pitch black while all the others were pure white. More importantly, his seemed to have additional structural reinforcements, while the others looked thinner and less dense by far.

"The hells," Shiv muttered, and then all at once he felt a series of spatial pressures pulsing across all the other anchors in a chain. His own teleportation anchor tried to trigger another spell, but a gushing spray of Dimensionality resulted in nothing but a few flecks of blackness washing over Shiv's form.

A second thereafter, every single teleportation anchor above and below him opened, and a few hundred Vultegs emerged on the bridges. Shiv's Biomancy counted four hundred Vultegs in a two-hundred-meter vicinity. Four hundred very confused Vultegs that were bathed in the Creeping Void.

"Did someone do something to the ambient light, huh?" one of the Vultegs called out.

Just then, the walls along the tower opened. A veil of mana shimmered over the new exits, preventing the molten metal outside from leaking in. Yet, it did little to prevent Shiv's Creeping Void from leaking out. The Deathless saw the bridges connected the anchors to the openings leading outside. That's how he discovered where he was: In one of those strange metallic towers descending into the depths.

Shiv stared out into the molten ocean that surrounded the Vulketh Gateway. A veil of mana was layered over the insides of the tower. This was how the Vultegs were delivered en masse to attack the gate. They were first teleported to these towers, and then they would simply exit them physically.

But why are there—Wait, more towers only arrived earlier. They didn't amass forces for this attack. They're literally just dropping in right now. Did Scorn not plan this at all?

He pushed that thought out of his head. There was no time to figure out why this attack felt so sloppy. He needed to find his golem again—or make a new one. And it needed to be ready by the time Adam got through.

First, though, a goodbye gift for some of these assholes.

Shiv immediately lashed out with two streams of forking Vitae. It shot up and down, ripping through the weaker Vultegs while pinning the stronger ones against the bridge and draining them. At the same time, he froze time. His temporal shell formed over him—just as a ripping wall of Chronomancy crashed down from above. Shiv reacted. He slammed the back of his left hand into the collapsing wave. His Magebreaker shrieked as its frequency spiked. It was like trying to shoulder through a literal flood, even with his boosted physique. Shiv hissed and pushed harder. With a final bit of effort, the warding bent off at an angle.

His Magebreaker rattled violently, but it held. And it gave him enough time to proceed. Shiv spiked his gravitic field sixty times in quick succession. His Inertial Overdrive hit a point where his skin was beginning to tear, where his muscles were ripping free. He discharged, then. The world around him burst. His inner flesh expanded in a rupturing pop. A corona of fire and force spread out—but froze in the stilled grip of time.

Ow. Shiv winced.

Adamantine Adaption 166 > 167

Then he cast himself back in time and shot out from the open port before the next wave of Chronomancy hit. As he went out, however, he flinched as another rush of Chronomancy—one he hadn't anticipated—slammed into him. Nearly all of Shiv's Chronomancy field peeled free from his body. Thereafter, he noticed another tower frozen nearby, just a hundred meters away. At the top of the tower was a gleaming spike, a Chronomantically enchanted construct that constantly radiated broadcasts of counter-mana.

Shiv grimaced as he dismissed his Chronomancy once more, preserving it just before it broke. The insides of the tower he departed from exploded. Shiv was blasted outward, and he clenched his teeth as he felt something inside him twist to the wrong side. A pocket of air formed a three-hundred-meter radius around him. Then, Shiv found himself briefly falling through open air.

The molten ocean had an open patch in its depths. He used that opportunity to accelerate ahead, trying to figure out where he was, to reach the gateway again, and secure his Vitae Golem so that Adam could shoot it and be done with this mess.

That being said, his act within the tower did more than a little damage. Just not nearly enough to see this done fast.

Ritual Conditions: Slay [1,211/50,000 Vultegs] to align the Dimensional frequency of the Vulketh Gateway to the Tutorial.

Shiv flung himself through the air. As the molten ocean came rushing back, he saw the form of a Jealousy splashing down, displacing massive waves of liquid. As a wall of fluid came crashing toward him, the Deathless spiked himself forward and magnified his Skysplitter. He slashed vertically using his titanic blade and shot into the cleft he made in the water. Bifurcated waves slammed into him. He parried both halves and let his Frictionless Vector do its job.

Frictionless Vector 65 > 66

The Deathless passed into the water as an injection and slipped past the Jealousy. He shrank his blade again just as the Greater Demon looked up. Yet, it failed to follow the exact position of his body as his Creeping Void drenched it in a miasma of black.

“DARKNESS!” the Jealousy cried. “DON’T LIKE! HATE DARKNESS! WHERE DARKNESS COME FROM?”

The Jealousy fired a beam of Psychomancy through the black field, but Shiv was already circling behind it, following the falling towers on the way down. The teleportation left him confused, but since all the Vultegs were heading to the gate, he let the falling towers be his guide.

But some of the enemy grew aware of his presence. Spells slashed through the air, and glistening fragments of steel detonated around Shiv, bursting into showers of screaming shrapnel. They bounced off his bone armor, and one even skipped away from his eye. Shiv didn't stay and fight. He just left a body behind just to confuse the Vultegs and kept spiking himself downward.

Deception 12 > 14

He followed a descending tower as it unleashed another ripple of counter-magic. More waves pulsed from the surrounding darkness. There were more towers sinking to the depths. Many more. And even if he couldn't see any of them, he could count the Chronomantic ripples and knew they probably had spatial wards as well.

Shit, that might make hitting the Vitae Golem hard anyway. Godsdamned System, always rushing us. Never gives us any time to pl— Shiv cut off his own complaining. The System didn't care. So he wouldn't either. Shiv would figure something out. He always did.

Just then, a dead Vulteg tumbled through the ocean across from him. He noticed a very familiar arrow lodged in their singular eye. A dimensional rupture tore open. An arrow pierced the dead Vulteg. Adam blasted out from the pathway in an instant—barely in time as the dimensional pathway was squeezed shut behind him.

Shiv accelerated and gripped Adam by the shoulder. The Gate Lord's armor was glowing bright, straining against the molten waters on his behalf. At the same time, his eyes were glowing with Divination mana, which explained how Adam found him so fast. Rather than Shiv dragging Adam along, however, it was the Gate Lord that accelerated them both through the water, navigating the molten expanse with ease. His vector-wings moved as fast in the ocean's depths as they did through the open skies.

Shiv reached out using his Psychomancy and connected his mind to Adam's. At the same time, he began creating a new Vitae Golem—accepting the last for lost. “So. I think this Vulteg invasion thing was kind of spontaneously thrown together.”

“It does appear that way—” Adam hissed as he pulled both of them down. They slipped by an accelerating tower and barely kept ahead of the molten waves it displaced. “There are more of these ships splashing down. They don't have any formations set up—any proper force concentrations. It's like they're all just dropping in haphazardly and trying to figure out how to overwhelm our gate as they go.”

Shiv focused on infusing his Animated Skills into his new golem. With all that was happening around him, that was practically a feat unto itself.

And the System seemed to agree with Shiv.

Skill Gained: Multi-Tasking 1 (Common)

Chapter 132 (II) Ritual [II]

“Okay,” Shiv said, composing a new Vitae Golem. “How far can you fire that arrow?”

“A hundred meters in a half-second,” Adam replied. He was navigating the depths through Shiv’s eyes and his Divination. Pairing that with Adam’s Heroic-Tier Awareness, he navigated the depths with borderline prescience. “That’s how long I get before the spatial wards start hitting me.”

“Same thing with my Chronomancy,” Shiv explained. “Managed to parry one of the ripples, but another one nearly ripped my shell right off my body.”

A column of flame splashed down at them from above. Shiv widened his Skysplitter into a shield and parried the blast. Adam loosed a Hydromantically-charged Veilpiercer in the same moment. More spells came. More projectiles slashed through the depths. Most of the others missed.

The Creeping Void 112 > 113

“We’re going down. Let’s get close to the gate before I fire this bloody thing.” Adam’s wings flared brighter. They shot past a dozen of falling troop-towers—and came to a rough stop as Shiv saw a few thousand Vultegs blocking off the gateway. They were pouring through the other side like a swarm of insects performing a raid on a rival hive.

To Shiv and Adam’s benefit, the Vultegs’ rear was left wide open. They weren’t expecting Shiv or Adam to be coming back.

Shiv finished his last infusion and commanded his golem to move fifty meters away. “Adam. This shit’s gonna be tight. The moment you fire that shot—”

A blur of movement passed across the corner of his eye. Shiv shoved Adam aside as a glaive passed through the space between them. An obsidian glaive Shiv remembered seeing in the chest of his last Vitae Golem.

And just as he thought of his previous golem, its severed head tumbled past him. It dissolved in the molten depths, coming apart as motes of red and white. Shiv and Adam regarded the fading golem, and slowly they looked up. Hovering above them was that glass-armored Vulteg again, and behind them descended ten towers and four more Jealousies. More shadows emerged even higher up in the ocean, and that made Shiv all the more certain that this wasn't a fight he was supposed to win directly.

"We're being forced into using my Vitae as a bomb. But something's missing here. The sudden breach, this sloppy attack... There's something behind this. It feels more coherent and planned than the system's bullshit."

Adam formed another arrow as his Necromantic vambrace crackled with energy. "We can figure that out if we survive. Right now, we make this count and finish this. I'm going to fire my arrow twenty meters away from that glass-armored bastard. The moment I do, you stop time, move your golem in position, and get us out."

Shiv looked back and frowned as he noticed the obsidian glaive shooting through the gateway. But he didn't have time to warn Adam that the glass-armored Vulteg could teleport to his glaive. The Gate Lord fired his dimensional arrow. It ripped across reality. Shiv stopped time at the same instant and ordered his golem to move. "Get in front of that arrow!"

Waves of Chronomancy crashed down—and they were more layered than ever before. There was scarcely a gap between them now, and Shiv understood why Adam was in such a hurry. When enough of those towers landed, they wouldn't be able to use their Chronomancy or Dimensionality at all.

The Vitae Golem spiked itself into position, but the descending wardings immediately shredded its temporal shell. Shiv grabbed Adam by his waist and spiked both of them as fast as he could. This would injure Adam, but staying meant death. Shiv held the Gate Lord close to his body and kept Adam protected from all surrounding harm. Such a feat was easy to accomplish when he was three times Adam's size. He crashed into the Vultegs rushing through the gateway just as the first of the wards brushed against his back.

Part of his temporal shell peeled away. The Vultegs choking the gateway before Shiv burst apart were knocked aside as he accelerated himself once more. He ripped through them just as a chain of other wards smashed into him. His temporal shell burst apart. Time resumed. A searing heat kissed Shiv's back as the world behind him vanished into an expanse of all-consuming soul-fire. Vultegs around him ignited and screamed. Shiv gritted his teeth and pressed on as he heard Adam cry out. The Gate Lord's limbs were folded the wrong way from the brutality of inertia.

Adam's Heroic-Tier Reflexes were gentle. Shiv's was anything but. The difference between them made itself known time and time again in the most brutal of ways.

A squeezing pressure clamped down around Shiv as he crossed through the gateway. He shot back up into the air, ripping a bloody path through the tightly packed Vultegs trying to pass through. At the same time, a rush of flame splashed against Shiv's back, melting through his bone armor and burning soul-wounds into his flesh.

Shiv let out a hiss as he pulled his gravitic field at an angle. He and Adam crashed against a building and then through a dense layer of stone. As the battlements collapsed behind them, Shiv felt a series of spells sting and break against his body in quick succession until he called for someone to cease fire.

Pain consumed him. But Shiv was used to the hurt by now—didn't let it distract him. He triggered his Song of the Vigilant as he cast a Woundeater into Adam. The Gate Lord's arms snapped back in place as he gave a groan of relief. Shiv pulled him back to his feet and turned to face the scattered and broken Vultegs.

Spells rained down on the invaders from all directions. Mortar's shots splashed down, consuming parts of the gateway in molten slag. But a beam of blinding fire continued climbing higher into the air. It burned bright and hot, and it just kept going. As Shiv cast his Vitae into downed Vultegs and began transferring his soul-wounds onto them, his breath caught as a notification appeared before his eyes.

Ritual Conditions: Slay [2,871,446/50,000 Vultegs] to align the Dimensional frequency of the Vulketh Gateway to the Tutorial.

"Holy felling shit," Shiv exhaled. His mind went blank. He expected Adam setting off his soul to do something. Some damage. Some harm. But this was something else entirely. This was another level of destruction and death. Shiv knew what it was like to kill an army of enemies. Everything below High-Adept felt like an insect to him now. They died when he moved—though some with esoteric skills still posed strange threats, especially if they engaged him together. Masters and Heroes were harder to kill, but almost three million people dead in an instant. Shiv gawked at the beam of soul-flame erupting from the gate, cleaving a brilliant wound high up through the sky. His mind was numb. His body was still partially charred. Shiv couldn't fathom any more than a few thousand dead. Millions were ridiculous.

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He crossed some threshold today. Something was going to come from this. Something severe.

I... I don't know if I can cook this feeling out of me, Shiv thought.

Vitality Drain 55 > 59

Ritual Commenced!

Lord Scorn wants you to know that he is pissing himself in anger!

Lord Scorn has been prevented from reaching across realms and crushing the gate!

Lord Scorn has designated Adam Arrow as a new slur for the Vultegs!

Lord Scorn has sworn his eternal, undying hatred for Adam Arrow and the Corpse Shedder.

Lord Scorn is going to torture Adam Arrow and the Corpse Shedder for eternity once he captures them.

Lord Scorn has promised aid and divine blessings to anyone that stands against Adam Arrow.

Adam staggered beside Shiv. Both stared into the rising pillar of soul-fire. The Deathless looked at the Gate Lord. Adam's expression was blank. "How many people did we just kill?"

“Around three million,” Shiv breathed. A chuckle of disbelief escaped him. “Sullain wasn’t shitting about me potentially lighting up the continent.” And that just made the idea of facing the Vicar even more daunting. “He managed to capture and reshape my soul-detonation, too. So. I have no idea how we’re going to kill him, Adam.”

The Gate Lord nodded. “Is... is it wrong that I don’t feel anything but exhaustion?”

“I think it might be normal,” Shiv replied. “Because I don’t know what I’m supposed to feel from this.”

Both of them kept staring into the column of white and red fire rising from the Vulketh Gateway for a beat. Stretches of corrosion danced along its length. Uva landed beside them a moment later, joining them as they watched the afterglow of their destructive act.

“What did you two...” Uva swallowed. “I assume that is what it looks like?”

“Only a bit,” Shiv replied. “A blunted bit. I don’t know what’s happening on the other side. I don’t want to know.”

And slowly, the pillar of soul-fire began to shrink. It thinned with each passing second. As it did, Shiv could see the Dimensionality mana spreading out from the gateway clearer than ever before. Something landed beside them from above. It sank into the ground and split in half. It looked like the haft of a spear. A very melted obsidian spear. A moment thereafter, Uva pulled Adam out of the way as a smoking carcass crashed down where he stood.

All three looked at the body as smoke rose off it. To Shiv's surprise, the Vulteg groaned. Then, the Deathless noticed their glass armor and shook his head. "You poor bastard. You teleported straight to your glaive, didn't you?"

The limbless, eyeless Vulteg twitched at his words, then let out a final noise and went still.

There were other Vulteg around them. Most of them were burning too. What few survivors remained threw down their arms in surrender as they gazed at Shiv. Several were on their knees, their gazes revealing naked terror. A few others even killed themselves outright, driving their blades through their bodies.

Dread Aura 96 > 100 (Skill Evolution Imminent)

Shiv started at pockets of surrendering Vultegs and sighed. "More prisoners."

Adam shook his head. "We're not keeping them here. We're—"

His words were interrupted as the final thread of soul-fire vanished and a sky-shaking scream shook the gate.

"FUCCCCCCCCCKKKKK! FUCKKKKK! CUNNNNNNNNTT! WHAT THE FUCKING FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU FUCKS! DO YOU THINK IT'S FUNNY TO BOMB MY DIMENSION! DO YOU FUCKING THINK ANIMANCY BOMBS ARE EASY TO FIX! YOU RAT FUCKING—OH, YOU'RE GOING TO FIND A WAY TO GIVE ME A DIVINE ANEURYSM. I'M GONNA SHIT MYSELF AGAIN! I'M GONNA DO IT! I GONNA SHIT MYSELF AND NAME THE FUCKING PIECE OF SHIT AN ADAM! I'M GOING TO MAKE IT COME TO LIFE AND HAVE IT TORTURED EVERY DAY OF ITS ETERNAL LIFE!!!!!"

Lord Scorn sounded more like a wheezing accountant than a terrible god. In fact, he was on the verge of degenerating into angry sobs at any moment.

“Why is he just blaming me?” Adam whispered, his expression offended. “You were part of this, too.”

“Yeah, but he doesn’t know who I am. He just called me the Corpse Shedder.”

“Why the felling shit does he know who I am, then?” Adam snarled.

“Good question,” Shiv said. “Other good questions are: How did the gateway get breached? And who breached it?”

“Who?” Adam asked.

“Yeah,” Shiv nodded. The last lingering remnants of his mental numbness faded, and his mind began to churn. “Had to be. There was a breach in the metal as well. An opening. If the Vultegs could make that from the other side—the hells with that, if the Vultegs were the ones who did this, they would be more prepared.”

“What do you mean?” Uva asked.

“The attack was spontaneous. Rushed, even.” Adam shook his head at her as he looked down, trying to process all that had just happened. “They didn’t even have proper formations set up on the other side. That’s why their forces entered so haphazardly.”

And just then, Shiv shuddered. A feeling of suspicion hardened inside him.

“Well. You’re quite the firecracker, aren’t you, Insul?”

Whisper materialized just behind Shiv. The orc stared past the partially collapsed battlements into the glassed crater surrounding the gateway. The orc chuckled as he held out a hand. A rain of ash fell. The moans and cries of badly wounded Vultegs assailed the gate with a symphony of unceasing suffering. And slowly, Shiv could see the Dimensionality of the gate shifting and changing, like a boiling cauldron of black bile on the verge of overflowing.

Lord Scorn’s screams were replaced by Challenger’s booming laughter midway through. As the orc god bellowed his glee, anger exploded inside the Deathless—but he held it in check.

If only for a moment.

“Hey, Whisper,” Shiv said, turning to stare at the orc. Whisper greeted him with a smile. The other orcs stood atop a second set of distant walls set up just before the obsidian tower. “Got a question for you.”

“Yes, Insul?”

“Did the Challenger ask you to do it, or did you breach the gateway because you thought it would be funny? Because it would get me to do the ritual faster?”

Awareness 15 > 20

Deception 14 > 18

Psychology 15 > 24

The orc’s eyes widened in surprise, but Shiv read something from Whisper’s expression.

And the anger inside the Deathless exploded. But rather than let it consume him, Shiv spent the anger on a skill. He spent it on Awareness as he read every muscle on the orc’s face, as he watched Whisper’s surprise turn to respect and astonishment.

“I know it’s you,” Shiv said. “Because who else could it be? We thought we watched you well. But—”

“No,” Whisper said, shaking his head. “Not me. But close.”

Shiv pressed his lips together, and suddenly, he considered the only other orc that could have done this without him noticing. Band waved at him from atop the walls, his face wild with glee. He clapped for Shiv, and the Deathless let out a breath.

“Did the Challenger tell you to do it?”

“Yes,” the Challenger’s voice rumbled from the shifting gateway. “Now, Insul—”

Shiv very calmly punched Whisper in the face before the orc god could say anything else.

Chapter 133 (I) Army

I prefer fighting orcs over talking to them. The worst thing that happens when you fight an orc is that they kill you. They may torture you. But there's an end to the madness. There's a final point where it finishes, and you feel no more. You suffer no more.

But if you talk to an orc, they will twist your mind with their words. They will strike at your heart using psychology, philosophy, rhetoric, anything to bend your will and assert their dominance over you. We stopped interrogating orcs for that reason; half the interrogators and torturers we used on the orcs killed themselves within a span of two months.

You see, they understand us. They can guess how we feel. But we don't think like they do. For good reason. We're a natural species. We were alive before the Integration, before the System came. We lived by evolutionary rules. Theoretically, we are tribal creatures. We value things and develop deeper connections.

The orcs are nothing more than weapons given life, and they'll use every aspect of yourself against you. There's always something you want. There is always something you wish to achieve. And if you're desperate, and the orc knows what you're desperate about, it will use that. It will use that to chain you.

But that doesn't mean they're unbeatable. No. I've shamed an orc before. I mocked their failure to breach one of our walls, and he apologized to me. He was genuine. It wasn't mockery. He said he was sorry. He said that he shamed himself by not being good enough, by not reaching his desired endpoint of triumph.

And that's the thing. If there is any way to overcome an orc mentally, philosophically, rhetorically, it's by focusing on where they failed. Not the ideas where they failed. Not how they conceptually failed. How they literally failed. They are very materialistic creatures. Proudful to the extreme. And they value their achievements and experience above all else.

If you have to talk to one, use that. But for the love of all the gods, don't talk to an orc. Not if you can help it.

They'll make you care about them somehow. And then they'll betray you with a grin on their face.

-Hero-Ranger Morgan Munny

Whisper blasted through the air, tumbling several times with an imprint of Shiv's knuckles on his face. Before he even touched the ground, the Deathless slammed into him, pinning him against the far battlements beneath the obsidian tower. The stone walls shook, fissures spreading along them. Shiv gripped Whisper by his neck, lifting the orc high.

Whisper chuckled as he spat blood and broken teeth all over Shiv's chest. The Deathless was calm. He was extremely calm. His anger had all been spent. But still, he wasn't sure if he was going to kill the orc or not. Calmness was one thing, hatred was another. Part of him screamed for him to reach into the orc's spirit and mutilate him beyond measure.

Far above, the other orcs cheered him on. A mithril ingot switched hands as Band lost a bet to Mortar. "I told you!" Mortar bellowed. "I told you the Deathless would see through it. He's uneducated, but that doesn't mean he's a fool."

As the other orcs grinned down at him, Shiv clenched his teeth.

"Now to see the interesting part," Tequila said, "is he gonna rip Whisper in half? Is he gonna come for us right after?"

In the background, Shiv could hear the Challenger's laughter turn to an amused sigh. "There is no point to this, Deathless. It was going to happen sooner or later. I merely accelerated the process, and perhaps saved your Blackedge in the process. You all deliberated too long, and as amusing as your little cooking challenge was, you really do need to deal with your actual problems soon."

Adam hovered in the air. He had three Veilpiercers drawn, each of them aimed at one of the other orcs. Uva drifted behind him, her mana strands rearing back as if a few thousand hair-thin serpents prepared to strike.

"You could finish me off," Whisper said. He was entirely too calm about this. "I think it might make you feel better—"

Shiv jabbed him in the throat with the bottom end of the Skysplitter. The orc choked, but his expression didn't change.

"Don't talk to me," Shiv said. He pointed his blade high at the orcs as he glared. "None of you talk to me. Not until I get to you. Not a word."

He met Band's eye, and the musical orc just smirked at him. That smirk became a grimace as Shiv blasted upwards, seizing Band by the throat. Whisper was left behind as Shiv's ire fell on the true culprit. They rose high in the air, the orc squinted at the Deathless, shrugging in his grip and offering a near-comical gesture. And everything Shiv felt about what they experienced from cooking together, about how perhaps the orcs weren't just cruel monsters, was drowned in a new wave of cold loathing.

"Umbrals died," Shiv growled. He looked back at the first layer of battlements. Most of them were half-melted. Only a single section of the wall still stood. He couldn't see any bodies remaining atop the parapets. But he'd seen the defenders who gave their lives to hold the gate. "Weaveresses died. People died."

Band's lips curled upward as he met Shiv's eyes. "People die," the orc mused. "We die, you die. It's just what happens." With every word spoken, Band swallowed, biting back pain. "Difference is..." Shiv's arms trembled as he held himself back from immediate murder. "You come back. We come back. They sleep. They go away. For good. And you. Killed too. So many. Why mad? Three million lives. Fingerlings. As conscious as any spiderling. Jealous of you. Insul. Powerful. Brutal. Their families. Scream your name at night. Screams echo across history."

Shiv wanted to crush the orc's skull. He wanted to rip his own body open and pour his wounds into Band. He wanted to torture the orc over and over again, bring him closer and closer to the brink until he finally got an apology.

But his massively strengthened Psychology Skill told him what would actually happen. These were orcs. He could shame them based on them failing to dominate him, or failing to live up to their potential. They were performers, builders, makers, Pathbearers of a savage extreme.

But it was as the Challenger had said before: philosophy was just a weapon for them. Morality was something they could utilize and discard at a whim. Torturing the orc likely wouldn't even inflict any mental trauma, unless he directly targeted the orc's mind.

Shiv and the orc swayed high in the air. Below, the Umbrals turned on the remaining orcs. Two teams of sisters held out their polearms. Ikki stood among them, her face coated under a layer of dried blood. Nearby, Can Hu regarded the orcs as well, and Valor hovered behind it, a Necromantic blade crackling with murderous intent.

Yet despite all this, the three orcs not within Shiv's grasp continued chatting among each other. Mortar and Tequila leaned over the parapets as if nothing was wrong, as if they were just taking in the sights. They ignored Adam and the Veilpiercers he had pointed at them. They ignored Uva and the threat she posed to their minds. And most of all, Band still taunted Shiv with his condescending gaze.

"You know, if I reach into your soul, I can tear you up for good," Shiv hissed. He tapped a strand of Vitamancy against the orc's jaw and slowly drilled it through Band's skin. It went deeper than the flesh, splashing into the inner recesses of Band's being, and the orc let out a slight grunt of discomfort. "I could finish you, or I could just rip you up, leave you crippled between every life. A mangled, broken thing that screams and screams when he respawns, but never gets to be a true Pathbearer again. Just a ruined lump of felling meat."

Band looked at him once more and shrugged. "If that is the price. For. Excitement. And experiences." The orc was entirely honest. An eternal wound meant nothing to him. An eternal wound was easily accepted if he got something of a novel experience out of it.

And another one of Shiv's assumptions about the orcs broke apart. They weren't fearless because they were immortal. No, they were fearless because their psychology simply didn't allow them to be terrified in the same way a human or Umbral might. It was by design, not simply a side effect of their metaphysical nature.

"Remember," Band continued, his voice strained. "Remember war. Need good warriors. Many warriors. Killed many. Only needed to kill fifty thousand." And Band smiled. It was a vicious sneer of a smile, and the orc licked at his bloodied lips. "But after that fifty thousand, so many others. Remember the rules of the ritual. Go. Get your reward. Accept your army. Insul."

"Remember the rules of the ritual,"

the Challenger carried on where Band finished.

Shiv turned his head backward, and he stared at the dimensional gateway that once led to Vulketh. It was roiling, pulsating with building waves of energy. Blackened tides splashed outward, each one crashing over another. On the gateway was a deep bowl, surrounded by cracked glass across the ground.

Countless Vultegs lay in the depression, their bodies disfigured beyond description. Some of them had expired. Some of them remained on their knees, whimpering for mercy. And some were broken of mind and spirit, wandering madly. Just the sight left Shiv briefly stunned. This was only a small group harmed by his soul-fire detonation.

So what the hells does Vulketh look like right now? Shiv wondered.

But then new shapes joined the Vultegs. Larger shapes that reached up through the gateway, pulling themselves over the black lip of Dimensionality. A shaking membrane of surface pressure broke free from the bodies of newly arriving orcs. They arose in an orderly fashion, one climbing up after another.

As a group of ten orcs slipped out from the gate, they formed a perimeter and held their blades high in unison. They all bore what seemed to be a butcher's cleaver, and their bodies were adorned with bloodied aprons. Along each of their hips was a chain of heads: elven, Umbral, Vulteg, automaton, and more.

"We come to serve you, Insul!" one of the orcs roared. "We come to give ourselves to your service! We depart from Lone Star for the coming summer! And we give praise to your slaughter! We give praise to your feats of destruction! We give praise!"

And the other orcs cheered with him.

Shiv stared in utter disbelief, but that feeling slowly faded as he descended from the sky. He dropped Band back on the parapet, and the orc readjusted his chainmail suitcoat. He cracked his neck and gave Shiv a slow smile.

"No, you don't get to do that," Shiv hissed through clenched teeth. "We're not done. This isn't over. You get a few moments. A few moments before I figure out what to do with you. But your life is mine."

"Not over?" Band asked, flicking a tongue across his lips.

Shiv chuckled humorlessly. "Before any of this is done, Band, I'm going to hear you scream and scream for real. I will find a way to hurt you for good."

"But not yet," Band replied. "Not right now. Go. Go. Greet the army. Your army. Your gift. Your rite."

Shiv simply glared at the orc, and then he turned his hateful gaze on the others. "All of you, come with me. You're not staying here, not anymore." He looked back at Band. "I want to know what you did and how you did it—Actually, no. Uva!" Shiv called out. The Psychomancer met his gaze readily. Behind her eyes, he read a hint of cold fury.

"This one." Shiv pointed at Band. "He opened the breach. Reach into his mind, but don't break him. Find out everything he knows—if he did anything else to the gateways. Find out if he has any other surprises for us."

"And any more mana bombs?" Adam added. "That's what he used to throw the Surface District into chaos. That, and a series of specially summoned dimensionals. They butchered slaves, mercenaries—more. That godsdamned mad bastard..."

Band held his arms open as Uva's strands pierced into him. His smile faded, and his eyes rolled back. He promptly collapsed as several of her Psychomancy threads pulled upward violently. She wasn't going to do this gently, and she didn't care if she broke him. Frankly, Shiv didn't truly care either.

"The rest of you," he said, calling out to the orcs, "with me."

"Oh, and where are we going now, Insul?" Tequila asked. He barely gave his friend a second glance as Uva began prying open Band's mind.

"We're going to the Tutorial," Shiv declared aloud. "All that death was to get an army, right? Fine. I'll bite. I'll see this army. But I want to see the fucking Challenger too. I want to see him tell me why he was so determined to be a piece of shit. I would have felling done the ritual eventually anyway."

"Eventually," Whisper said, sighing. "Eventually is too far away, Deathless. We were helping you. You didn't have the time."

"I have as much time as I decide I have!" Shiv growled. "It's not your place to decide for me."

"Of course, Insul. I apologize." Whisper bowed, and he wiped blood from his face using his robes.

Shiv wanted to crush the orc's skull. But murdering the orcs pointlessly would be a waste. Too much of a waste with the war looming over the horizon. "Adam, you're with me too. Time for us to have our first formal conversation with the Challenger. And for us to survey our forces." Shiv frowned. "Well. Survey the orcs. Can't exactly call them our forces if they're going to do shit like this."

"But we are yours to command, Insul," Mortar said with a chuckle. "Don't you trust us?"

The orcs were determined to taunt him, to see how far they could push him. Shiv wanted to kill at least one of them permanently to set terms, but a pounding coldness inside his head commanded him to think straight, to be pragmatic. Besides, if he did butcher them, they would have won over him in some—

MOTHERFUCKERS! Shiv raged internally. They were using their godsdamned Psychology Skill on him. They knew he hated bending as much as they enjoyed domination. Shit. Adam was right. I am almost an inverted orc in some ways.

Once again, he considered just killing one of them. And once again, he held off. They were going to be facing Sullain at Blackedge soon. The Inquisition had an expeditionary force on the way. The orcs were using him, and so he was going to use them in return, because they were going to spend their lives the proper way.

"And if I do want to kill one of them permanently," Shiv thought to himself, "I'll do it later, when we're in control. The last thing I need is the Challenger deciding to renege on this little ritual and flood the gate with his orcs. Shit. We basically just replaced Lord Scorn with something worse."

"Far worse," the Challenger crooned. "And far better as well."

Mortar and Tequila jumped down from the top of the battlement. Shiv grabbed Band by the back of his neck and carried him away while Uva continued her Psychomantic delving. He wasn't leaving her or the orc here. They would do this in the Tutorial—and not risk the remaining survivors in the gate anymore.

"Null Mont!" Shiv roared. He looked around, trying to find where the Exalted Mother was. "Null Mont!"

Lightning flashed above. An arcing bolt of electricity twisted past Shiv and slammed a Weaveress into shape atop the battlements. Null Mont materialized at the parapets, staring at the Deathless. Her posture was one of excess tension. Her many limbs were shaking, and the humanoid digits at the end of each limb vibrated even more so.

"Yes, yes! Honored Guest!" She coughed. "I mean, Hero Shiv."

"You hurt?" Shiv asked. He looked Null Mont up and down. His Biomancy couldn't detect any wounds, but some of the metal quills running down her arms were broken, and she clutched at her torso like there was something wrong.

"No, no, I was... I took the Leviathan meat. I..." Her words came out as a messy stammer. She held up the wrapper, and he understood and gave her a nod.

"You're fine then."

"Yes, thank you. Because of you..."

Shiv offered her a brief nod. Null Mont was an idiot, but compared to the orcs, she was downright angelic. She'd even served an active role in combat. Despite being absolutely terrified. I can see her shivering. "Listen, I need you to get everyone together. Construct additional defenses around the gateway. Trap the gateway. Dome it in if you have to. Let nothing get in or out. Do you understand? Get the Geomancers now. We're going to go across. If we don't come back in 3 hours, you seal the gate, take whoever you can among the remaining inhabitants, and you leave as soon as you can."

"In fact," Adam called out, "you should go introduce yourself to more people first. That should allow the mana core to synchronize with you as the next Gate Lord, in case something happens to me." Adam grimaced at that statement. He shot a look at the orcs standing around the dimensional gateway, and a tense breath left him. "Are you sure this is a good idea, Shiv?"

Shiv stared at Adam. "I think I'm too tired for good ideas."

The Gate Lord laughed. "Ah. Well said. Well. Let's go do something potentially stupid together."

Chapter 133 (II) Army

"The orcs are tied to me," Shiv said. "You don't—"

"Shiv," Adam cut him off. "Shut up and stand in front. I want to get a shot off in case they start attacking, and I need your thick head to block some attacks for me."

And somehow, that made the Deathless feel far better.

He, Adam, Uva, and the orcs moved toward the gateway. As they prepared to descend, each of the butcher-apron-wearing orcs fell to a knee. They slammed their cleavers into the ground and bowed their heads.

"The Challenger awaits," one of them called out. "Praise be your bloodshed, Insul."

Another grinned at Shiv, "Praise be your wrath, your cruelty, your dominance."

Adam eyed the orcs warily, and Shiv chucked Band through the gateway first. He stared at Uva and Adam. "Stay close to me. If anything happens, Uva, get in my head. Adam, get a Veilpiercer ready. Necromancy too."

The Gate Lord's mouth fell open. "We just obliterated one dimension, you want to do it to another?"

"Yeah," Shiv said casually. There was more than enough passing loathing in his blood to make him a willing bomb. "If the Challenger does anything stupid, I want to see if he fries like the Educator."

"Come and see, then," the Challenger said. The orc god's voice was thick with anticipation rather than fear or offense. "Come and see what I have arranged for you. Come and see the salvation of Blackedge."

"Wait!" Valor called, sailing through the air, and Can Hu floated upon a stone platform just behind him. "I am coming too," the Legendary Pathbearer declared. "It has been some time since I had this conversation."

But the Challenger interrupted him. "Oh no, we have not had this conversation, you broken thing. I spoke to the Valor that was, the Valor who was whole. Valor Thann, He Who Stills Eternity. You are not Valor. You are just a shadow. Broken pieces, groping, desperately trying to recompose yourself."

"Yet, even my shadow remains enough for you," Valor rebuffed. "I remember your failures on Ishimere, the world you failed to take. I remember your defeat at the Wolves' Den, where the Moon-Blooded drove your orcs back and sealed your gate."

"With your aid,"

the Challenger finished. "Yes, quite impressive. And I remember what you taught me there, oh Great Valor. But you are not so great now. You may come through, but your presence makes no difference, as you are not the Deathless I seek to speak with."

At that, Valor regarded Shiv. "He will never lie to you directly," Valor said, "but he will avoid the truth. Partial details will be revealed, and essential facts will be forgotten. But if he has promised you an army, you will have one, and if he has promised that they will fight alongside you, they will."

"But beyond that, anything goes," Shiv surmised. "Yeah, I kind of got that. You all ready?"

"No," Adam said. Then he offered Shiv a slight smirk. "But fuckit, let's go anyway."

"I'll be right behind," Uva replied, her gaze steady.

As Can Hu descended behind Shiv, several of the orcs pointed up at the automaton. "That's a Penitent! Penitent!" Several of the others immediately began cheering as well. "Penitent! Penitent! Penitent!" One muttered about how he had been beheaded by a Penitent once, and that he thought it would be funny if it happened again at some point.

"Felling orcs," Shiv muttered under his breath, and with that, he dropped through the gateway.

Spatial pressures folded over his body once more, but as he emerged, he found himself not at the bottom of a molten ocean, or below the azure glow of a mana core. No. This was a portrait of hellish ruination. The sky above resembled an ugly rash. Stretches of raw-red clouds ran as far as the eye could see, broken only by clefts of smog that spewed hissing rain upon the land.

And yet, this place was categorized not only by desolation but also by constant conflict. As Shiv looked behind, he saw that the gateway was built into an archway of gnarled steel. It rested atop a mountain of bodies—automaton, human, elven, and more. But between each of the other races there lay a fallen

orc, butchered, ruined, slaughtered beyond description. But on their faces were expressions of delight, rather than contortions of fear.

And beyond that corpse-lain mountain were towering structures. They jutted out of the ground like tombstones, but Shiv could see windows, aesthetic designs that shaped them. There were hollowed-out mountains in the distance as well, large sections carved into them, with orcs flowing in and out. But more importantly, there were countless orcs standing at the base of the mountain.

Many of them were kneeling; some stood tall, their fists held up. They were beyond Shiv's ability to count, extending past the horizon, stretching over mounds of rolling bodies, over peaks and vanishing under crests in the land. Some stood atop smoldering husks, and many wore the bones of their enemies.

Shiv saw few common aesthetics among the orcs. Some of them, much like him, were death-clad, wearing bone skulls or helmets, using spines as weapons or jutting ribs as daggers. Others were dressed in the most exquisite finery Shiv had ever seen. They had half-capes shrouding the right side of their body, while glistening silks flowed across their enormous musculature.

And then there were orcs that wore a uniform set of armor, though it was composed of different materials. Some wore plates of bronze, while others had layers of crenulated titanium. And then there were those who stood larger than the other orcs, sticking out as if oaks among blades of grass. They were adorned with adamantite and, in a few cases, even Inertium. Their right shoulders had a singular symbol: a shattering sun. Shiv guessed that was probably a mockery of Lone Star.

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"Welcome to this humble patch of the Tutorial, Insul," the Challenger whispered, gesturing out at the massive amount of orcs gathered before him. His form appeared as an oppressive backdrop to the sky,

visible where the clouds cleared to allow them an unobstructed view of the deity, or perhaps merely its projection.

Shiv took in the orcs and found himself speechless. It was one thing to imagine almost three million dead; it was another to behold three million arrayed before you, three million psychotic monsters dedicated to bloodshed and destruction. Three million promised by a ritual empowered by slaughter, three million that might betray him in any number of ways and for an equally infinite number of reasons.

"This place is always at war," Valor said. "Even right now, we could be attacked at any moment, for such is the nature of the Tutorial."

"What is this nature?" Adam muttered. He glared warily at the amassed orcs, and Shiv could feel his muscles tighten. Adam didn't much want to be here, and Shiv couldn't blame him. But they had to do this. They already did the deed. Now it was time to collect an army and set new conditions.

"There are so many," Uva breathed. For once, her ironclad demeanor gave way to genuine shock. As her Psychomantic threads loosened around Band, the orc squinted one of his eyes at her. Slowly, he laughed.

"More... This is nothing," he choked out, "nothing at all. A single percentage of orc-kind would drown your Weave, drown you forever." And then her threads tightened, and once more, Band's eyes rolled before he crashed face-first down upon a corpse.

"This place is cleaner than I remember," Valor commented.

"Cleaner?" Adam gawked. He stared at the many bodies resting at his feet, and he shook his head.
"What do you mean, cleaner?"

"I mean, there were far more corpses, and it constantly rained blood."

"Yes, about that," Tequila said, wiggling his nose disgustedly. "We complained."

Valor's expression froze. "What?"

"We complained," Tequila repeated, his yellow eyes widening to express how genuine he was. "Ask anyone below. Ask them about the Plague Days."

As soon as he said 'Plague Days', several orcs scoffed, and that scoff spread through the masses gathered as a few hundred thousand orcs started complaining at once. The world was swallowed by a droning mess of voices. Through the clamor and din, Shiv managed to hear things about constant sickness, respawning endlessly, and how bad the smell was.

"We do things to destroy our enemy," one of the orcs said. "It doesn't mean that we like to smell their corpses. We don't like shit. That's why no one bombs the active waste disposals here. It's one of the few laws we enforce."

"We're standing on a literal mountain of corpses," Adam said, waving his hands at the literal precipice of death that supported their gateway.

"Yes, but that's mainly to bother you," Tequila replied with a cheeky grin. "It likely took them a while to pile them up."

Adam's jaw dropped. "You... All of you... You're a race of assholes."

"Indeed, we are." Mortar nodded enthusiastically. "And your expression makes it all worth it."

The Gate Lord sputtered. He didn't really have a good comeback for that, and neither did Shiv, for that matter. But the Deathless didn't care so much about the death. He was busy taking in the sheer amount of orcs all around him.

"But also," Tequila added, "some of these bodies are the people you two killed." Adam's expression went from one of incredulity to slight horror. Shiv looked down as well, staring at the faces, trying to see if there was anyone he recognized. And then Tequila slapped his knee. "Of course not! They weren't your kills, Insul, don't be foolish. It's not like the Challenger can claim ownership over any corpse he wants. Some of them go elsewhere. Some belong to other gods."

Shiv paused, then glared at the orc. "Hey, Tequila," he said. "You know something about assholes, yes? Sometimes they get a knife shoved up the hole."

Tequila considered that for a moment and then nodded. "Some of us might like that." Shiv coated his knife with Vitae. Tequila grimaced. "Right. Maybe not."

"So, what do you think?" the Challenger asked. "I've already subtracted the 50,000 lives it took to adjust the gateway. The rest are a promise to you, Insul, based on the terms of the blood rite. Approximately

80% of them are Adepts, and 80% of that 80% are High Adepts at that. The remainder mostly consists of Masters, while 0.1% are Heroes."

Shiv blinked. "Point one percent are Heroes?"

"Correct. Quite a substantial amount, wouldn't you say?" At first, 0.1% being Heroes didn't sound like much, but then Shiv realized he was only a single-skill Hero. Adam and Uva only had two skills in the Heroic Tier, and more importantly, there was almost no one else who was a Hero on their side.

With a few hundred Heroes, Shiv wondered what they could do. And then his thoughts went from excited to downright terrified as he realized that he had no idea how to protect himself from a few hundred Heroes either. Adam and Uva were thinking about the same thing, judging from the expressions on their faces.

"Did... did we get any Legends?" Adam asked.

"Oh, what a delightful question!" The Challenger laughed. "But no. Legends are hard to kill in the worst of times, little hawk. Worry not. So long as you keep them occupied, give them proper directions, and don't over-attract their ire, you should be fine."

"Yeah," Shiv called back. "Well, I got some terms and conditions of my own, Challenger."

"What is this? You're negotiating with me after the blood rites have already been performed? How interesting. Tell me more."

"I'm not negotiating," Shiv said. "I'm telling." He looked at Adam, then down at the seemingly endless army of orcs. "Here's the new arrangement. You will fight with us. You will do what we tell you to. And we will give you the biggest godsdamn brawl we can manage. But!" He let his voice echo for a while. "If you do anything to anyone in the gate, I will reach inside of you, and I will break you in ways that ensure you never heal."

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A few of the orcs actually flinched at that, and his Dread Aura immediately experienced a rush of power. Not enough to achieve another level, but then Shiv looked at Band. The orc's expression bled away.

Brutal inspiration struck Shiv. His Intimidation Skill was right on the edge, and he felt the itch to remind the orcs about consequences. Now, he had a perfect use for Band.

"Hey, Band," Shiv said.

The orc let out a tragic sigh. "You changed your mind? Going to finish me?"

"Yeah. I don't care to break your will. I don't care that you know Georges, or what your history with Adam's former Divination mentor is, or whatever mind-games you assholes are trying to play. You crossed me. Now, get fucked."

And then, he cast a strand of Vitamancy through the orc's skull as he began to tear him apart in spirit and flesh.

Dread Aura 100 > 101 (Skill Evolution Reached)

Skill Evolution: Dread Aura (Adept) > Shape of Monstrosity (Master)

Chapter 134 (I) Monstrosity

Shape of Monstrosity

A Master-Tier Skill Evolution exclusive to a specific kind of monster: A Cursed Tarrasque. No other being in Integration has been known to receive this Skill Evolution upon advancing their Intimidation to this Tier.

Shape of Monstrosity can be compared to the Feardrinker Skill Evolution. However, while Feardrinker merely enhances a Pathbearer's Physicality by consuming an adversary's dread—thereby removing their fear as well—Shape of Monstrosity transforms the Tarrasque on both a physical and spiritual level. It boosts not only the monster's physical and magical skills, but it also lets the Tarrasque regard "fear" as a tactile object it can seize.

This is where the "shape" in the skill title comes from. When the Tarrasque uses this skill, its body shifts into a canvas of horror. It retains the same dimensions, but the space around it warps to assail the mind of the observer. Many firsthand accounts from Pathbearers who have survived Cursed Tarrasque encounters have also spoken about festering, jagged tendrils that reach and clench around their flesh.

This likely is the psycho-tactile representation of the fear-construct mentioned above. Its tensile strength is determined by just how much terror the observer feels.

CAUTION: Having a Psychomancy Skill or being a Psychomancer on your team when facing a Cursed Tarrasque is non-negotiable. Short of being utterly devoid of fear, every bit of terror you feel will be magnified and then siphoned to further enhance the beast's destructive power.

-Encyclopedia Apocalyptia

Shiv didn't notice his Dread Aura's Skill Evolution; he was too busy dissecting Band at a spiritual level. Even as the Deathless peeled the orc's outer flesh apart, he never lost his bloody grin, as if taunting Shiv to do worse, to try and make it hurt. But Shiv was done playing this game. He had been led on by the orcs long enough. If he tried to beat them on their own grounds, tried to overpower them through ordinary domination and cruelty, he would lose.

For as much as he enjoyed battle and killing bastards, the orcs lived for bloodshed. They didn't break like people did, and they would never give him any satisfaction—for it was a final display of triumph on their part. That he couldn't break them. That he could never get more from them than they took.

So Shiv stopped seeking satisfaction and started going for pure effect. The first point was to teach the orcs consequences. But that wasn't going to come with Band dying. No. Band would live. But there would be nothing left of him. The Deathless was going to make him a wretched, broken thing.

A screaming mass of flesh and ruined soulstuff.

A burst of white and red mana washed over Shiv as Band's Magical Resistance shattered completely. The Deathless ignored the magical shrapnel and continued. His Vitae dug deep into Band's soul, and Shiv moved without any gentleness. His streams were like blade-covered serpents burrowing their way through the supple inner organs of a person. Band writhed, and for the first time, the smile on his face twisted into a grimace.

Orcs had good pain resistance, but it wasn't infinite.

Band's sudden reaction had Whisper and Mortar chuckling. Tequila simply let out a disappointed sigh. "That ego was always going to get you broken some day, dear friend," Tequila proclaimed solemnly. He shook his head at Band, but took no action to stop Shiv. And there was that orcish psychopathy again. They did care for people and things, but it was a cold, brutal caring. The kind of caring where they enjoyed you, were amused by you, but ultimately, weren't that empathic for you.

For humans, this was unnatural. Shallow. For orcs, all things were transient. Aside from memory. Aside from life.

"I will miss you, though," Tequila continued. "I am not sure if I will ever know your like again, Band."

"Oh, you'll be able to visit him later," Shiv whispered under his breath. He found the first of Band's Skills, and he speared into it. He lashed at the strange pathway, expanding his Vitae once he delved its depths. Shiv wasn't looking for an Animated Skill Infusion; he wanted to break Band foundationally. Utterly. The insides of the skill resisted for a moment. Just a moment. Then it shattered like a glass cage trying to contain a bomb. Band's midsection burst apart into a flood of rope-like viscera, and the orc's eyes rolled up into his skull. Shiv strained—ripped at Band's vitality. It tore like a piece of fabric. But the Deathless continued. Pieces fell away Band's body. Limbs were severed one after another. Eyes were burst. Ears were caved in. The orc's throat was crushed completely.

Through it all, Band never resisted. Never tried to fight back. The quiet wrath inside Shiv commanded him to continue, but all the recent levels empowering his Psychology made him think. Just as he prepared to inflict another eternal wound on Band, he studied the orcs and suddenly did a double-take.

They were silent, watching him with glistening eyes of admiration. More than their rapt attention, he also noticed something else. There were countless strange, bladed tendrils growing out from his body,

connecting him to thousands of orcs. The tendrils were the texture of his adamantine bone with patches of gray flesh. Orcish flesh. Shiv's mind went blank at the sight of them, confused as to where they came from and why they were growing out of his flesh. He turned away from Band and gripped one of the tendrils. To his surprise, he could feel it, touch it, and pull on it.

And that was when he realized his own body looked different than before. Shiv blinked. He had sunken so deep into a state of hatred and bloodthirst toward Band that he didn't even notice the physiological changes happening across his body. The surface of his bone armor had changed. The faces of screaming orcs were carved into the bones, and from the deep depressions that formed their eyes came blood and tears. Shiv then noticed how the world was bending around him, his very presence manifesting an eerie distortion that twisted light itself. Adam's azure sun folded around Shiv's being, but it never settled upon his body fully. It was as if the brightness was too afraid to touch his flesh.

The tendrils were also pulsating with a substance. Fear. Shiv could feel it. Taste it. He knew the feeling well, had wielded and sensed it using Dread Aura. And now it was completely transformed. Instead of it simply existing as a presence in the world that he could feel, it was something he amplified, absorbed, and could move. And absorbed was the keyword here. Shiv felt another boost enter his body. Plaguefueled had already exaggerated his physical features. Fear only made his muscles stronger, his body harder, his reflexes sharper. But his magical fields were dramatically expanded as well.

His Biomancy field alone expanded to become a sphere of nearly a full Kilometer in diameter. Shiv blinked as he felt the sheer amount of mana at his disposal. And he knew it knew this wasn't his power alone. No. It was something fed to him by all the orcs, empowering him to an extreme level. He also looked toward Adam and realized the Gate Lord was bleeding fear as well.

"Shiv," Adam said, his voice controlled, but his heart pounding fast. "You seem to have developed a sense of... Uva-envy."

Shiv regarded the fear-forged connection binding him to Adam. Unlike with the orcs, what existed between him and Adam was a chain of sky-blue metal and bone, and it glistened with blood and gristle.

Uva frowned at the skill and reached out tentatively to touch the chain. But her hands went right through. Comparatively, Shiv took hold of the chain just fine and tugged on it lightly. He ended up pulling Adam a few steps toward him.

“What kind of nightmarish bloody skill did you develop now?” Adam asked. He shuffled back a few steps, but every time he looked at Shiv, he winced and averted his eyes. Shiv was about to ask why, but then he noticed how his bone armor changed when he was facing Adam. Instead of it being ritually decorated with screaming orc faces, it was now a layer of flayed flesh, and at the center of his chest, Adam’s severed skull was lodged in place.

“Shit,” Shiv breathed, looking down. “The notification wasn’t kidding. Shape of Monstrosity indeed.”

Shape of Monstrosity 101 > 102

“Shape of—” Adam gawked. “Why have I heard of that before?”

Valor, who had been watching Shiv up to now, finally opened his mouth—

But was cut off by the Challenger’s booming laughter. “I knew it. I tasted something different about you from the start, Bruiser. No human has that much tolerance for violence and struggle. And now, with this wonderful scenario I have set up, I see you acquire a skill possessed exclusively by Cursed Tarrasques. Not just an ape. You got a monster hiding inside that little body of yours. You have an imprint of a Tarrasque in your mind and soul.”

Shiv looked at Valor for confirmation, and the Legendary Pathbearer just grunted. “Yes. He speaks true. And you engineered this moment, didn’t you, Challenger? You sacrificed one of your orcs to shape this experience—to push him to gain this Skill Evolution?”

The sky above thundered as the Challenger just sighed. “Your problem, lich, is that you always lacked spontaneity. You think everything is a scheme because your life has been drowned in deception, darkness, and politics. No. I saw an opportunity. I took it. Of course, I did push my orcs to push the moment so we can get through the pointless delay, and now here we are. With the Insul evolved and an army at your side.”

“Your army,” Shiv said, pointing his Skysplitter up at the clouds. “Not ours.”

“Incorrect,” the Challenger replied. “They are your army. They came here for you. They want to fight beside you. To see just what havoc and bloodshed you might bless them. What chaos and trials you will face. For so many summers, they have fought and refined themselves at Lone Star. Now, they wish to do something different. Something special. So don’t let them down, Bruiser. A bored orc is a dangerous orc.”

“I would have taken your felling offer,” Shiv snarled. Flashes passed through his mind. Dead Umbrals. Dead Weaveresses. Fires rising in the surface district. Dead civilians. “You—” Shiv clenched his jaw as he cut himself off. “You wanted this. You wanted me this way. You wanted me to break Band.” He looked at the mutilated orc. Stripped of limb and senses, Band was smiling. Still smiling. Always smiling. He was like an infant amidst a dream of hopping bunnies. “Is that it? You’re using him as a sacrifice? Something to figure me out some more? Sell me your orcs?”

He looked at the nearly three million orcs around him and studied their expressions, their postures. The Challenger wasn’t lying. They were all excited. They wanted this. They wanted to be here. And with the act of mass murder he just committed—and Band’s spiritual ruination on top of that—he just got made into an orcish celebrity.

“There are many reasons why things turned out as they did. But you could have prevented this. If you were more careful. If you were more aware. If you were more skilled. You could have prevented this. The deaths are not to be blamed on me. These events were a result of Band’s choice—and your inadequacy. You know what I am. You know what an orc is. Throw your fit if you must, but it means and matters little. And you know this just as well.”

Shiv just glared up at the raw, red clouds, split by thick patches of smog. “And you know that I’m going to hold onto the shit you and your orcs did when I reach Legendary and beyond. You know that I’m going to keep that close to me when I eventually come for you.”

Some of the tendrils connecting him to the orcs hardened. His Biomancy field grew past a kilometer. Even more fear flooded his body and soul.

“Oh, I look forward to it, Bruiser,” the Challenger said. “But for now, you have other matters to attend to. And an army to discipline. I take my leave of you. Do with Band and these orcs what you will. But understand that they are soldiers. Not slaves. Keep their interests. Give them a proper fight. Or they will seek their own amusements. And my orcs are very proactive.”

“Before you go,” Shiv said, “I want you to know that any orc that does this shit again will be broken.” He clenched a fist, and another part of Band’s soul burst apart. He was gasping for life as a small ocean of blood poured from his many open wounds. “Like Band here. And if you do more than that, I’m going to set myself off in the Tutorial.”

“Ah. Do to my dimension what you unleashed on Vulketh? Quite the threat.” The Challenger didn’t sound scared at all. “Alas, Scorn was unfocused. Easy to provoke. And recall what the Vicar managed. And understand that I find his mastery over magic... acceptable.”

“Acceptable?” Adam gawked.

“Yes. His theories are sound. But his power is lacking. If you think you would be the first to unleash a weapon of mass destruction on the Tutorial, you would be wrong. I, myself, have destroyed this place more times than I can remember. If you do set yourself off, you will kill many of my orcs. But that will be all you do. And that will be if I don’t grasp your collapsing Vitae much like the Vicar did. Or inflict worse upon you. I appreciate your willingness to threaten me. But consider your methods further. That is my feedback.”

Adam blinked. Shiv just snorted. “Yeah. Feedback taken. But you wait, Challenger. Someday, I will burn and break you. If there’s any wisdom in you at all, you best strike us down now. Because I’m coming for you.”

Chapter 134 (II) Monstrosity

Uva glared alongside Shiv until the last part. Then her expression turned into one of unease. “Shiv, why—Don’t tell the god to strike us down inside his own domain.”

“He won’t,” Shiv said with a slight sneer. “For the same reason I didn’t kill Whisper earlier. Because it would show a lack of power over him in some way. Perhaps that would hurt you more than an actual wound, wouldn’t it, Challenger? To betray yourself by doing what someone else wanted you to do.”

Psychology 24 > 25

“It would. Ah. Quite good. Quite good. Finally. You are starting to use that cruel little mind of yours more. Do continue to do so. It will prove to be a more dangerous weapon than the blunt instrument you are forging your body into in the long run. For now, I must depart. There is a certain angry god I wish to taunt—and guide along a path of revenge as well.”

And with a final hum of amusement, the thundering presence of the Challenger receded and faded from the sky, leaving Shiv alone. Alone in the Tutorial. Alone with the orcs.

“Bloody hells,” Adam breathed as his eyes gleamed bright with mana. His Righteous Dawn Prevails burned bright behind him, shrouding him in light. Between that, his bow, and his diamond wings, he looked like a divine avenger. Unfortunately, his expression was that of a terrified rookie. “Shiv, do you think—”

“The asshole’s talking about Lord Scorn,” Shiv said without hesitation. “Because of course he is. Because all this is just a thing of amusement for him. You’re going to be dealing with the Vultegs again, Adam. And probably soon.”

Adam nodded uneasily. Then he froze. “What do you mean I am?”

“The Challenger hasn’t told Scorn my name. He just knows me as the Corpse Shedder. That could be anyone. It’s probably a rogue Necrotech or something, from the looks of it. But you, the illustrious Adam Arrow—”

“Oh, that big godsdamned bastard,” Adam snarled. “Why? Why would he do this?”

“Well,” Shiv said. “If I was a completely amoral bastard, I would probably do it for entertainment alone. But also, he probably finds it funny, wants me to focus on him and his orcs, and maybe if you get killed fighting the Vultegs, I’ll end up leading an orcish army into Vulketh in another war or something. The opportunities for strife are countless, and the Challenger’s just the kind of clever, cruel shit to capitalize on each and every opportunity.”

The Gate Lord blinked. “Oh, Ascendants.”

“Yeah,” Shiv agreed.

Psychology 25 > 26

Uva took all that in and frowned. Her eyes went from Shiv to the few million orcs all around them as she sighed. “What are we going to do with them?”

Shiv watched the orcs, and they watched him back. He studied the curiosity in their eyes, their breaths misting the air, and the weapons and mana that lit their bodies. He also noted how he was the only one they were looking at. No one else from his group was of any consequence to the orcs. They came here because he committed a massacre on the Vultegs and was about to lead them into another.

Awareness 20 > 21

“I don’t think you guys are supposed to do anything with the orcs,” Shiv said. “That’s going to be me. I’ll interface with them. I’ll talk to them. I’ll handle everything about them. You guys focus on designating objectives, keeping the gate stable, and ensuring everything is fine on the other side. I’m moving Courtney here and setting up beside the gateway.”

“What?” Adam said. “Are you—”

“It’s his best way of protecting the rest of you,” Whisper said, grinning at Adam. “He will serve as gatekeeper and Insul. And so long as he is here, we will not wander overmuch to your space, threatening your people or ruining your lives.”

A shudder of worry came from Uva. Shiv looked at her—and winced as he noticed a fear-chain connecting her to him as well. He didn’t like seeing that. She was afraid of him too. Everyone was.

What the hells did I think was going to happen when I got this skill? Shiv thought. With everything I’ve done, people don’t just shrug that off. People can’t. The ones who aren’t me can’t, at the very least.

“I believe this to be a wise, if unfortunate, choice,” Valor said. “We have confronted the Challenger, and I do not think he will attempt to betray us directly. But the gate is still in danger. Everyone is when there is an orc nearby.”

Mortar studied Valor. “Hey. Bones. You’re a Legend, right? How much fight do you reckon you can put up right now—”

Shiv seized the tendril of fear connecting him to Mortar. He pulled hard with his gravitic field. The orc was ripped off his feet. But halfway through, the tendril snapped—and immediately began to reform. In the same moment, Shiv brought Mortar down as a blunt weapon on Band. The larger orc slammed hard against the violinist. Band’s already ruined body let out a series of ear-piercing crunches. Mortar groaned as he was brought down time and time again.

Laughter and cheers erupted from the orcs below. But with that came something else—fear. Fear that made Shiv stronger, faster, more magically potent. As he dropped Mortar on Band a final time, he flung the massive orc off into the distance as he looked down at the bloody smear that was Band. The dying orc gurgled and wheezed. Shiv cast his Psychomancy into the orc’s mind. “Be seeing you soon, Band. You

don't get to just die so easily. No. You stay screaming in the dark. But I still got a use for your memories. For what you know. For the knowledge I intend to take. I'm not playing your kind anymore. I get you now. Dominance. So. I'm just going to force you. I'm just going to take from your kind. Any way I can. Every way I can."

Philosophy 9 > 10

And across the link, Band managed a final, disbelieving laugh. "We turned you into one of us pretty fast, didn't we? Or maybe it was always there. Maybe that was always you."

Shiv's right eye twitched. He brought his boot down on Band's skull. A resounding crack was accompanied by a burst of force. Adam looked away. Uva used her shield to ward off the shockwave. Both Valor and Can Hu were driven back, but Shiv didn't care. His insides burned with ice-cold fire.

Around his right foot was a smear of blood and pasted flesh. "Alright," Shiv said, turning to face the orcs again. He drew in a breath and wondered what he was going to say. He stopped wondering a second later as honesty took hold and his instincts sharpened. They came to fight a war, and he was going to sell it to them. "You're here for blood, aren't you?"

"YES!" the orcs below raved with joy and shared glee. They weren't like a human army driven to passionate fervor, trying to amp themselves up. No. They were like patrons at a bar, preparing to break into song.

"Good. I got a war for you. A real one. I don't know what you usually do at Lone Star, but I bet you won't get to kill a Necrotech Legend there."

Several orcs began to salivate outright.

“Vicar Sullain!” Shiv shouted. “That’s who we’re gonna kill by the end of this. That’s whose skull I want. And you’re going to help me get him. Him. His Necrotechs. Compact. The First Blood. And the rogue Republic Inquisitors who are coming to our gate.” Shiv let out a breath as he gave the orcs a moment to digest the words. “But they don’t know about you. And they don’t know they’re coming to die!”

The narrative has been illicitly obtained; should you discover it on Amazon, report the violation.

A joyous chorus of cheers rose across the land and beyond the horizon. Orcs slammed their weapons together. He wasn’t sure how they all heard him. Probably a courtesy of the Challenger.

Skill Gained: Rhetoric 1 (Common)

Leadership 1 > 4

“Where the hells did this come from?” Adam whispered. He looked at Shiv with undisguised astonishment.

“The gut,” Shiv grunted in reply. He raised his voice again. “And it’s the truth. We got problems on all sides! But I think that’s going to need to change. I don’t want to have problems. I want to be the problem. We’ve been reacting and trying to keep up. Well. We’re done with that. No more keeping up now that you violent shits are here. I need firestarters. I need butchers. I need monsters. Because we’re going to be fighting monsters. And—and—”

Shiv's mind went blank as he turned to Adam and Uva for advice.

The Psychomancer winced and made a sideways cutting motion with her hand. "I don't know—public speaking unnerves me."

"And I want to be the bigger monster!" Adam suggested. "Wait, no. And I want them to learn who the real monsters are!"

Shiv turned back to the orcs. "And I want to show them who the real monsters are!"

"Almost fucked it up," an orc at the very front heckled.

Shiv snorted, found the orc's fear-chain, and pulled him off his feet. As the orc sailed through the air, Shiv flung Band's remains at him. The corpse and the offending orc both burst apart in mid-air as they struck each other.

Initiate-Tier. Shiv snorted. Teach you to be a heckler.

"Feedback received," Shiv declared. "Anyone else got advice for me?"

Roaring laughter washed through the orcs. But a few looked at him with expressions of careful consideration. Shiv regarded those orcs. And then he went a step further.

“First. I wanna get a feel for what you can do. I’m guessing you’re all blooded warriors. You know how this war shit works?”

A unified roar of agreement and rattling of weapons came from the orcs. Magical fireworks went off at a few places. Shiv let out a breath. “Alright. That’s good at least. Then, I want you sorted across the Tiers. And I want to see the Heroes right here. On this here mountain. Masters, get yourselves together behind them. Adepts, Initiates, Commons, make yourselves neat and tidy.”

Some of the orcs booed and gave him a thumbs down. “He needs help sorting us. Bah! Insul’s human after all. Always organizing this and arranging that.”

“Yeah,” Shiv shouted back. “I’m trying to figure out which of you I intend to send at the vampires, which of you to use on the Inquisition, and which of you I’ll unleash on the Necrotechs. But congratulations, dumbshit, you just volunteered for guard duty here while you’re friends have fun.”

The complaining orc let out a loud cry of dismay as the other brutes around them jeered and pushed him around for his stupidity.

“Shiv,” Adam asked, his body extremely still. “What are you planning?”

“I’ll sort them into groups first. Maybe try to figure out a command structure. You know more about that than I do. Hells, they probably know a lot more about that than I do. But we got an opportunity now. To open a way to Blackedge. To sabotage and raid the First Blood. To intercept the Inquisition’s

coming forces. We have the manpower now. I just... I need to have them focused on someone or something that isn't us. And we're going to spend them. Spend their lives. Spend their skills."

Shiv stared hard at the Gate Lord. "And I need you to figure something out with Null Mont. Maybe move the obsidian tower too. You're going to need constant patrols around this place. More defenses. We're going to need a way to connect the Tutorial Gateway to the surface directly or something. Something that won't let the orcs interact with the people there. I don't want them having direct access to the gate, or the Umbral wilderness, for that matter. I'll entertain them for now. But there's a lot of shit we need to figure out."

"Would you like a suggestion?" Whisper asked.

"No!" Adam cried.

"Silence," Uva hissed.

"Sure," Shiv replied.

His companions stared at him.

"We're not wasting the orcs," Shiv said. "They're here, so I'm going to use them. I'm just not going to trust them. The deaths in the gate were my fault. I needed to watch the orcs closer. I should have always kept them close to me. So I'll learn from that. But we don't waste them. We use them. Because they're going to use us otherwise."

“You’re getting smart, Deathless,” Mortar coughed. Shiv looked down the mountain, and he saw the orc clambering back up. Half his face was a bruise, Band’s gore painted his torso, and one of his mechanical legs was missing. Even so, he had the largest grin on his face. His expression was that of a boy who had just leaped from his swing. “Getting real good at understanding who we are. What we are.”

“I’m learning,” Shiv muttered in response. “Whisper?”

“We can now do many things at once,” Whisper said. “The First Blood can be raided. Constantly. But understand that any orcs you unleash as marauders will find amusement in whoever they encounter. That means your precious non-combatants will be at constant risk. So. Be mindful. The same goes for the surface.”

As Adam frowned at the orc, Shiv just nodded. “Yeah. I know. Adam. I need a set of objectives. I need maps. I need to give these orcs shit to do.” He paused, then raised an eyebrow. “Actually, I’ve got something to do myself.” He looked down at the orcs. “Hey. Assholes! I need a kitchen!”

For the first time, the orcs just looked up at him, dumbfounded.

Nearby, Tequila started cackling like a hyena.

“You heard me,” Shiv continued. “Kitchen. Skillet big enough to cook a dragon. Cauldrons. Stove. The works. Get to making one. You’re godsdamned monsters, but I’m not letting you kill shit on an empty stomach. You’re going to taste some leviathan tentacle soup.” He huffed. “I’m going to need to bring Courtney over too.” And then something else occurred to him as he noticed the sheer number of orc Biomancers present. Psychomancers as well. “Wait, I might be able to pilot the damned Court Leviathan—Fuck that, I got Practical Metabiology tutors too.”

And suddenly, parts of this whole orc army thing didn't seem so bad anymore. He still needed to keep the large, gray monsters away from the gate, though.

Uva just stared at Shiv with her jaw slightly open. Can Hu shared her incredulity with a narrowing of its optics. "Pathbearer," the Penitent began. "Is your solution to all issues just cooking or violence?"

"They've worked for me perfectly so far." He looked to the orcs again. "Also, who here knows how to pilot a Court Leviathan?" A few thousand fists went up. Shiv laughed. "Fuck yeah. Wait! Biomancers! Sort yourselves out into another group. I got some questions for you later. A lot of questions. Have any of you read the Odes of Blood—"

"Everyone's read that!" one of the orcs called out. "Basic reading material."

"Pretty funny book," another orc said.

"I don't like how much time Ekkihurst spends eating and torturing people," an orc complained. "It's pointless. Just kill and get it done."

Other orcs heckled the speaker, defending Ekkihurst. He cursed back at them. And rather than fighting, what seemed to be a civil forum on the merits of brutal cruelty versus effective inflictions of pain and murder took hold.

Adam shivered. "Shiv. Are you... seriously considering learning Biomancy from them?"

“Why not? It’s going to be a while till I can get back to Cradle. Got no one but the book. And now I got a lot of people. Listen, can you get someone to fly Courtney over? And bring some of the basilisks too? Teleport them across. There’s stuff I want to do.”

The Gate Lord slowly turned to Uva. “Uva. Say something. Say something before he turns into more of a monster.”

“Shiv,” Uva said. “They’re not teaching you any Psychomancy. That’s solely my domain.”

Shiv regarded the iron in her eyes and nodded slowly.

An orc laughed. “Afraid we’re gonna steal your nice lay from you, Umb—” One of Uva’s Psychomancy strands whipped out and straightened. The orc let out a loud cry. More laughter followed.

“Look at the dumb bastard twitch,” Shiv yelled. “Everyone, loot his stuff and hide it. See how long it takes for him to find it once he recovers.”

A collective cheer rose at that suggestion.

Adam sighed. “Shiv. Promise me you won’t develop a terminal case of orcis bastarditis if you’re going to be spending time with them.”

“Is that a real thing?” Shiv asked.

“No. But since you’re here, it might just become real soon.”

Chapter 135 (I) Helix

—Confidential—

[Ambient Mana Recognized — Incoming Message from Master-Advisor Oldsmith]

"Dearest Inquisitor Sijik, I must, fortunately, inform you that I will not be coming down to Fortress-City Diego. Additionally, I want you to heed the following words and understand that they represent the bottom-most desire of my inner machinery. My core turns with anticipation as I pen this script. So read this text, and read it well.

When you were born, I suspect that your mother passed you out from her ass, rather than the ruined, rotting folds she called a vagina, and in doing so, misplaced the actual child she was meant to birth with a piece of shit that somehow got confused enough to attain sapience.

This piece of shit I speak of is you, Inquisitor Sijik. Just so you’re unclear. Because I suspect some of that shit is still lodged in the brown matter in your head.

I loathe you from my copper wires to the gleaming metal that composes my outer alloy. I would tell you to suck my waist coagulant, except I fear that is too good for you. Except I fear that may cleanse you and make you a better piece of shit.

Furthermore, I would request that you resolve yourself posthaste, using the nearest means possible. Be that the pen in your hand, or a quick spell you might be able to shape. Yet, I fear that your death will bring you to a paradise you most definitely do not deserve. As such, I would ask that you simply atrophy eternally and never perish, so as to avoid offending any gods with your presence.

And should there be no gods? Should the afterworld resemble the vast expanse of black and gray as described by the Tarantian skeptics? I would ask that you sink deeper into that bleakness and never trouble us again.

To encourage you, I have decided to betray the Republic and offer my services and certain Animancy core directly to the esteemed Vicar Sullain. In fact, I will be moving to aid Vicar Sullain in conquering Blackedge and destroying Starhawk's Perch as fast and thoroughly as I can. Afterward, I intend to form a demonic ritual to give every nobleman and Inquisitor a fast-acting venereal disease.

Enjoy your cock rot, Inquisitor Sijik.

Yours truly, Master-Advisor Oldsmith."

-Spell-Sealed Sync-Letter Between "Master-Advisor Oldsmith" and Inquisitor Sijik

It was less than a minute after Adam, Uva, and the others left to reinforce the gate against the orcs and help Shiv move his Court Leviathan over that an orc Hero greeted him in person.

The Hero rose from among the other orcs on wings of glistening red. They were shaped not from solid matter, but from chains of flowing blood. They spun around each other, bending like two coiling strings, and between them, horizontal supports connected each string to another.

The wings were too consistently shaped for the design to be random, and Shiv shivered as he took in just how powerful the orc's Biomancy was. The field projected from the orc stretched further than almost any other Biomancer Shiv had faced. Devon's likely rivaled this orc, as did the Composer's. But the orc's field was not only vast, it was dense. Being inside the orc's field gave Shiv the impression of standing within a pulsating membrane that stretched over all existence, rather than being cast in a moonlit glow of crimson.

Even more pressing was how the orc's body glistened with dense mana. Every part of him was infused with Biomancy, and the coat he wore, long and flowing, was no exception. However, Shiv also noticed strange creatures crawling along the coat. They resembled worms, centipedes, and spiders all at the same time, and they wove new strands across the orc's body without pause, strands that resembled the shape of the orc's bloodied wings.

What is that shape? Shiv thought to himself. And then it came to him. He remembered seeing it while in the library years ago, inside a geometry textbook. A helix.

Skill Gained: Memorization 1 (Common)

As the orc descended, Shiv looked upon the gray-skinned brute and noted that this orc was devoid of any scars. In fact, his skin was smooth. His eyes were also a bright green rather than the typical yellow.

His teeth were aberrant for an orc as well. Several fangs resembled the wedge shape of a herbivore, only slightly tipped at the middle. And then there were the spectacles that the orc wore. Shiv guessed

that the spectacles were likely a purely aesthetic choice, since Pathbearers could overcome issues such as nearsightedness by visiting a Biomancer or elevating their Awareness Skill.

As the orc touched down before Shiv, his wings reeled back into his body and vanished entirely. His inner Biomancy field glowed brighter, and Shiv felt the sheer power emanating from the orc.

Even with all the fear flowing into his flesh and spirit, Shiv knew his Biomancy could not match this orc's. Not even remotely. At once, a shudder of excitement passed through the Deathless. He called for Heroes to approach him, for Biomancers to sort themselves out, and now a Heroic-Tier Biomancer came seeking him immediately.

"I have a complaint to lodge," the orc proclaimed.

Nearby, Mortar shook his head and let out a quiet guffaw. "Oh, Helix, of course you're here. Can't miss an opportunity, can you?"

The bespectacled orc didn't even regard Mortar.

"What kind of complaint?" Shiv asked, interested in where this conversation was about to go.

"The complaint has to do with clarity, or the lack thereof." Helix eyed Shiv with slight disdain. "You asked the Heroes to sort themselves from the masses, and then you demanded the Biomancers place themselves somewhere else. Did you think about what a Heroic-Tier Biomancer would do?"

"I'd assume that your title would mean more than that single skill."

The orc chuckled, but there was no genuine joy in it. It was the laugh one gave when they were speaking to a particularly simple child. "You assume? By the Challenger's whims, Insul. If you assume, I can only shudder to imagine the state of your Practical Metabiology."

"You don't need to imagine," Shiv said. A thin smirk spread across his face. "It's at thirty-eight."

The bespectacled orc let out a groan of genuine pain. "Thirty-eight? But your Biomancy is..." The orc narrowed his eyes. "So they weren't lying about you being Deathless. Let me theorize. You were incredibly reckless, killed yourself and other people multiple times, ruptured and ruined your flesh. And now you what? Use your bones as armor because they have adopted your Toughness. Is that adamantine? Hmm... variable structure, dynamic as well. That's Adamantine Adaption." The orc did a double-take. "Why do you have Adamantine Adaption?"

And that never got old for Shiv. "Well, you can thank 811 for that."

"You're going to have to be more specific," Helix said. "There are a great many 811s." But then the orc frowned. "However, I suspect I know which one. Joyful, inquisitive fellow, always watching. Aeromancy and a form of Geomancy that turns his flesh into crystalline rock."

Shiv was surprised. "You know him?"

"I know a great many other orcs. I'm almost at a thousand reincarnations. Quite a few cycles, I suppose."

"One thousand reincarnations, but a few centuries of life in every one," Tequila said. He suddenly blinked into existence beside Helix, wrapping an arm around the orc Biomancer. Helix regarded Tequila with disdain, but did nothing to push the other orc away. "This one here," Tequila said, wiggling his eyebrows at Shiv, "is well over a hundred thousand years old."

Shiv blinked. "What."

"He exaggerates." Helix sniffled. "Perhaps not by much, but he exaggerates. Yes, I let my lives last, but it's purely for the accumulation of knowledge and to deepen my learning. I do not fear death. I merely think that it gets in the way of the proper work, of the true path, the highest path of dominance."

"Oh, here he goes again," Mortar grumbled.

"And here I go always," Helix said, his head snapping toward Mortar. "You are a fool if you think that we can only win by raw brute force alone." Helix closed his fist, and suddenly his flesh rippled. Blood danced past skin and settled again, but Shiv watched as Helix's skin, muscles, bones, and more shifted. It went from an orc's hand to something lighter, something slight, something soft of flesh, like that of a newborn human. And then it became insectoid, chitinous, and layered in a pitch-black exoskeleton. At the end, a river of hair broke over, and his hand became a hoof.

Finally, it settled back into being merely an orcish hand, but Shiv used that moment to glimpse inside Helix's biology, and he felt himself tense. There were no organs inside the orc. Well, none that he could feel. There was no heart, no lungs. Shiv paused. He noticed a cloud of substance dancing inside the orc, guided by his Biomancy. And just then, it occurred to Shiv that the orc lacked any Magical Resistance whatsoever.

This orc was the purest mage he had ever faced.

And as he gawked at Helix's strange interior, the orc Biomancer began a lengthy diatribe aimed at Mortar. "You think we're going to bomb everyone into submission? Is that it? You think that we're going to prevail by hammering people, attacking them over and over again in the most brutal, senseless, stupidly direct fashion?"

"It's worked in the past," Mortar said. "And I'm not direct. I'm distant and—"

"Yes, yes, you use the right ammunition for the job. You prepare adequately. You load, set ammunition into your mortar, and then you fire it over and over again. You use your Pyromancy and your Mathematics skills to triangulate your bombardment." The Biomancer listed what Mortar might say, one after another. "But this is only a limited form of dominance. You imagine destroying existence. Well, I don't want that."

"You don't?" Mortar replied with a sardonic growl. "Why don't you? Why, I despise you Exos. You, and—" Helix cut him off with a wave. Mortar's mouth vanished. Whisper let out a chuckle.

"Oh, poor foolish Mortar," Whisper said, shaking his head, "always picking fights with dangerous threats. Your fearlessness is why you don't reach the Heroic Tier so often, Mortar." And now the Artillerist was glaring at his robed companion.

"What the hell's an Exo?" Shiv asked.

"An Exo-Assimilant," Helix proclaimed. "I am of such a clique."

"Yeah, I heard about that," Shiv said. "I know you orcs have your own internal factions and stuff, but still, what the hell does that mean?"

"It means," Helix explained, "that I yearn for eternal domination, that I wish to subjugate, elevate, and dominate our enemies time and time again. And I wish to do so in ways more than merely the physical, merely the brutal." He aimed another glare at Mortar, and then he looked back at Shiv. "Death," he began, "is merely a great unconsciousness for many. It ends. It allows them to escape from knowledge, escape from responsibility, and I despise that. They must be taught the fullness of their weakness."

Shiv was taken aback by the orc's vehemence.

"I despise the fact that our enemies are allowed to die, that they're allowed to escape this cycle, this struggle, while we return. My great foes have been robbed from me, perishing in other battles. And one even had the audacity to pass from old age." Helix laughed bitterly. "Old age! Senescence of all things, as if she didn't have a choice to elevate her Physicality or to seek out a Biomancer. By the Challenger's whims, she could have sought me out! I would have preserved her, if only to show her her rightful place in existence."

"And where's that?" Shiv asked.

Helix answered by grinding his heel against the face of a human corpse.

Shiv snorted. "You're kind of a prick, aren't you, Helix?"

"I," Helix said, leaning closer, "am properly cultured, unlike certain other orcs from inferior cliques. No, they just want to bomb you or kill you or torture you. It is not enough. You must know where you stand

in the order of things. That you are not true strugglers, not of war, not of skill, and not of magical discovery."

"And that's you, huh?" Shiv looked Helix up and down, surprised by everything the orc said. But after he had a few seconds to digest it, it wasn't that shocking. Orcs wanted to dominate, to hurt. And there were many ways to dominate and hurt. They might need to kill a few people for them to heal faster, for them to feed and reduce the feeling of the itch. But that didn't mean they only had to do that physically, that it would only be expressed through raw, unchecked brutality.

No. Helix was a brute of intellect, a brute of magic. And now he sought to proclaim himself before Shiv.

The Deathless offered the orc a slight nod. And he noted how there was a thread leading between him and Helix. Despite everything, the orc was on some level afraid of him. But the thread was just that. A thread. It wasn't a chain as thick as that which ran between Shiv and Adam. It wasn't a tether like what allowed Shiv to yank upon most orcs. No. Helix was joined to the Deathless by a thread. And that thread was, fitting the orc's namesake, also a helix.

"Alright," Shiv said. "I get it now. So, aside from complaining about my lack of clarity and telling me about how great your philosophy is, you got any other reason why you were in such a hurry to meet me?"

"Several. I wish to see your Court Leviathan," Helix declared. "It has been some time since I had access to such a creature, and it would serve my studies well."

"Yeah, hold on there for a second," Shiv said. He placed a single finger against Helix's chest. The orc's eyes cut downward and narrowed. "That's my Court Leviathan. Her name's Courtney. You don't do anything with her unless I give you the say."

Helix's expression dropped to one of utter incredulity. "You named the Court Leviathan?"

"Yeah," Shiv said. "And we're also going to be eating it."

"We're what?" Helix sputtered. He looked at the other orcs around him.

Whisper simply laughed. "He's going to show you a few interesting things in a moment, oh Helix."

The Biomancer frowned, but he raised no further protest. "Aside from the Court Leviathan, I wanted to get your measure properly. I felt that you were a Biomancer, but there was something odd with your mana. Something off with your magical field. And now I understand why. You have next to no Practical Metabiology to support you. Not even an Adept-Tier Evolution. Such a thing is shameful." Shiv just rolled his eyes. "And you are indignant toward your incompetence. Your Deathless nature has rendered you—"

"Yeah, no," Shiv cut him off, annoyance finally winning. "That's not what happened. What happened with me was that I never got the chance to learn anything useful. Because the people I grew up around thought I was going to be a monster. And so they did everything they could to stop me from becoming a Pathbearer."

Helix took a moment and thought about what Shiv just said. And for the first time, the orc let out a laugh. "They thought you were a monster. That you were going to turn into something terrible. And they tried to slow your growth. Is that it?"

"They stopped it for a good long while entirely," Shiv replied. "Look, I'm going to state it plainly. Aside from cooking and a few other skills, I'm very blunt force trauma, not that technical."

The orc narrowed his eyes at Shiv. And a sense of unease entered Helix's posture. The chain of fear between them thickened, and Shiv laughed as both his Psychology and Shape of Monstrosity leveled.

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Chapter 135 (II) Helix

"It is a dangerous thing to admit that much to an orc," Helix said.

Shiv simply shook his head. "You gotta ask yourself why I'm willing to admit that. Why I'm not that scared at all. And that's because of the Deathless part. And it's also because you're going to figure it out soon anyway. So I got no taste in wasting any fucking time. I called all the Biomancers out because I wanted to start learning properly. I had another instructor, you see. But they're a little bit far away, and I almost never get any time to read or practice the technical aspects of my Biomancy."

"Ah, so you are recruiting instructors." The orc nodded vigorously. His expression shifted from disdain to begrudging acceptance. "This is good. This is good. I would have despised answering to a pure brute." The orc's eyes flicked over at Mortar for a moment. "The fact that you are willing and actively seeking means to make up for your atrophied education is proper."

"What, you were planning to personally tutor me?" Shiv folded his arms and looked Helix up and down. "I mean, you're pretty powerful, but—"

"But nothing," Helix said, cutting Shiv off. He looked over his shoulder, staring at the other orcs. A small group was marching toward the mountain, while others began to shift and rearrange themselves.

Shiv's jaw dropped slightly. He expected some kind of chaotic clamor to break out among the gray-skinned brutes. Some kind of delay or chaos he needed to handle. No. After he dispatched his orders, the orcs responded in an orderly and hyper-disciplined fashion. None of them fell upon each other in a frenzy of violence. None of them complained or tried to incite a rebellion. None of them attempted an assassination. In fact, they were even chattering in a borderline polite manner.

"There are no orcs capable of matching my knowledge, my experience, and my insight into Biomancy. And I will not be led by an Insul ignorant to the true promise of his strongest Magical Skill."

"You know what? I can accept that. Saves me the time of wrangling a group of Biomancers and trying to figure out if they're planning to assassinate me or not."

"Yes, about that." Helix adjusted his spectacles. "How does your deathlessness work? Because I know it does work. But are there limitations or issues?"

Shiv raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, nice try."

The orc rolled his eyes. "Oh, come now, boy. We're going to find out sooner or later. One or both of us will die at some point. And the other will eventually learn. You especially are fighting alongside all these orcs. You think we don't speak?"

Shiv considered that, and he decided to offer Helix a partial truth. A little bit of detail and not the whole picture. "Vitality."

Helix blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Vitality. If I die, I drain it to come back."

"Oh, is that all? And specifically your killer's vitality, or..."

"No, any vitality will do."

"Then be specific," Helix spat. "Why are you so vague, so general? We need to cure that in you."

"Cure what?"

"If you're going to be a good Biomancer and eventually a good blood coder for that matter. You're going to need to be specific. The demons are in the details. The small, tiny, little details. Smaller than the cells themselves. Indeed, if you were meticulous, you would have noticed that you are dying right now."

Shiv stared at Helix. "What the hells do you mean?"

"I gave you cancer."

"What?"

"I have given you cancer," Helix repeated, slightly louder. "There's nothing wrong with your hearing, is there?"

"No," Shiv replied. "When did you..." Then, as he turned his Biomancy inward, he felt a spreading patch of tissue inside of him. Inside his...

"Yes, it's inside your blood," Helix said, frowning. "How low is your Awareness? It must be below Adept as well." Helix sighed. "This will not do. This will not do at all. We're going to need to coordinate your skill development. Both your Practical Metabiology and your Awareness need to evolve at the same time. Hopefully, that will give you the Mystical Cell Skill Evolution."

Shiv felt more of the cancer spread through him. And the first hints of weakness traveled through his body as well. His jaw fell open. He considered punching Helix in the face, but the orc simply carried on.

"Now, the first thing about cancer is that practically everything can develop cancer. So you need to learn how to get good at treating cancer. Now, do you know how to clear this out of your blood?"

"If I did, I would have already ripped it out of myself and thrown it at you," Shiv said, barely keeping his agitation in check. His Woundeater flared around his arm, and Helix placed the back of his hand against his forehead as he nearly fell backwards.

"Is that a Woundeater? Is that your Master-Tier Skill Evolution? By the Challenger's whim! He's broken. He's broken beyond belief."

Shiv looked down at his wyrm and frowned. "What's wrong with my Woundeater?"

"The question is how you managed to get the Woundeater in the first place. You clearly didn't evolve your Biomancy through any rational or well-studied means."

"So I was trying to heal two people, all right?" Shiv said, a little heat entering his voice. "I tried to close their wounds or pull their injuries out of them."

Once again, Helix nearly collapsed dramatically, and Tequila held him up. "Pull... pull the wounds. He's treating the body like an arts and crafts project."

Elsewhere, Shiv could hear orcs laughing. He glared down from the mountaintop, and he saw Biomancy fields spreading out from them as well. The Deathless gritted his teeth. This godsdamn orc was embarrassing him in front of the other Biomancers.

"Listen—" Shiv growled.

"No, you listen first," Helix said. "I need to evolve you. I need to save you from the folly of your own actions and woeful experiences."

And just then, another orc arrived. He stomped up the mountainside, and Shiv immediately noticed how large he was. Even after being made over three meters tall by Plaguefueled, this orc was still twice Shiv's height. His bulky body was uncovered aside from a loincloth, and he had what looked to be a colossal tree branch resting on his shoulder.

"Insul," the orc said, his voice a dull mutter, "I am Bonk, reincarnation 1001. I... I no think good."

Shiv raised an eyebrow.

"Bonk," Helix said, turning around and letting out an exasperated sigh, "I'm in the middle of something right now."

"He needs to be saved." Bonk blinked. "Hey, Helix, what do you need to be saved from?"

"And knock it off. He's not stupid." Helix gave Shiv a desperate look. "He's just undereducated. You can play your games with someone else."

Bonk sulked. "Damn it, Helix. I saw his face. He almost bought into it. I could have convinced him."

"And what would that do, Bonk? What would that do? What is the point of such a thing?"

"It would have been very funny when I solved an incredibly complicated problem or said something highly intellectually astute, but then went back to pretending to be mentally challenged," Bonk said, gazing wistfully out at the horizon as if imagining a future that would never come to pass now.

Tequila sighed. "Classic Bonk."

Shiv let out a breath as he processed the orcs' conversation. "Man, Adam is going to hate you guys."

Speaking of which, immediately Shiv pulled on the cord between him and Helix. The Biomancer gasped as Shiv clutched his head. He drew Helix in close, froze time, took Helix's glasses off, and put them on his own face. When he finished that, he stood behind Helix and let time resume. The orc Biomancer nearly fell over, but Shiv reached out and caught him again.

"So," Shiv said, his voice loud and authoritative. "You're not that fast, Helix. Lacking Reflexes. You feel kind of soft, so I don't think you got much Toughness. I'm guessing you're not a frontliner orc."

Helix slowly turned, and Shiv pulled the spectacles off and handed them back to the orc. Helix blinked and put the spectacles back on.

"I'm going to state this very plainly," Shiv said. "If you give Adam cancer, or if you give Uva cancer, or if you hurt anyone on the gate... If you hurt anyone in the gate," he pointed through the gateway, "I'm going to do things to you that will make you wish you were Band. I'm going to find your Biomancy skill, and I'm going to crack it. I'm going to break it for good, and then I'm going to go for your Practical Metabiology, and I will break that too. And that's it. That's all I'll do. Now, if you commit suicide and reincarnate with a fresh soul, or however that works, I will find you again, and I will break your two most valuable skills. Do you understand? You will always be a partially crippled orc. Intellectually crippled. Magically crippled. Crippled in every way you care about. You will never be able to exert your desired dominance on fucking anyone. Do you understand me?"

With each exchange and with each sentence spat, Shiv leaned against Helix harder and harder, while the fear cord between them grew thicker and thicker. And finally, by the end, the orc Biomancer just nodded. "That is most understandable. And I am not interested in whoever you just mentioned, either. It's you. You are the Insul. They are trivial. Although... are either of them Biomancers?"

"No," Shiv growled. "And so long as you're here, they won't be."

Just then, a pulse of Dimensionality swelled out from the gateway. It rose into the air, and with a clap of pressure, the Court Leviathan emerged. It spread its massive tentacles out, swishing them through the sky. Its kilometers-long body was shrouded by a backdrop of raw, red, rash-stained clouds. And the massive creature held a cave-biter in one tentacle, waving it around.

Adam briefly popped his head through the gateway.

"Adam, get the fuck back inside!" Shiv snapped.

Adam eyed the orcs, looked at Shiv, and retreated with a grimace. The chains between him and Shiv grew even thicker.

"Godsdamn it." Shiv sighed. "I was too rough."

Helix turned, but before he could get a good look at Adam, Shiv grabbed the orc by the chin and wrenched his face over to face him. "I want you to understand something, Helix," Shiv continued. "If you

think that he's going to be my weakness, I want you to look at this another way. If you hurt him, or if you hurt Uva, or if you hurt anyone I decide I care about, I am going to devote my life to rendering you a mentally challenged orc. Like the kind of orc Bonk here was pretending to be. Literally. Is that understood between us? They are not people you can threaten. They are people that, if you so much as approach them, I will torture you endlessly for. I will go beyond your notions of monstrosity. I will have the other orcs begging me to stop."

And as Shiv finished his violent, angry rant, both Mortar and Whisper began to clap. The absurdity of the moment nearly made Shiv let out a chuckle.

"Well," Helix said, taking a step away from Shiv. He adjusted his coat, and one of the small creatures that constantly stitched new lines of silk poked its head out and stared at the Deathless before retreating under a few of the strands. "That was... Yes. You should strive to always be as thorough and as specific as that," Helix said, nodding vigorously.

Shiv noticed that the cord between him and the Heroic-Tier orc Biomancer was now as thick as a rope. Not quite a strand anymore,

Shiv thought. "Fine. Now, let's get back to the part where you were talking about my Woundeater. What's wrong with it?"

"What's wrong with it is that it's a limited skill, used to transplant injuries, organ deformations, and whatnot. It's potent, I suppose, for someone who's using it as a brute force instrument, but you can do better. In fact," the orc pointed up at the Court Leviathan, "we have direct means of progression for you."

Shiv stared at the Court Leviathan. "What, you mean the regeneration?"

The orc Biomancer let out a scoff of disappointment. "That's not what it's doing. What it's doing is assimilation. The regeneration is merely one of many capabilities it has inhabiting its body. It can also shift its flesh and grow new organisms. And it can assume the qualities of those organisms. Don't tell me you didn't examine its mana core."

Shiv frowned at the orc. "I didn't really have time."

"Well, now you bloody do. Wait, how far are you from your next evolutionary threshold?"

Shiv looked at his status. "I'm 90 with my Woundeater, so, assuming it evolves again, ten levels."

"Ten levels," the orc said. "And no Practical Metabiology advancement." He let out a hiss of displeasure. "We might need to force your Biomancy first. You're capable of having monster skills, so why not give you a better one? Instead of just taking wounds, we let you learn how to integrate flesh. It will save you the misery of more cancer, and it will save me the misery of watching you constantly drop dead from cancer. You can just draw that into yourself... Yes... It will require significant strain."

And just then, Shiv felt the first surges of deeper weakness wash through his body. "Yeah, about that," Shiv groaned. "Can you take the cancer out of me?"

"No! We're going to have you try removing it yourself. It should be good for your Practical Metabiology, even if you fail."

"You know if I die," Shiv said, "I'm going to be draining your vitality, right?"

"Yes, yes. Just remember not to kill me, for I am the only one who can—"

"Yeah, listen, you already sold yourself. I needed a Biomantic tutor, and here you are. Just tell me what you expect and what you want me to do for my next Skill Evolution."

"It's quite simple. The first thing we're doing," Helix turned as he stared at the horde of orc Biomancers, "is that we're boarding the Court Leviathan. We're going to get this thing working again, and we're going to be using it to its maximum potential. Second thing is that we're going to have it digest you while the rest of us tear you apart over and over."

Shiv stared. "What?"

"Yes, it will assimilate you. You should resist that."

"Wait," Shiv said. "I've been assimilated a few times before, but how's that supposed to help?"

"By resisting!" Helix cried out. "You're going to resist the assimilation. You're going to die over and over, until finally, your Woundeater is going to hit a proper threshold. Now, while this is happening, I and the other orcs will constantly be attacking your mana field. It will be extremely painful, but your deaths should help you focus."

Shiv simply shrugged. "Yeah."

"Oh," Helix said. "You're not bothered by that."

"Death makes me better."

Once more, the orc gave him a rare nod of appreciation. "Fine, then this should be easier than I expected. We're going to try to get you past level 100, and then when we do, we're going to try to get you a proper evolution, rather than progressing entirely. It can be done with enough strain, with enough struggle."

"Good," Shiv breathed. He was looking forward to this. "But does it have to be done now? I need to talk to the other—"

"You're not talking to any other Heroes!" Helix let out a loud declaration as he pointed up at the Court Leviathan. A group of orcs paused behind him. "They will all eventually board the Leviathan anyway. You might as well use that as your central command center. We can carry battle groups around in that thing. The Heroes and Masters will come. They will board. They will wait for you to undergo your new Biomantic metamorphosis, and when you emerge, only then will you talk to them as a proper Biomancer."

"So what kind of skill do you expect me to get from this anyway?" Shiv said.

Helix narrowed his eyes. "The very same skill that empowers the Court Leviathan, of course. Chimeric Assimilation."