

Deathless 141

Chapter 141 (I) Predators [II]

The orcs are meticulous about their cruelty. When they took me, they separated me from the others. Only a few came with me. The others... The others were put in another camp.

They were titled “Relief.” Relief for the orcs, relief for their cruelty, for their itch, for their urge to harm. And we weren't far from the relief camp. They moved us into the Tutorial, and the screams that came from the relief camp were endless. Constant. They echoed ceaselessly, and the bars built around the camp were open. They let us see in. They let us see, but not completely. They threw silk sheets around the inner courtyard of the camp and there... they... they did things to people... things... things I don't want to talk about. The relief camp. We don't need to talk about that.

Let's talk about where I went to, where I went to. I went to the “Solution” camp. The solution camp wasn't even a camp. It was more like a luxurious resort. They even made a pool for us. It was absurd. The first time we went in, the front door had golden steps, luscious carpets. The orcs, cruel shits, they dressed up like concierges. They liked playing roles, teasing us. They used their social skills on us, trying to charm those of us most pliable. And then we were separated, placed in our own rooms and watched constantly by an orc.

They fed us well. They treated our wounds. They talked to us about our trauma. Some of the orcs even mimicked our psychological patterns. They... they led us on. They told us about how they were tired of this cruelty, how they didn't want to be orcs anymore, and that... that was the first point of failure. Some of us were so desperate to believe that we found a way out, that we could find an ally in this... this hell and escape, that they betrayed themselves. They... they turned to the orcs and, well... a week later we saw them in the Relief camp... I was—we were...

We were brought to the relief camp. The people in the relief camp didn't get to keep their arms or legs. They had stumps. They crawled around like animals. They were fed like animals. They... they didn't... They couldn't keep their tongues either. And they showed me the relief camp. They showed me everyone else that had been part of the Solution camp, and I was the only one left. I was the only one.

And I saw... and I saw my mother... and I saw her and... I will go home now. I need to go home. Someone needs to tell Dad what happened. He's alone. We're alone. We're just two now... Someone needs to tell him what happened to our family... I need to tell him...

-Interview with Adept-Artillerist Lee Halley

Uva's new armor was more akin to a crustacean's carapace than it was separate pieces of plating assembled together. To say that it was not optimized for direct and physical combat was an understatement.

There was a lack of flexibility in the joints that would have disqualified it from use for any warrior or similar. The arcanite was harder than focus crystal by far, but still, that did little to solve the direct force issue posed by blunt weapons or concussive attacks. That being said, it was apparently transparent from the inside, like wearing a barrier of glass. From the outside, Shiv could only see his own reflection.

For anyone other than Uva, entering the armor would have been a chore. It unlatched from the back, forcing the wearer to squeeze through a narrow set of flaps. Uva had no issue squeezing. Frankly, she had no issue sliding in and out of the armor at all. She didn't even need to open the flaps.

She simply undid one buckle, and the rest of her body flattened, sliding in like an undulating wave splashing through a crevice. Both Shiv and Adam looked on, speechless, as the Umbral transformed her physique. It was only after they watched her feet slide in, flattening to accommodate the tightness, that Adam finally broke from his stupor.

"You know, I don't think I'll ever get used to your Physicality Skill Evolution."

"I suspect I won't either," Uva replied, her words muffled from inside the armor. It took a while for her to properly right herself. The armor bounced from side to side, and Shiv helped keep it still. It was only when her limbs started moving again that he backed away. "It feels strange being able to move in odd dimensions. I have a hard time not folding myself in half when I walk at times."

Just then, the prismatic substance that comprised her armor flashed with a growing brilliance. Arcanite was a mana conductor, as was Focus Crystal, and from her head emerged a nest of mana strands. Previously, she was like the center of a spiderweb. Now, Shiv would more liken her to the heart of a literal jungle.

It wasn't just that she had more strands; rather, some of them forked, growing new branches of mana that multiplied on as well. But as he studied her in an amplified mana field, he noted that some strands seemed fainter than the others. Her translucent mana strands had always been harder to notice, but they still glowed, still had a presence in the world. There were a few strands that were fainter than all the others, and when Shiv projected his own Psychomancy through them, they dissolved, causing him to step back in surprise.

"Illusory mana," Uva muttered with curiosity. She directed one of her other strings to feel at those faint pseudo-strands. Her strings passed through as well, disrupting them as if she was pushing her hand through a veil of swirling mist. After a few moments, however, they reformed, and she stared at those illusory strands. She could even compel them to move in certain directions. "The wearer of this armor valued discretion," Uva hummed, "but I suspect they had their own Magical Resistance skill as well. Or avoided combat entirely."

Shiv thought back to her armor's list of enchantments, and he realized she was right. It didn't have Magical Resistance. It seemed entirely focused on keeping her hidden.

"It's bloody hard to keep my eyes on you," Adam said. His eyes were burning brightly, struggling as he looked at Uva. His head shook as if it was at war with his neck, trying not to turn. "I daresay this armor would be more useful for a thief than a mage."

"Or a thieving mage," Uva said, building on Adam's guess. "But even so, I suspect the wearer was also focused on countering other magi."

"Why do you think that?" Shiv asked.

"Because the false mana field, or at least the illusory mana field, I should say... It is not exactly false. It is still drawing from my Psychomancy, but only a paltry amount I can't exactly control. The illusory strands... They do move, conversely, to a few actual strands I have. They're more like mirror images than anything else."

Shiv imagined Uva facing a rival Psychomancer now. He didn't see that ending well for them. "Yeah," he said, smirking slightly at the dense nest of translucence veiling Uva. "I don't think I'd like to get into a mind battle with you, even if I was a Heroic-Tier Psychomancer."

"Not over long distance, perhaps, but close, force to force..." Uva hesitated. "I would avoid a direct competition of magical might against one of the orc Psychomancers still. The armor has amplified me, but my Heroic Skill remains what it is: a skill of distance, subtlety, and dexterity. Not much of a weapon of mental destruction. As for the other enchantments..."

She looked at her hand for a moment, and her body flashed. A second later, she began to fade from view.

As she disappeared, Shiv expanded his mana hydras and found her in a near instant. She was right where she stood, though if he was using his eyes, he wouldn't be capable of perceiving her at all. Between the Invisibility and Awareness Warding enchantments, she was as hard to detect as any with a Master-Tier Stealth Skill. Hells, Shiv thought to himself, Awareness Warding is probably a Master-Tier Stealth Skill at the very least.

"I can still hear a heartbeat," Adam replied, "but I keep losing track of my thoughts after." He held out a hand and made a gesture at her. A moment thereafter, he nodded. "Well, it's not entirely immune to tracking."

"Elaborate?" Uva asked. She reappeared in an instant, her invisibility dispelled.

"I mean, my Divination still works on you. Which is unsurprising. There are few things Divination does not work on, considering it taps into the narrative of all things."

Valor popped his head out of Shiv's cape and stared at Adam and Uva. "Ah. We are still here? I expected us to cross over to the Tutorial already to begin field tests."

"In a moment, Valor," Adam said. "We're busy gawking at Uva's Mage-Thief armor. And I'm trying to figure out how I could counter this thing."

"It is not wise to state your suspicious intentions so openly, Gate Lord," Uva said with a low laugh. "Do you not trust me? Are you still worried I might reach into your mind and do something terrible to you."

"Oh, I do trust you, Sister," Adam replied, letting out a light breath. "However, in case we run into someone like you, or with a similar skill..." Adam didn't finish that sentence. He let it stand and allowed Uva to come to her own conclusions.

She acknowledged his point with a nod. "Understandable. But perhaps you might gain more insight once we give this armor a field test." Shiv could feel a slight grin spread across Uva's face. "Let's see how long it will take the orcs to notice and react to me."

Uva was invisible when she crossed over into the Tutorial. Shiv and Adam remained connected to her, aware of where she was. But the orcs were given no forewarning at all. Instead, the only hint of her presence was the massive, sprawling ocean of threads that extended from her.

Most of the orc army failed to react. But a few of the orc Psychomancers responded immediately. Their heads turned from where they rested around the campfires. They looked up and shifted their own fields to intercept Uva's strands, but they did so more out of curiosity than malice. As their fields shuddered, the strings they tried to interface with dissolved, and Shiv saw a collective expression of surprise play across their faces.

What they didn't notice were a few other strands weaving patterns over their heads. Spells formed within those patterns, and they remained there, hovering over campfires, trembling with slowly building concentrations of mana as they crystallized into shape. They remained there, without affecting any of the orcs or the environment on an obvious level.

"So that's the Lagged Spell enchantment," Uva said.

"What's it do?" Shiv asked.

"It allows a spell to be cast ahead of time. It simply condenses itself slowly, but the action is already done."

"So it's like leaving a mine?" Adam asked.

Shiv frowned. "A mine?"

"A bomb triggered by delay or proximity," Adam explained.

"Sort of," Uva replied. "A delayed spell, to some extent. However, it is still tied to me. I think that is connected to the other enchantment I have, spell priming." And as Uva twitched one of her strands, the spell went off. It burst in a large cone, spreading across the orc encampments, and they all turned their heads upward as a telepathic statement washed down over them. "Do not be alarmed, this is just a test."

And that was all she said. The orc Psychomancers were actively darting around now, rushing through the camp as they tried to follow the fading telepathic spell. Several had convened together, and they observed her mana strings, watching with curiosity and interest. She didn't like the predatory gleam in their eyes, however.

"I think maybe this is good enough." But she ignored him just then and continued shaping a dozen new spells. A chain of Psychomancy spells formed across the expanse. Each of them resonated, and they

seemed to pulse in sequence. After a few moments, each of them detonated as well, but they spread wide this time, splashing out as a wave rather than a cone.

"This—

“—is a warning—”

“—of randomized varieties—”

“—He who deciphers the hidden message gains—”

“—understanding.”

Each of the telepathic broadcasts sounded almost too close together. They arrived as if a jumbled mess, and Shiv frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. Just something to get the orc Psychomancers paranoid. Let them try to decipher my mental rubbish,” Uva replied with a dry chuckle. True to her word, even more orcs were reacting, trying to figure out the mystery behind the strange mana strands.

But though the benefits her armor offered were good, they weren't perfect.

"There," Adam said, pointing. Shiv and Uva both turned. It took a moment for them to spot what Adam was looking at, and he had to highlight it using his own divination for them to finally notice. They stared through his eyes and passively experienced his Seer of Horizons.

His awareness arrived just before a tall orc that had a shard embedded at the top of his head. A shard that gleamed violet, lighting a brutally scarred face and casting shadows on lips spread wide in a grand and wicked smile.

"I see you, and you see me!" The orc giggled madly. Adam reeled his senses back and shook his head.

"Well," he said, sounding slightly unnerved about that encounter, "I believe we just ran into one of the orcs' Diviners. I suspect his Awareness might be Heroic-Tier as well."

"Why is that?" Uva asked.

"Because I think he's looking directly at you instead of me." Adam frowned. "It's most definitely well into the Heroic level threshold."

"Feeling inadequate?" Shiv asked.

"That's less important than understanding what my enemy is capable of," Adam said, his expression serious. "I would rather seethe at a superior foe and live, rather than hide in my arrogance and lose."

The Deathless just stared at Adam. "You know, Adam, sometimes you're pretty cool."

The Gate Lord froze. He twisted his head to look at Shiv and squinted. "Do you actually think that?"

"Yeah. Like just now. I like that."

Adam nodded, and he slowly smiled. "I am pretty cool."

Chapter 141 (II) Predators [II]

"Adam is pretty cool, and that orc is now a noted issue," Uva said. Discomfort spread through her mind. Connected to her consciousness, Adam and Shiv tasted it as well. Uneven undulations passing along her mana strands as a result—the only magical sign of her slight anxiety. "I will need additional countermeasures for Diviners, I suspect."

"There is no perfect counter," Adam declared. "For every skill, there is another skill it cannot account for, and it only gets more extreme with every evolution. We are nowhere near invincible, and it's best that we remember that. Except for you, Shiv." Adam gave the Deathless an annoyed stare.

Shiv just laughed. "Don't worry, Adam. As long as you stick close to me and survive all the horrible things that keep coming my way, I guarantee that you'll be at least, I don't know, a tenth as powerful as I am. And it'll only take a hundred times as long."

"Don't forget about my vambrace," Adam said with a snort.

"What, your little sparky Necromancy thing?" Shiv pretended to yawn. "Yeah, it's really impressive. Of course, if you shoot me with it, you'll have to think about the collateral damage."

Adam sneered. "You know what? If you annoy me enough, I might just forget to consider the collateral damage. Maybe I'll just shoot you. What do you think about that?"

Shiv's grin faded slightly as he considered that. "I think not, Adam. I think you're too good a guy for that, and I think even if somebody pissed you off enough for you to do something like that, I doubt you'll be able to live with yourself after."

Psychology 29 > 30

The faux aggression on Adam's face broke apart then, and he blinked. "Was that psychoanalysis? It felt uncomfortable. Felt like you could see right through me in some way."

Shiv considered what he just did and let out a grunt. "Yeah. My Psychology leveled again. Hells, it's leveling fast. I just kind of triggered it without thinking. Probably got into the habit of using it against the orcs. They like poking at minds as much as they do the body."

"Well, best that we don't use that on each other," Uva said.

Shiv nodded in agreement. "Yeah, sorry. It just feels like..."

"Reflex?" Adam finished for him.

"Yeah," Shiv replied. "Reflex."

The Gate Lord considered that for a moment. "Your environment shapes who you are. I don't think it's good for you to be spending all this time alone with the orcs. With so many orcs as well. You'll probably need to come up with a strategy to balance out your behavioral influences."

"You make me sound like a kid, Adam," Shiv replied, a bit of humor returning to his voice.

"That affects everyone," Adam said. "Isn't that right, Uva?"

"Correct," the Umbral said. "Wait, how do you know about this?"

"I took a Psychology course in the academy."

"Adam, how many felling classes did you take there?" Shiv asked.

Adam's eyes looked upward as he tried to recall. "Well, I managed to fit in ten semesters' worth while I was there."

"Ten?" Shiv asked.

"Not that much. The academy expects you to practice and develop your own capabilities on the side. Classes are mainly theory," Adam finished. "Now, stop interrupting me. As for classes, I don't know, eighty?"

"Eighty classes," Shiv gawked, "on top of all the learning you had to do as a kid? Holy shit."

"Holy shit, indeed." Adam sighed. "I didn't much like some of the classes, and I must admit that most of them didn't go that deep into the subject. But still, my father stressed the importance of knowing things. Even a tertiary bit of knowledge matters in the heat of battle."

"Like with the mana bomb back at Passage," Shiv said.

"Yes," Adam replied, holding his head high with pride. "Just like that."

"Yeah, well, instead of having classes or instructors, I got these orcs." Shiv chuckled.

Neither Adam nor Uva shared his amusement.

"That and they're likely using their psychology and social skills on you all the time," Uva said. "I expect that most of them are at least Adept-Tier for most of their social skills. Probably Master-Tier for at least one social skill on average. Mingling with them is dangerous and beneficial for you at the same time. But only if you are exposed and grounded by a comparatively kinder, more ethical influence."

Uva's strand squeezed Shiv, and the Deathless just nodded. "Of course, Miss Uva. You know I have no problem with you educating me."

"Uva," Adam said, looking between them. "I have many complimentary things to say about you, but perhaps I should be the one to instruct Shiv on ethics."

"You doubt my ethicality?" Uva asked.

"Yes," Adam said bluntly. "Not severely, mind you. But the things you are willing to do are more than a little uncomfortable for me, disregarding the biases of your culture. Frankly, Shiv just butchers people. What you do with a mind is invasive. It can be a thing about my culture, but just crushing someone's sense of self bothers me deeply. I mean this without offense."

"Hm," Uva mused. "A mix of influences on Shiv, then. And regardless of how unnerved I make you feel, his other influences are Can Hu, Valor, curse-happy chef, and the orcs."

Adam stared unhappily at the millions of gray-skinned monsters leering at them from all directions. "Right. Yes. Well, Shiv, I might as well spend a bit more time with you when I can. Even if I do have to come over here more."

“Not sure how wise that is,” Shiv said, staring down the orcs with a casual glare. “You don’t much like it here. They make you nervous. And if I can smell that on you, they can probably taste it.”

“Right. But so what?” Adam shrugged. “They scare me. Combat scares me. Death scares me. Losing my mother scares me. Failing my town scares me. I’m basically always scared these days, Shiv. But being scared doesn’t break me. It just makes me more committed. I’m not letting the orcs cow me. And I’m absolutely not surrendering you to them. You’re not theirs to have.”

The Deathless swallowed as he looked at Adam. “Hey. Adam.”

“Yes?”

“Thanks.”

This book's true home is on another platform. Check it out there for the real experience.

The Gate Lord smirked. “What are friends for?”

“Oh,” Shiv muttered. “We’re friends now? Not your responsibility?”

“We’re responsible for each other. You’ve always done what you can for me. Over and over. So I’m going to do what I can for you. Damn the past. Even if it hurts us.” Adam paused. “I’ve been thinking about the orcs. They will exploit that against us. They will figure out our history. I think it will still hurt.

To recall and be insulted by what your parents did to my mother. My family. Blackedge. My sister. But you know what?"

"What?" Shiv said, a weight growing inside him.

"You gave me back my mother," Adam said. "And you've bled for me. You've died for me so many times. What Harlon and Vera Lowe did was forever. But what you did is forever too. So. I'm going to state that now before the mood abandons me and I don't have the courage to muster the words."

Shiv nodded. Mainly because there was a large rock in his throat. If he started speaking, it wouldn't be so dignified. "Yeah. Thanks," he managed to force out.

"Yeah, thanks?" Adam repeated, something tugging at his lips. "That's your reply."

"Shut the fuck up, asshole," Shiv growled to hide the wetness building in his throat. "If you make me have a moment in front of these orcs, I'll kick their asses for mocking me. And that'll take a bit too much godsdamned time."

"And normal Shiv returns," Adam muttered with a smile.

The two sons of Blackedge shared a look, a laugh, and then a happy silence. Uva said nothing, but Shiv felt a warmth emanating from her as well.

It only then occurred to Shiv how lonely he had been all his life, and only after he got a contrast of people he could count on—people who cared about him—that he realized how much being lonely hurt.

"Anyway," Adam said, letting out an extended breath. "I'll be coming over here because I don't want to imagine what Shiv without morality looks like."

"I don't think you need to imagine," Uva replied flatly. "Just go find one of the more destructive orc Heroes."

Shiv winced at that. "Am I really that bad?"

"Bad?" Uva replied. "It has nothing to do with bad. It has everything to do with how you act. Of course, you're destructive because your skills lean that way, and because you're inexperienced. They're destructive because they want to see things break. Still a fundamental difference. There isn't a true parity between you and a Heroic-Tier orc until your destruction becomes a matter of choice rather than a byproduct of your actions."

Shiv took both Adam and Uva's words in.

All his life, he wanted to be a Pathbearer, to be powerful, to hold bare magic and wield it, to create wonders and miracles. He wanted to be free to adventure across the world to see sights he could only dream of and sights beyond his dreams. But now that he had this opportunity, now that he'd grown faster and to greater heights than most Pathbearers could ever hope, he considered who he might become when he finally hit Legendary Tier.

And he was going to hit Legendary Tier. Likely sooner than anyone else on Earth ever had. He brought up the Quest again, the first one he'd received, and one that was still pending.

Quest: Break Vicar Sullain's siege of Blackedge and stop another war between the surface and the Abyss before it can begin.

Success: Evolve an [Existing Skill] to Legendary Tier.

Failure: The Abyss rises, consuming all surface territory of Lost Angeles.

The moment the town was liberated and Vicar Sullain was defeated, he would be able to elevate himself into becoming a Legendary Pathbearer. But which Skill would he choose? And what kind of Legend was he going to be? How was he going to face the world?

I think I might have been a little too reactive most of my life. I thought I was active when I tried to earn a Path by killing the lesser vampires. But interacting with the orcs, dealing with the problems now... I've just been rolling with the punches a bit. Maybe a clear goal of who I could be would be more useful. Not just stuff I want to do.

Philosophy 11 > 12

Psychology 30 > 31

And as he considered that, his Philosophy and Psychology both leveled.

Shiv felt a resolution harden within himself. Yeah, clarity. A direction at least. I don't just want to be getting pushed around one way or another by other people. Learning from the orcs is good. Being influenced by them even subtly is not great. Right, some ground rules for myself. The basics still apply. Try not to kill innocent people or non-martial Pathbearers. And immediately he cringed as he remembered fighting 811, and also the aftermath of his battle against the Jealousy and the Recollector.

The Recollector was a problem. He likely couldn't have done anything in that situation, no matter what he tried to minimize casualties. There was no point in regretting the deaths because the System had directly forced his hand.

Right, he thought, let's add something to that. Maybe figure out a skill that will allow me to teleport myself and an enemy somewhere without people around. But I've got no clue what kind of skill that would be. I might need to ask Adam about it.

"I could just fire my arrow at you," Adam said. And then Shiv remembered that he was still mentally connected to Adam and Uva.

"Oh, right. Yeah, thanks, Adam. Might work."

"The dimensional pathways will close eventually. But you fighting someone within that expanse is better than you fighting someone in the middle of a city. Though there are other potential issues, such as me not being present when you need this kind of support."

"Right. Maybe we can get some kind of pocket dimension on command," Shiv considered.

And that made Adam have his own thoughts. He stared at his bow and let out a quiet hum. "A dimension on command. That might be useful for me as well, especially if we want to trap someone, or if I want to set the dimension ablaze with corrosive energy."

And just then, a loud cry echoed through the air.

"Hey, Insul! Took you long enough. Finally back!" Bonk stood atop the Court Leviathan, waving his massive cancerous club. "We're going out, or what? If we're going to have to wait any longer, we're going to start fighting each other. We were expecting to go to war, not to sit around all day."

Shiv snorted. "Right, Adam, Uva, suppose we start rounding up orcs and moving them out through Surface Gateway? Let's see how our army of gray-skinned monsters holds up against the Inquisition."

The Gate Lord nodded slowly. "We don't have any teleporters yet, but I can fire a Veilpiercer from within the bunker to the Surface Gateway. After that, they just need to pass through the pathway."

Shiv considered that, and it sounded like a pretty good solution, albeit one that relied mainly on Adam. It wouldn't be efficient in the long term. "Maybe you can just create a dimensional network that connects all three gateways in the bunker or something."

"That was what I was thinking as well," Adam replied. "It'll be a separate channel, though. Maybe we'll have to build an additional teleportation anchor on top of that for everyone else's use. The orcs have their own specific channels that remain apart from the ones we all use. I will have to make sure it's properly awarded, though."

“So?” Bonk shouted. “We going, or do I need to start killing some of these other orcs? Because I will. I don’t like a lot of these ugly shits, Shiv, and I want to hit something.”

"Alright, I'm gonna go talk to these bastards before they start tearing each other apart. Or us."

“Wait,” Uva said. “Activate your cape. I’m going inside too.”

“Wh—Oh, right, the Light-Curse.”

As she slipped into the Dimensionality of his cape and joined up with Valor and Can Hu, Shiv shot up into the air with a burst of gravity.

“I’ll get a pathway set up,” Adam called. “Have the orcs queue properly if you can.”

Shiv laughed at the thought. That laugh died as he realized the orcs probably could manage a pretty neat line while they marched off to butcher and maim.

As he traveled through the air, orcs called out to him, cheering for his arrival, some jeering him for taking so long. But instead of just relishing their attention as he did before, he focused on their voices. Focused on how he felt, and he noticed it. They were pulling at his psychology, influencing him in weird ways. He truly enjoyed the orc's attention. It made him feel wanted. It made him feel special. And with every time they cheered, that feeling grew a little stronger.

Oh, you subtle, sneaky, gray-skinned sons of bitches, Shiv said to himself, shaking his head. But he realized it this time, and he remembered this moment. He reached inside his own mind using his Psychomancy and gripped this realization. He tried to scar it into his mind.

The orcs were not his allies; they were not his friends, and they were using any and all means to influence him. He needed to be wary of that. More importantly, he might be able to use the same means to influence them back. It was time to put them on a bit of a defensive.

He came to a halt above the Court Leviathan. There, Bonk and a dozen other Heroic-Tier orcs looked up at him, their eyes glowing with violent anticipation. Some of them were bleeding, their armor slightly damaged.

"The hells happen to you idiots?" Shiv asked.

"Sparring?" Bonk replied as if it were obvious, shouldering his club. "So? Are we finally leaving? Is the Gate Lord pleased with our proposal? Or are we going to have to each sign a skill contract with him, promising our souls as collateral in case anyone accidentally steps on an ant?"

"Nah," Shiv said with a vicious grin of his own. "You guys are going to be scratching that itch of yours good today. Go get the other orcs prepared to cross the gateway. We're gonna be intercepting the expeditionary force. Let's see how you bastards do."

Chapter 142 (I) Structure

This is Master Acolyte Hammerfoot, requesting direct SkyCast to Inquisitor Sijik.

Inquisitor Sijik, nothing to report. The skies are clear, and our Shadows have encountered no threats aside from a pack of chameleon raptors. The subterranean teams have also reported no visible threats.

Progress is optimal. I recommend that we double our pace. We should avoid Magerita Point for that reason. It might add a few extra hours to our travel time, but passing through might just see us intercepted, considering we have not sent them a SkyCast in advance.

That, ultimately, is your decision to make.

Master Advisor Sijik, for now— Wait, what the hells is that? Please hold. I think I see—

-Recovered SkyCast Communications from Master-Acolyte Hammerfoot

"Wait. Hold. I'm coming with you."

Shiv turned just as he was about to step through the gateway and saw Helix descending from the Court Leviathan. Beside him, a long and orderly line of orcs were already queuing up. Those who walked the Path of the Shadow, the Thief, and the Assassin were at the front of the line, and they were chattering among each other, discussing how fun the coming excursion would be.

Behind them were Heroes of Physicality, Toughness, and more. This was the main force of the orc army, the arm that would see the Inquisition's expeditionary force crushed. It was a mixed group of Heroes and Masters, and ultimately, there would be 20,000 orcs taking part in this operation.

The best thing about the orcs was that they were self-directed. He didn't need to herd them like they were sheep. The moment the order came, they immediately began massing, preparing their equipment, readying themselves, and making for the gateway.

But if there was one other thing he had noticed, it was that it was every orc for themselves. They might talk to one another, discussing old experiences and new expectations, but they didn't hold to any obvious teams. Every orc was his own individual. And so, though they were about to fight together, they ultimately operated alone.

However, if there was one orc he didn't expect to be heading over to the surface, it was Helix. Helix, who made his distaste of the First Blood known. Helix, who was openly interested in raiding a First Blood city and capturing vampires for his experiments. And now, the Heroic-Tier Biomancer was gliding down through the air, his revolving wings of blood fusing back to his flesh while his Biomancy field sheathed itself around his body as well.

"Helix," Shiv said, "We're not really going for the First Blood yet. As soon as I get back—"

"No, not that," Helix said with a loud scoff. "I will partake in the sacking of the parasitic blood-vermin. But right now, I wish to be with you."

Shiv stared at the orc for a moment. He didn't expect this. "With me?" Shiv chuckled. "You find me that charming?"

"No, you fool, you're that inexperienced. If you think I'm going to let you wander off onto a battlefield and miss out on key educational experiences, you are woefully mistaken."

Shiv just grinned, and that made Helix scowl all the more. "So, what, you're planning to tag along just to be my tutor?"

"Just to make sure my previous efforts are capitalized on," Helix said, sticking a finger in Shiv's face. "Also," the orc lowered his hand as he took in Shiv's armor, "what have you merged with your armor now? I see some basilisk biomass, but why is it leaking green between the crenulations of your scales?"

Shiv looked down at his armor and felt a swell of pride spread through his chest. "Oh, this?" His armor was split in slight separations. That was the result of fusing the basilisk flesh to the bone adamantine. Adding the basilisk's venom glands, however, created a network of green veins, veins Shiv could affect using his Biomancy at any moment. "Yeah, I added a basilisk's poison gland to the armor. At first, it was just to dose myself up fast. But then, I thought, well, if I want to poison someone and paralyze them in battle, wouldn't that be useful too?"

Helix looked on at Shiv's armor, frowning slightly. The Deathless expected the orc to chide him about some Biomancy mistake or another. Then, Helix just nodded. "Very good. This is the kind of initiative a Biomancer should take. Experimentation is good for you. Remember to fail often, fail soon, and always fail. That is how you make something interesting. Is this the only thing you've imbued with a basilisk's gland?"

"For now," Shiv said. "I used up the entire gland."

But before he could finish speaking, Helix made a gesture in the air, and a Biomancy spell swirled into shape atop his palm. A concentration of gleaming red mana pulsated as a swirling constellation of microspells came together, fusing into a dynamic structure. Shiv tried to take in all the details, all the patterns, but they were moving too fast, and there were far too many for him to count.

In an instant, the glowing construct of mana hardened, and it transformed. A large, pulsating organ revealed itself atop the orc's hand, and Shiv's eyes widened as he took in a new mana gland. It was plump, bright green, and practically half the size of Helix's body, and it blocked Helix's torso from sight. Inside was a swirling miasma that could cripple one's nervous system. The orc held it out to Shiv, and he directed his mana hydra to swallow it after a moment.

It vanished in a flash of Biomancy mana and became a rendering within Shiv's field.

"Did you just make a basilisk's venom gland using your mana right now?" Shiv asked.

"Yes," Helix replied, his voice doing nothing to hide how proud he was. "It is a trivial task if you know what to do. Why, I was capable of this even when I was merely an Adept, though it would take a substantially longer amount of time. Alas, you are an inverted Biomancer, and I will have to feed you like a mother hawk does a chick. A large, dangerous chick that is simply underdeveloped of the mind."

"I'm touched," Shiv replied sardonically. "But I also don't need to keep being reminded of this."

"And I will never stop reminding you of that until you finally exceed my expectations," the bespectacled orc said, grinning at Shiv as he held his hands behind his back. "Nonetheless, about your cape. I understand that it is a dimensional item."

"It is," Shiv said, narrowing his eyes at the orc. "And no, you're not getting in."

"Oh, come now. I suspect that someone else is already inside, or several someones you wish to protect from the dangerous orcs. Let me assure you, I have no interest in hurting your companions." Helix

considered for a beat. "Not yet, anyway. Right now, I'm mostly interested in seeing your development through. I've already taken you on as a disciple."

Shiv considered that for a moment and just nodded. "Alright, sure. Thanks. Awesome, Helix. But you're still not going in the cape."

"Oh, you don't trust me."

"Not even a felling smidge when it comes to the lives of people I care about. Listen, Helix, the poison gland was pretty nice. Everything you taught me was cool as shit. But there's a simple problem."

"I'm an orc?" Helix asked.

"You're an orc," Shiv confirmed. "I have nothing against you coming with me, but you're going to be doing it in person. Or not at all."

"What is it about me that makes you so paranoid?" Helix said, prodding at Shiv slightly.

"The fact that you're an orc, a Heroic-Tier Biomancer, and that you've probably not shown me half of what you can do with your Biomancy." Shiv looked Helix up and down. "Like how you managed to give me blood cancer the first time we met. Didn't even notice that. I let you near one of my allies for too long, and you might infect them with a parasite somehow. Or some kind of sick, fucked up disease that will only trigger when you decide. So, yeah, I am a bit of a baby bird. But that doesn't make me mentally challenged."

Helix stared at Shiv for a good long moment and said nothing.

Shiv put a hand on his hip and waited.

"Very well," Helix finally said, rolling his eyes. But then the orc laughed in concession. "Paranoia is also good for you. It is not a bad instinct to have."

"Were you gonna actually do something like that?" Shiv asked bluntly. Helix didn't reply. Once again, the Deathless sighed. "I just can't risk anything with you bastards."

"You can't risk anything with anyone," Helix corrected, latching on to Shiv's statement. "You think you can trust those you're with, that they are your friends, that they are the ones you can rely on? No. With time, everything is eroded. And with life, everything changes. Everything mutates, Shiv. Remember this. Never forget. Eventually, and should you survive long enough, you will be at odds with everyone you were beside, at least once. That is the way of the world, and that is the way of the System."

The orc spoke with absolute conviction, no doubt in his own words, and his confidence left Shiv feeling uncomfortable. He knew the System was trying to set something up. A triangle of counters between him, Adam, and Uva. Except Shiv didn't think that triangle was going to hold for long.

Adam could still hurt him substantially, avoid him maybe, but with his new Vitaemancy, he could offload soul damage. And at the same time, with how fast his skills were growing, he just didn't see Adam keeping up, or Uva, for that matter. They would still be dangers in their own right. Shiv doubted he could match them in their primary skills in the near future.

But down the line, if this was what he was capable of after a few intense weeks of struggle and death, what was he going to be in a year, in ten years, in a century?

"Good," Helix said, noticing Shiv's gaze grow distant. "You are thinking. Do that more. Do that as much as you can. Think from as many angles as you can. Work at the problem constantly. Like right now, I want you to get a Crafting Skill as well."

Shiv stared at the orc. "A what?"

"A crafting skill," the orc replied. "You have every means of creation. You can shape biology, and now you can assemble different pieces together. You can grow weapons. You can forge living creatures from your mana. But since you don't understand how to do that yet, you can fuse weapons together using biology, using spell patterns representing biology. You have an extra venom gland. I think that you should consider how you want to spend it. You've already incorporated it into your armor. Perhaps you need a weapon as well. But I will leave that to you. Expand. Grow. All is Biomancy. Don't just deepen a few skills. An organ doesn't work alone. Be complete."

"Complete," Shiv muttered. "Got it."

"Now," Helix said as he marched past the other orcs and made for the gateway. He rose up the final steps and stared into the black pool of Dimensionality. "It's been a while since I've seen the surface of Earth. Let's see if it is still the delightfully savage land I remember."

An orc beside him swung out a meaty fist. Helix let out a cry as he was backhanded down the steps. He bounced several times, and Shiv just watched while the other orcs cursed and spat in the Biomancer's direction.

"Back of the line, asshole!" one of the orcs shouted. The other orcs muttered in agreement, and someone threw an old boot at the back of Helix's head. "The hells do you think this is? Challenger's godsdamned asshole, have some dignity!"

"Helix?" Shiv called. "You okay?"

"Yes," Helix groaned, clutching his face. "I got carried away. It was terribly impolite of me to cut."

The twenty thousand orcs made their way through the gateway, through Adam's dimensional pathway, and finally out the surface gateway thereafter in under half an hour. They were efficient; a constant flow of bodies that moved eagerly toward their destination, and as they appeared on the other side, they immediately fanned out, forming something of a defensive perimeter.

Whisper, alongside a few hundred orc Dimensionalists, threw up a barrier of quivering black static around the gateway on the surface. Shiv was about to ask why they were doing such a thing when Adam explained without being prompted.

"It's the easiest way to hide us from a Seer or from someone with high-level Awareness," Adam said. He observed the orcs' magic as it formed a dome over the gateway. Uva connected her mind with Shiv's as well thereafter. The Deathless had given her verbal confirmation that the sky was dark, but even so, her strands moved with care, as if fingers reaching toward boiling water. Only after a few seconds did she finally move without worry or nervousness. As she tapped into Shiv and Adam's mind, she let out a breath of disappointment.

"My first gaze at the mysterious surface of the world, blocked by a wall of Dimensionality. Truly, the orcs ruin everything."

"It's only temporary," Adam said. "It's a very well-done Dimensional veil, though. These orcs have experience working with each other, constructing shields and dimensional barriers. I guess when you live as long as they do, you just kind of start cooperating intuitively sometimes."

"Still, they don't really seem to work in teams," Shiv muttered.

"They don't, do they?" Adam said. "It's not that they can't cooperate; it's that they prefer not to. But they will, if the task calls for it. At least for short periods of time."

"Insul, Gate Lord," Whisper said. He walked up to Shiv with an eager shine in his eyes, but didn't regard Adam at all. "We've established a protective perimeter. As I speak..." And then there came a shudder, and a part of the ground collapsed. A hole opened in the earth, and a tunnel was formed. "Our Geomancer friends are going to be shuttling the bulk of our ground-inclined forces. It is agreed that they will maintain a 20-kilometer distance from our forward operating Shadows. Would you like for this distance to be adjusted, Insul?"

The orc made a deliberate show of asking Shiv while ignoring Adam. The Gatelord frowned, but Shiv snorted.

"Yeah, Whisper, why don't you ask the Gate Lord?"

"Certainly," Whisper said, and he turned his head to Adam. And suddenly his demeanor shifted entirely. The orc just sneered. "We're going to be maintaining a 20-kilometer distance. Do you have suggestions, or shall we proceed with the operation?"

Adam sneered back at the orc. "Twenty seems fine. I'll keep an eye out from the air."

"Oh, you won't be joining us?" the orc questioned. "Fearful of your life?"

"I'll be right beside you," Adam said as he materialized a Veilpiercer, "if there is a need. Aside from that, I think I'm most useful high up in the sky, and with my senses cast far wide open."

"And you'll be keeping that eye on your enemy, I hope?" Whisper asked, a sweet smile playing across his face.

"Hey, Whisper," Shiv interrupted, flicking the orc on the forehead. "Knock that shit off. You've got plenty of Inquisitors to tear through soon. Save it for them."

"Of course, Insul. My apologies. I simply get excited."

"Get excited about the right people," Shiv chided. The orc bowed his head before telling the others what they had just decided. More orcs were flooding out from the gateway, and the messages were passed through them quickly. Orc Psychomancers even cast memory-imprint spells into the air, informing the ones that just arrived.

"Well," Shiv said, looking toward Adam, "I think that they won't be listening to your orders at all."

"I suspect not," Adam replied. "Still, they're experienced, and they're willing. Maybe we won't need to give them that much guidance at all."

"Likely not," Helix said. He loomed behind the Gate Lord and simply stared down. "And a word of advice, Young Arrow. Hide your emotions better. I can smell your annoyance from here. Now every orc will try to treat you the same way Whisper did."

"If you orcs intend to make this a problem—" Adam began.

Helix just shook his head. "No. That's not the right reaction at all. You run that perfect border between dangerous and vulnerable. You are everything we love to abuse in a human. While the Insul is mostly danger and very little vulnerability. Be cognizant of what you are. I tell you this not out of kindness, just so you can pose more of a threat. And also because I wish for my tutelage to end before I and Shiv try to kill each other."

"Just laying it out in the open, huh?" Shiv grunted.

"We are eternal. The clash is inevitable. There is no if. There is only a matter of when. And that applies to everyone that lives long enough under the gaze of the System."

"Well, I'll be sure to make your end quick and messy."

Shiv's promise slid off Helix like oil. "Focus on becoming a better Biomancer first. It would be a most embarrassing victory if I rendered you invalid from a special variant of brain degeneration and muscle atrophy."

Shiv blinked. "Did you hit me with something like that? Is that shit hiding in my genes right now?"

Helix just walked past him without replying.

"Felling orcs," Shiv breathed. Then, he laughed. "Never a dull day with them."

Adam, meanwhile, took a slight step away from Helix. "I'm going to have one of the Biomancers back in Gate Arrow take a deep and thorough look at me later."

Chapter 142 (II) Structure

"Anyway, how are we gonna do this?" Shiv asked. "Actually, which direction are we headed again? I have no idea where Fortress-City Diego is." He looked on as the few hundred orc Dimensionalists continued walking outward, increasing the spell perimeter as the rest of the orcs started sorting themselves into mobs.

"South," Adam said, but his attention wasn't on Shiv. Rather, he was staring at the orcs, trying to figure out what they were doing. "I can't quite make out the logic here. They're not sorting the magi into dedicated spell columns. They have mounted riders mixed in with pure infantry. The only ones that stand apart from the others are the Shadows and Thieves. Some of the Assassins are mingling with the Vanguards as well."

"Perhaps their order is instinctive," Uva suggested, but even she was confused. The Arachnae Order was an organization that was built off of hierarchy and discipline. Her training as a Psychomancer gave her insight into other cultures, especially the First Blood. However, the orcs were something foreign to her as well.

Shiv's gut told him there was an underlying reason behind how the orcs organized themselves. He watched the orcs, studied how the Heroes and Masters mingled without issue, watched as magic-focused orcs stood side-by-side with towering brutes of Physicality or Toughness. But there was one thing missing in the way they arranged themselves: chaos.

If people didn't know exactly what they had to do or weren't experienced enough, there would be a lot of questioning, a lot of talking. The orcs did very little talking about organization. They simply went to a place and settled there, taking on a role Shiv didn't yet understand. Maybe Uva was right. Maybe they'd been fighting together for so long that everything they did was purely intuitive by this point.

"Or maybe it just doesn't matter at all," Shiv said. He thought back to what Helix said about having a complete set of skills. To evolve broadly, not just deeply, for specific skills. "They're all capable of filling in each other's roles," Shiv muttered. "They might not be as good as the orc next to them, but they could respond in a pinch. Adapt."

"Correct," Helix said without looking at the Deathless, but Shiv could see the sides of the orc's face stretched back in a smile. "Among orcs, there is a soft hierarchy decided by Cycle Ratios. However, beyond that, it is about performance and understanding. There are no new orcs here. No, those are the Initiates, and they will be given the chance to blood themselves in combat later. But mostly they will be doing the dying. After all, you must experience some death before you finally get the taste of what not to do."

"And the rest of the army," Shiv said, "they're already so experienced that it doesn't matter?"

"Oh no, everything matters. I wouldn't say we are perfect," Helix replied.

"We're not perfect at all," Bonk called off from the side. He chewed on an apple of some kind as he looked Shiv up and down. "When are you going to dose yourself anyway? I'm getting tired of looking at you so shrunken. How do you even live being so damned small?"

"Later," Shiv said. "When the fighting actually starts, I don't want it to wear off."

"Just dose yourself again," Bonk replied. "I don't see what the big deal is."

"The big deal is that the dose needs to keep climbing higher."

"That's not a problem. Just find more poison. New poison. Hell, you're a Biomancer, manufacture your own diseases."

"It's a work in progress," Helix answered on Shiv's behalf. "He's more likely to stop his own heart instead. Now, if you don't mind—"

"I do, actually," Bonk said as he marched right next to Shiv, towering over him. "He's looking for structure, but there is no long-lasting structure among us. There are, however, orcs that other orcs listen to. You see those over there?"

He gestured, pointing at Whisper, at Mortar, at himself, at an orc Psychomancer whose mana resembled a glowing tower of translucence that rose from his temple rather than anything spherical or strand-like. "Those are maestros, the closest thing you can find that can be compared to your human commanders. But they're more like conductors, in a sense. They direct other orcs. They point them, or they create opportunities for other orcs to exploit. And that is the individual's job. That is the individual's duty. For we live in a world decided by personal legend, rather than collective effort."

"Still, it seems that could leave your effectiveness diminished by far," Adam said. He frowned at the orcs, but now his gaze was settling on specific members of the gray-skin cohort, the Maestros, as Bonk mentioned.

"Hardly," Bonk replied, grinning at Adam. He leaned down and stared at the Gate Lord.

Adam's posture grew tense. "Don't worry," Bonk said. "I'm not going to do anything. If I was, I'd do it directly. You see, I'm not like the other orcs, or at least not like most other orcs. If I were to kill you, Gate Lord, I would declare it first, and it would be a good and proper fight. I love good and proper fights—"

Then Bonk grunted and staggered backward as Adam's *The Righteous Dawn Prevails* flared. Orcs all around Adam reacted the same way, with a few even falling over as a swell of weakness washed over them. "What is...?" Bonk let out a shudder and looked at his hands. "Why is my Physicality Skill Level dropping?"

"Because it is unwise to continuously threaten me," Adam said, his voice sharp with frustration. "I've put up with it for quite a while, but let's make a few things clear. You do bother me. You do scare me. I do despise the fact that you can see through me in certain ways. But keep playing this game. Do it. Talk to me as if I'm a child awaiting abuse. You'll find a lot less pleasure fighting me than you think."

Bonk closed an eye and squinted at Adam before he finally shrugged and nodded. "Very well. I guess we might find out in time."

"You might not," Shiv said coldly. "Stick to the topic."

Bonk just grinned. "You want to look at this army of ours like an organism."

"An organism," Shiv repeated. "It sounds like something Helix might say."

"Because he would be right." Bonk let out a long, suffering breath. Helix simply looked up at the sky, or where the sky was supposed to be if it wasn't clouded by a veil of Dimensionality.

Bonk continued. "An orc Symphony can be characterized by the eyes or senses on the exterior. There is no unified term for this, but understand that to be the Shadows, the Thieves, the escape skirmishers. And behind them is the skin. These are usually Assassins, or, more often, those with high Reflexes levels. They'll move fast, they'll hit fast, they'll exploit breakthroughs, or they'll simply run back and tell the others where spots of fun might be discovered. Then come the bones. High Physicality, high Toughness, high Magical Resistance. The ones that are hard to break, that keep the enemy held in place for the true music to begin. And after that, there is the meat: the magi, the destructive orcs meant to break and bloody. But our armies are also different from you humans."

Bonk gestured at the massing army. "We are each our own nervous system, our own mind, and we don't have any veins, no logistical backline. If we are caught out, then we simply feed on inflicting suffering. Aggression, dear Insul, that is our way. Attack, always attack. Everything must pivot into an attack. To defend is to starve, and death is not a final consequence."

"And comparatively, our armies care about logistics and the command structure," Adam mused, frowning. "Interesting, but I suspect that you Maestros..."

"The Maestros are like nerve clusters," Helix added. "Killing them will reduce harmony between the orcs, but it will not stop us, not completely."

"He understates the point," Valor suddenly said. The Legendary Pathbearer's words echoed in Shiv's mind with gravitas. There came faint flashes of old memories, of human Saboteurs and Assassins slashing their way through orc Shadows and creating a breakthrough before the grayskins knew what was happening, of an ocean of liquid fire spilling over a collapsing orc army a million strong and drowning it entirely. "The orc claims they are aggression. I disagree. They are momentum, Shiv. Momentum. When they force the opposition onto a defensive, that is when they are strongest. Regardless of their obsession with individualism, it is when they are most coordinated, when they are most in tune with each other, that they are most dangerous, the hardest to overcome."

More images appeared, of an orc Vanguard smashing through a line of elves just as an orc Shadow ripped through the elven magi protecting their front with Dynamancy spells. "But when the enemy turns to fight them, when they are not afraid, when they stand their ground and bleed the orcs for every meter they gain, there is a fighting chance. The orcs right now are selling you an illusion of omnipotence. They may seem to be more effective than conventional fighters, as they might pride themselves on their own individual intuition and initiative."

Even more flashes of memory. A grand archway shattering and burying countless orcs beneath it. Orc skulls being crushed by canine feet as an army of bestial figures howled its defiance at the sky.

"But a Symphony is nothing close to undefeatable. When orc armies collapse, they are actually defeated more easily than many others, because they refuse to consolidate. They break apart into pockets, or more often, solitary, frenzied figures. And there, they can be overwhelmed. Adepts can kill Masters, Masters can kill Heroes, and Heroes can kill Legends. They are right about the System favoring the

individual. Why, there are no group skills after all. But what is the individual without the group? We are shaped by the masses. We exist among our kin and our enemies. They think otherwise, but they are blind to this. You can no more dominate the world than you can make it cease to exist, for you are part of it, part of Integration. The orcs have not dominated all that exists under the purview of the System for a reason; they chase a fantasy beyond them, and they do so because their maker is the same."

Shiv consumed Valor's words, transfixed by his words and the glimpses of memories. However, he wondered just how much of that was the Legendary Pathbearer's own bias. "You don't much like the orcs, do you?"

"No sensible man likes the orcs, Shiv, but that is the lesser matter," Valor said. "It is that I think they are fooled by their own true flaws. They think they understand their own limitations better than their adversaries do, but due to their warped psychology, they are incapable of noticing their actual faults."

"I guess we're going to be finding out about their actual faults real soon," Shiv said.

Just then, a loud call came from the orc Dimensionalists. "Spell ready! Prepare for singular veiling! Prepare, prepare, prepare!"

The orcs all began to cheer and chant. They held their weapons high, and before Shiv or Adam could ask what was happening, the dimensional veil collapsed inwards. However, it was not a chaotic breakdown of Dimensionality; rather, it came splashing back toward them like a receding wave. It blasted over Shiv's body, but it didn't impact him.

Rather, it wrapped him in a shadowy barrier that soon ceased its quivering, adapting to the environment around him. And just then, he realized what had happened. The Dimensionality spell was the very same that protected Whisper from notice. It was effectively a dimensional shell that couldn't be viewed from the outside, though it could be seen through from the inside.

"Broken Godsdamned Moon," Adam hissed. He looked at his own hand, at the faint black static coating him. As he let his gaze travel across the army, he saw that the orcs nearby were shrouded in the same blackness.

"Insul," Whisper suddenly said. Shiv nearly jumped out of his skin as he realized the orc was right behind him. The stealthy orc's dimensional veil was blending with Shiv's as well. "We are prepared to depart at your order. We know the location of Fortress City Diego, but would like to ask if you would be partaking in festivities at the Vanguard, or remaining here with the Gate Lord."

"In the thick of things," Shiv said, "as always—"

"I have them," Adam suddenly said, his eyes glowing bright. "They accelerated."

"What?" Shiv asked.

"The Expeditionary force. They're moving faster than expected. Coming right for us without stopping. They just passed Magerita Point. They're fifty kilometers away." The Gate Lord sneered. "Bloody lying bastard. Sijik said two days. He was going to arrive in one."

"Ah," Whisper breathed, chuckling. "Trust is such an ugly thing. But this is good. It saves us a long walk. Shall we even intercept, or set up an ambush here?"

"Intercept," Adam insisted. "We don't want any of the Necrotechs to notice what's happening. We do this in the wilderness."

Shiv immediately received images from Adam's mind, filtered over by Uva, and the bulk of the expeditionary force came into sight. The point of Adam's Seer of Horizons was hidden in a cloud. Shiv guessed that the young lord did that deliberately so that his Awareness wouldn't be noticed somehow.

"Can someone notice your skill?" Shiv asked.

"I am not willing to disregard the possibility," Adam said with a scowl.

The expeditionary force traveled aurally. A mass of clouds carried them across the sky, and formations of griffon riders, aerial magi, and flying automata formed their protective perimeter. At the center of the formation was a tall, bald man. A swirling mass of shadow constituted something of a coat around his body, and he had a staff planted in the middle of the cloud. His eyes were black, and the air around him was choked with flakes of spinning ash. By his side was a large automaton sporting four arms and six legs. The automaton's head was also more of a drill than a face, and wires dangled from its body, dragging behind as if something of a skirt.

"And I suspect we have eyes on our Inquisitor Sijik."

"The bald one?" Shiv asked.

"Correct," Adam replied. "The automaton talking to him, I suspect, might be Master-Interrogator Harare, or Salamander Glass, a Heroic-Tier Captain he mentioned before. He could also be someone I am entirely unfamiliar with."

“Heroic-Tier?” Whisper breathed. “Good. Perhaps this will be more battle than slaughter.”

“There are only two thousand of them still?” Bonk asked.

“Yes,” Adam confirmed.

The large orc sighed mournfully. “Yeah. I think that’s not going to be possible, Whisper. It’s gonna be a slaughter. You can’t match two thousand against twenty.”

“What happened to the world is for the individual?” Shiv asked.

“Basic arithmetic,” Bonk replied.

Shiv just laughed. “Alright. Orcs! We got eyes on the target. We—” He hesitated as he thought of how to frame this. “Keep all the bald Inquisitors alive. Especially the ones that have ash-shrouds for coats!”

“And the other elites too,” Adam added.

“Take some of their Heroes and Masters if you can. The rest...” Shiv shrugged. “I guess you can finally scratch that itch of yours.”

And though he could see the orcs pump their fists high, he couldn't hear them cheering through the veil. But he could hear the ground tremoring, and he could taste their excitement.

"Those poor, poor surfacers," Uva muttered. But her heart wasn't in it.

Chapter 143 (I) Capture [I]

The biggest weakness of the orcs is their cruelty. Never let them convince you that it's a strength. Yeah, it's terrifying, the things they do to people. Yeah, it does leave you scarred and traumatized. But we can take it. We can learn from it. We can adapt to their methods. If there is one thing we have over them, it's this: They cannot survive without cruelty. You pin them in place, and an orc atrophies fast.

We're all well aware of how a human or goblin Master can go months upon months without any sustenance and walk it off, depending on their skills.

We kept a Master-Tier orc in a cell as an experiment.

He lasted two weeks.

Two weeks before his muscle mass faded. Two weeks before his bones turned brittle. Two weeks before he started suffering from the effects of fast-acting dementia. Two weeks before his mana fields shriveled away into nothing. Two weeks.

If you can force them to starve, they're going to go feral. And they're going to be driven towards greater acts of psychopathy. Don't think of them as these perfect rational psychopaths. They are intelligent.

They are dangerous. But they're not perfect. Not nearly. You can force them to make mistakes. You can force them to decay, to suffer. You can force them through boredom, or simply through stalemate. The best way to hurt an orc is to not fight them at all. Box them in place and make sure that they get no chance to scratch that itch of theirs.

And if you don't have that option, then you should move on to the next best choice. You lure them out. You use their cruelty—their urges—against them. Present easy targets. They'll know it's a trap. Don't get me wrong here. It's not that we're fooling them. It's that they just can't resist after a certain period.

Their cruelty is not their strength. It's their drug. And we can be the dealers.

-Legend-Ranger Marion Crow-on-Graves

The expeditionary force appeared over the horizon as a splash of tumbling white contrasted upon a midnight sky freckled with scintillating stars. A distant, spiraling mountain was the only other source of light on the horizon, and at its apex rose a high, curved gate that glimmered with dimensionality. Around the gate spiraled crystalline dimensionals and the metallic bodies of automata.

That was apparently Margarita Point, one of the Republic's minor cross-dimensional mines. At present, Whisper and another detachment of orcs were moving towards Margarita Point, erecting a massive dimensional veil to hide the impending ambush about to befall the expeditionary force. The veil extended kilometers wide and high like a grand screen.

“This is more than just mana, Shiv,”

Valor said, watching the scene unfold. “This is control and experience. They don’t need someone to direct their spellcasting because they have done this over and over again.”

“Yeah,” Shiv said, impressed by how fast the dimensional veil was going up. “I hope I get good enough to pull that off someday.”

“You will. Give it time.”

Margarita Point didn't have much in the way of defenders, as it wasn't a great gate in the scheme of things. But still, a Pathbearer there could jump off and warn the bulk of the Inquisition's forces still stationed at Fortress-City Diego. And Shiv really didn't want them to miss out on their own surprise.

So the orcs went about engineering things to stay subtle. As the army of twenty thousand gray-skinned brutes moved out, they adjusted into a curving shape, spreading around the approaching expeditionary force like the open jaws of a beast. Only a few of the orcs took to the air immediately, and those moved alone, with great distance between them and the next flyer. Most of the orcs remained grounded, but they still moved fast, and more importantly, they moved without making any noise at all.

The orcs along the exterior were the eyes and the senses, and what followed behind them was what Bonk described as the skin—the second layer of orcs. Shiv remained just behind the skin, moving with the bones. The bones were the hard-hitters, the ones meant to crash in and break the enemy. This was the best place for him.

Though Shiv had a Master-Tier Stealth Skill, he was by no means subtle, and the orcs needed subtlety to best deal with the Inquisition's forward scouts—forward scouts that Shiv couldn't even perceive. But they had been there. Uva noticed remains left by the orcs. Blood and viscera. But no bodies. The Inquisition's outermost scouts were invisible. But it did nothing to spare their lives. The orcs were coming, and they were better at walking the darkness than the Inquisition ever was.

Shiv could spot the orcs serving as the eyes in the distance. The orc Scouts were fast closing around the expeditionary force. Their bodies shrouded in faint veils of dimensionality, they surged across the land, gliding as if blots of darkness across plains of sparse vegetation. Through it all, the orcs moved without requiring direction, without creating chaos or confusion. They knew their roles, and they played according to the situation. And as they collapsed around the two thousand inquisitors, maintaining a four-hundred-meter distance, all Shiv could hear was his heartbeat as tension built.

His heartbeat, and Uva's groans of nausea.

"You alright?" Shiv asked mentally.

"Is it always like this?" Uva asked. She was staring at the sky through his eyes, feeling the world around him using his senses, and her stomach churned. "It's so wide and keeps going. There's so much light."

Shiv was about to say something regarding how the sky was pitch black, aside from the glittering stars and the pieces of the moon. But then he remembered that compared to many places in the Abyss, this might as well have been daylight. Not to mention the whiplash from not having a ceiling above you at all times.

"I have no idea how you put up with this."

"I'm just used to it, I guess,"

Shiv said. "This was, well, this is what I've known all my life. The sky is just a normal sight to me. So is the horizon."

"And you're never worried that you might just fall up, that it will swallow you?"

The Deathless frowned. "No. Why?"

"Because it's just too open. Anyone above could be staring at us. We're so exposed."

He wanted to say that it was paranoia talking, but this was the way an Abyssal lived: hiding in the darkness, using the denseness of the Umbral Wilderness to keep themselves from being spotted. And, in a sense, she wasn't wrong. The expeditionary force proved remarkably easy for Adam to spot from kilometers away.

A shrouded orc approached them, then. Shiv narrowed his eyes and only managed to figure out who it was when the orc's veil splashed over with his.

"We are about to engage," Helix said.

Shiv looked back at the horizon. He could only see a few dots of Dimensionality out there. "How can you tell?" he asked Helix.

"Using my Awareness Skill. The one you've neglected. You have eyes, so use them!"

"Yeah, yeah, I get it," Shiv snapped. "Alright, Helix, use your wonderful orc eyes and tell me what your orc senses feel."

"My orc senses tell me," Helix said, gesturing out with a large hand, "that our Shadows and Thieves are getting through their final layer of scouts. And that the Inquisition is becoming aware of the danger they're in."

"Huh, how can you tell that?" Shiv squinted as hard as he could, but he couldn't see anything from the horizon before him that gave any indication that a series of battles was underway.

"Pay attention to the veils of Dimensionality. Are they moving? How are they moving? Focus your gaze. What can you tell?"

Before Shiv could notice anything, Valor's voice let out a hum of realization. "Ah, I see. Quite."

"See what?" Shiv replied. "I just..." And then he stopped talking. He watched as a few thousand veiled orcs quickly moved from position to position, but their acceleration happened in bursts, almost as if they were trying to throw someone off or intercepting someone.

At the same time, the tide of clouds carrying the expeditionary force was slowing down dramatically.

Awareness 33 > 34

"Now you see," Helix said. "A series of battles has concluded."

Shiv frowned. "But I don't see anything breaking. There's no dust, no debris."

"That's because they are Shadows," Helix said with a hint of derision in his voice. "Not everyone walks the Path of the Brutish Bomb. Shadows focus on subtlety, on precision. You might have noticed by this point that not everyone's Master-Tier Physicality makes them substantively stronger. Sometimes it makes them extremely adaptable. Or flexible." And that made him think of Uva. "At other times, it makes them more suitable for other circumstances. Consider Bonk for a moment. With the amount of force he outputs, he should be leaving colossal craters everywhere."

"But he doesn't," Shiv said. He remembered Bonk's attacks, how each strike built based on a concept of resonance without causing a shockwave.

And as soon as he realized that, a wall of shrouded figures began moving in on the orcs. At the same time, a few hundred other shrouds went still, holding in place even as the clouds drew closer. "What's happening now?"

"Ah," Helix said, his breath hot with anticipation, "now our Shadows are marking targets. They'll be firing their shots soon. And you will learn the weakness of having obvious commanders."

And true to the orc's words, a few thousand projectiles cut through the air. There was no signal, no warning before they fired, and no noise as they tore through the cloud bearing the Inquisition's forces. As soon as the first orc loosed his shot, the next followed. And soon, a chaotic series of volleys surged up from all directions.

Spells of flame, of ice, of Dynamancy, and more cleaved across the world. But more often than not, Shiv saw spells of Dimensionality splashing over the massive cloud looming on the horizon. The dimensional spell blasted outward, staining the air with a faint veil of static.

"The hells is that supposed to do?" Shiv asked.

"Make sure the Inquisitors can't just jump out," Helix replied.

All of a sudden, the entire orc army was surging. The orcs near Shiv accelerated. Those who operated as the skin remained in place, waiting for the rest of the orcs to catch up. Along the exterior, the eyes began to circle the expeditionary force. Columns of destruction blew pockets through the clouds. Faint figures fell from gaps, descending as a rain of bodies. Inquisitors were dying, and orcs shed their veils and roared theatrically—some sounding bestial, while others used the opportunity to practice their singing voices.

This shit is like a fever dream.

"Go, go, go now!" Helix called out, waving his hands. "Go before we lose our flavor, before we lose our pound of flesh!"

And that was all the encouragement Shiv needed. He spiked his field ten times. And just as he used his Biomancy to funnel the venom bound to his armor, his body swelled, his muscles expanded, and his skin hardened. The world around Shiv exploded as he shot forward like a meteor, overtaking several of the orcs.

"Wait!" Helix shouted, suddenly falling behind. "Too fast—don't leave me—"

But Shiv didn't stop. The shockwaves unleashed in Shiv's wake launched the orc Biomancer through the air.

"Catch up when you can," Shiv said mentally. There was a faint grin on his face. Helix prided himself on his Biomancy. But despite all of Helix's knowledge, he was an orc in desperate need of humbling. "In the meantime," Shiv called back to Helix, "Work on your Reflexes. Your physical skills are embarrassing."

A chain of explosions surrounded the expeditionary force. A larger storm manifested above and unleashed chains of lightning downward. However, before the massive cloud carrying the expeditionary force could be consumed, a shield, shimmering and multi-layered, pulsed into existence. It gave off a prismatic glow, but along its exterior, Shiv saw shifting wavelengths that distorted the air, wavelengths he remembered seeing from Dynamancy spells. At once, several orcs collapsed their dimensional veils as they began to call out to each other.

"Dynamancers! Singularity Bomb!" an orc bellowed. Shiv guessed that was a Maestro, judging from how several other orcs nearby froze to respond.

Shiv didn't freeze. He climbed higher into the air, building speed and power. But as he did, he froze time and found himself among the few still capable of movement in the world. There were five other orc Chronomancers he could see, but they didn't move as he did. He was the only one that had the Strider of the Unbending Path.

But he corrected that assumption a moment later, as he realized there was a golden shape lurking high above the clouds, fast ascending. A second thereafter, the massive form of a golden dragon burst through, and on its back stood a small figure. A small figure holding a lance a hundred meters long.

Shiv let out a laugh. "Ah, System. You didn't need to do this for me. But I'll never say no to a dragon fight."

The battle thrill was upon him, and the Inquisition came ready to brawl after all. He spiked himself toward the dragon, prepared for anything. At the same time, he began to shape a Vitae Golem. It emerged from his being, drawing out strands of white and red mana. As it comprised itself in his shape, a call sounded through the air.

"Halt!" A woman's voice shook the world. "Halt! You will be engaged! You stand across, facing an Inquisitor!"

"I know who I'm facing!" Shiv shouted, but she didn't respond. He realized her broadcast had been telepathic, and he was just yelling. Yelling while he had already broken the sound barrier. Shiv snorted. This wasn't going to be a matter of dialogue anyway.

Chapter 143 (II) Capture [I]

The rider continued her warnings as she approached. Her dragon was moving so fast that it left a jetstream of flame in its wake while its scales burned bright hot. "I am Hero-Inquisitor Athena Santiago. I ride Valero the Swift. Turn and be spared. Stay and face judgment before the Ascendants."

Shiv finished infusing his Chronomancy Skill into the Vitae Golem, but the Hero Inquisitor wasn't lying. That dragon was damn fast, faster than Shiv by a substantial margin. Good godsdamn shit, he thought to himself. That dragon's fast as hell.

He had maybe a hundred meters and half a second before she closed. He sent a telepathic command to the golem and decided against giving it a vitality drain skill. "Charge the expeditionary force, spike yourself, detonate when you're about to break." It shot off immediately, and Shiv accelerated toward the incoming dragon a moment thereafter.

He magnified his Skysplitter and slashed out with his blade. He tried to strike the side of the rider's lance, intending to parry it. But as soon as he made contact, her weapon trembled violently.

Shiv felt his blade bounce off at first.

At the same moment, the dragon and the rider turned ethereal and suddenly grew impossibly faster. They blinked across 500 meters, and they washed through Shiv like a river blasting through a stone. Though they passed through him as if intangible, he was wrenched back and pulled off course.

It wasn't like he was being overwhelmed by a greater force. Rather, it was like someone changed his accelerating vector entirely. Shiv was just suddenly pointing the other way. Behind him, the rider materialized. She thrust out with her lance, and a narrow beam of flame pierced the underside of his abdomen. The beam tore through the exterior armor, but his bone adamantium immediately began to heal thanks to the basilisk flesh.

Gods, I love Biomancy.

Shiv cast himself back a second in time to reset his position. He slashed out at the rider again. At the same time, he triggered Minor Illusion, Chameleon, and Creeping Void.

A splash of blackness swallowed 200 meters of space. Once again, the rider and her dragon turned ethereal. She rushed through the minor illusion, but the moment she felt no resistance, she tore off skyward, resetting her own position as well.

Huh. A joust. Shiv frowned. He remembered Tran telling him about Calvary Pathbearers who just focused on charging down dangerous foes. He guessed this rider was one of the Inquisition's special weapons, meant to guard and slay Chronomancers specifically.

Shiv felt cracks spread across his temporal shell, and a half second later, the first lines of damage formed upon the dragon's Chronomancy field as well. They were almost evenly matched as Chronomancers—neither was going to outlast the other.

Shiv shot up in the air after her. He adapted his strategy. She could move fast. Well, he could be in two places at once. He flung a bone drill at her. It shot forward, and he used his vitae strands to guide it, adding additional dexterity to supplement his lacking aim. The bone drill zipped across the distance and hammered into the underside of the dragon. A splash of sparks lit the time-frozen midnight sky as the bone drill bounced off at a sharp angle.

Shiv scowled. Some kind of Frictionless Vector-type Toughness Skill?

He noted the attack had been dead on, yet it slipped off like the dragon's body was slippery.

Marksmanship 12 > 13

Once more, she went ethereal, but this time Shiv threw his Skysplitter. The blade sailed high into the air, but its path was hidden by the Creeping Void that seeped out from his body. Both dragon and rider climbed higher, but they were unaware of Shiv teleporting to his blade. As soon as they rematerialized, Shiv reached out for them. He slashed at out, using both his Vitamancy and Biomancy as magical weapons.

Strands of red and white crashed over the rider, while a mana hydra wound itself around the form of her dragon. At the same time, Shiv materialized the venom gland he had stored within his Biomancy. As soon as it manifested, he burst the venom gland over her, directing the corrosive liquid through her faceplate and into the orifices of her dragon.

Aegis of Assimilation 104 > 105

The rider spasmed. The dragon curled in on itself. Blossoming mana explosions detonated, and Shiv's Skysplitter descended to slay both targets at once. Yet the dragon flared bright with Chronomancy, and suddenly it projected itself back in time, and the rider went with it. They blinked to where they were a second ago, and more of their temporal shell burst away.

Shiv gritted his teeth and cast himself back in time as well. He arrived about three hundred meters away from the dragon, and he spiked his field a few more times before he detonated in her vicinity. As he discharged his inertial sheath, the rider lifted her lance high, and an oval shield of opalescent mana expanded around her and her dragon. Shiv's detonation impacted her, but it splashed over the shroud as if a wave parting around a stone. Shiv felt his temporal armor break apart entirely, and somewhere in the chaos, the dragon lost its armor as well.

The world suddenly started moving, and he brought his Skysplitter back to parry his own discharge as best he could. His body was damaged. He fed the wounds into his Biomancy, and the crystallized chain of spells materialized within his Biokinetic hydras.

At the same time, a second discharge exploded outward from below. That was his Vitamancy golem trying to crack through the protections guarding the expeditionary force. Shiv directed one discharge against another, and two clashing waves of fire and force splashed together, sparing him the turbulence.

But at the same time, the golden dragon tore up through the air and suddenly went ethereal once more. She twisted hard and then banked left before plunging like a falling spear. Shiv tried to track her, but she vanished into a sea of expanding Pyromancy spells. Shit, Shiv cursed. "Uva, we have a time dragon here, with a rider too. Reach out and alert some of the orcs if you can. I don't want our guys getting taken by surprise."

"Acknowledged,"

she said while trying not to vomit.

Shiv pulled down on his gravitic field as well. As he fell, he pointed his Skysplitter at the slightly cracked prismatic shroud guarding the expeditionary force. Spells burst out from the shroud, attacking the encroaching orcs with shockwaves and more. A few hundred orcs were briefly repelled, but more pushed through the Inquisition's hasty defense, slamming against that prismatic barrier with might and spell.

More cracks began to spread, and the outermost layer broke like a glass cage as Shiv slammed blade-first upon it. As it parted, Shiv felt his blade suddenly halt as it struck another layer of wards beneath. As soon as he made contact, lightning surged up through his body. The Deathless spasmed within his biological armor. Whatever the magic sustaining the inner wards, it allowed them to electrocute Shiv, even through non-conductive structures. Despite this, Shiv's Adamantine Adaption learned to resist the electricity, and he regained control of himself, pushing through the flood of lightning.

Adamantine Adaption 170 > 171

He lashed down with Vitamancy and Biomancy. His mana hydra hammered the inner shield; a smokescreen for the vitae strands that followed. The crimson mana missile slammed against the protective dome, enveloping it.

At the same time, Shiv impacted it again and discharged his inertial sheath once more. More cracks spread through. However, the lightning flooding through his body was growing more intense with every passing second as well. He powered through, and his Vitaemancy slipped through the second layer and the third and the fourth and finally splashed past the inner thresholds of the Inquisition's defenses.

He slashed blindly using his vitae as he made contact with bodies. He sapped their vitality from them. He crushed and pulped the weak and struck and pinned the strong. Life force flooded him briefly, and then someone shattered his Vitaemancy strands. Hard-hitter, Shiv growled to himself. His Vitaemancy was adamantine-hard as well. For someone to break his mana so easily indicated that he was about to run into a Hero.

Just then, Shiv felt himself get pried off the protective wards. An impossibly strong force ripped his body off the protective onion shielding the expeditionary force. Shiv struggled against the crushing pressure, using his gravitic field to stabilize himself, but halted as he saw a massive gravitational vortex descending upon him.

It was 500 meters wide and shaped like a sphere. It had chunks of landscape orbiting it, and more than that, it had orcs revolving around it as well, cheering, laughing, using the massive Dynamancy spell to hitch a ride straight into the main fight. Shiv couldn't help but laugh. Crazy godsdamn bastards. But this is my kind of insane too. I want in on this.

He stopped fighting the gravity spell; instead, he let it take him. He let himself spin around its massive length, joining the orcs as they prepared to crash down upon the Inquisition's protections. Shiv suddenly went still as he rammed into something hard, someone that felt like an unbreakable wall. As he turned, he saw Bonk right behind him, holding him in place. "Glad to see you've joined us."

"What do you mean, joined you?" Shiv shouted. "I was practically the first guy here. I even got into a fight already."

"Were you? I couldn't tell. I lost track of you for a moment."

"Yeah, that's because you don't have Chronomancy. They got a golden dragon by the way."

"That's good, that's good. Dragons make things interesting. They never die easy—ah, BRACE! BRACE!"

"BRACE!" The orcs let out a collective shout.

The vortex crashed down against the layers of prismatic shielding protecting the expeditionary force from harm. For a moment there was a clash, two sets of magic grinding against each other. A series of mana detonations blasted outward as the swirling sphere of gravity ground against the many-layered defenses erected by the inquisitors.

Blasts of lightning cleaved through the gravitational sphere—but the orcs' spell had both mass and mana behind it. The Inquisition's protections began to shatter one after another, even as the gravitational sphere burned away, its size pushing through the barriers.

Bonk turned and glared into the gravitational spell. "Dynamancers, put your backs into it!" he barked. And just then, Shiv caught sight of orcs within the spell as part of the vortex collapsed. Those were orc magi. They weren't just casting a spell. They were literally piloting it into the fight from within the vortex. The orc magi thrust their hands out. The Dynamancy spell blasted outward, flinging Shiv and all the orcs against the flagging protections like artillery shells.

This time, Shiv smashed clean through the Inquisitor's wards, and as he blasted in, he felt soft bodies splatter against his armor, weak armor bursting and shattering before his brutal momentum. At the

same time, his mana hydra lashed out. It swept through the enemies, shattering magical resistances and ripping bodies apart, bodies he assimilated into his Biomancy.

Chaos swept through the Inquisition's ranks, but even so, they fought to maintain discipline. As Shiv tore through the outer vanguard, magical bolts cut through the air, coming right at him. He swatted them aside with his Magebreaker and pulled his field in the direction of his attackers.

Frictionless Vector 65 > 66

Yet, just as Shiv charged forth, he was intercepted by one of the Inquisition's vanguards. They slammed their shield against his person, and Shiv suddenly felt all the momentum get torn out of his body. His sheath went silent for a moment, and then three more Inquisitors slammed their shields in place right beside the first. The three shields trembled with kinetic energy, and they unleashed a blast of concussive energy—that did nothing because Shiv threw his knife behind them. He teleported and swung his blade wide, magnifying it to its maximum size.

Bodies blasted through the air, launched back by his blow. Shiv spiked his field again, looking for the center of the expeditionary force. Meanwhile, his mana hydras began to move around him in a churning spiral, crashing against Magical Resistances and assimilating every bit of biomass he could seize.

The shield-bearers behind tried to respond to Shiv, but the orcs were upon them a moment later. Bonk struck them. His first blow bounced off hopelessly, but the orc shifted his stance and swung twice more.

The sound of shattering shields sang out to Shiv, but he didn't wait to behold the final fate of the three vanguards; he had his own victims to claim. The cloud beneath his feet felt soft but solid, and with every step, a fog of static lashed at his flesh, trying to electrocute him. Orcs flooded in from all directions, and Shiv felt several inquisitors cast spells of Portomancy and Dimensionality.

Squeezing pressures washed over his body, but no one managed to teleport out. True to Helix's words, they pulsed in place but were then rebuffed. The orcs had anchored the expeditionary force using a colossal amount of Dimensionality to effectively weigh down the Jump Mages.

If the Inquisitors wanted to escape, if they wanted to survive, then they would have to fight their way out. They would have to create their own breakthrough, and somehow, Shiv didn't think they were going to be capable of that.

He swung his blade from side to side, yet before he could get far, he found it held in place by the towering automaton he'd seen earlier. Its drill-like head roared as it spun, and the mechanical Pathbearer tried to pry the Skysplitter out of Shiv's hands. Shiv pulled back, but to his surprise, he was actually struggling. The automaton was strong. Their Physicality was a match for his own at the very least, perhaps more.

Worse yet, as the bot gripped Shiv's Skysplitter, keeping it from scything through the rest of the expeditionary force, Shiv could feel the weapon cracking, taking damage. He shrank his blade and charged the enemy. He made it a meter through the air before he was suddenly knocked aside by someone tackling him.

Shiv spiked his field against the new adversary and, after a brief struggle, halted himself and brought an elbow down on the head of the offending inquisitor. A resounding clash sounded as the inquisitor's body went stiff. They were wearing a full set of adamantine armor. Shiv wanted to see if their Toughness matched. He slashed down using his Deepest Edge, and where the armor only bore a deep gash on the outside, flesh parted within, and Shiv swept through the slain Pathbearer's body, stealing their biomass for his own.

He could feel the beginnings of mana strain build within his Biomancy. Just then, Shiv had an amusing idea, an upgrade to his corpse flail. He fused all the recent biomass he'd stolen, but also fed a spare set

of armor into the spell pattern as well. Just like before, the spell patterns didn't mix. They shattered and warped, but that was fine with Shiv. Bone adamantite cancer was still more than acceptable.

Immediately, he projected his new creation and began to shape it. He didn't hold the flail physically anymore. Instead, he wrapped it within a mana hydra and spun it around himself in a swirling orbit. A mess of mangled teratoma hammered into bodies and shattered formations. At the same time, Shiv swung his blade and discharged his Inertial Overdrive. The Inquisitors were blasted aside. Shiv tried to push forward and rip into them—only to be driven back himself by a chain of gravitational bolts. He countered the Dynamancy spells using his field, but ultimately found himself plodding forward rather than blasting ahead.

He kept cutting, slashing, fighting. He attacked anything that wasn't an orc while trying to keep an eye out for the bald Master-Inquisitor. But the expeditionary force didn't die easily. Every single one was clad in high-quality armor. And though he swatted many aside, they fought their way back to their feet and held to their formations, each person trying to keep the ones beside them alive.

A telepathic tsunami exploded out from the center of the expeditionary force. "Inquisitors!" a baritone voice proclaimed. "Our vanguard has been breached! Jagged Onion! Jagged Onion! Fighting retreat. We kill our way out! We make a breakthrough!"

And at once, inquisitors began to adjust their formations. The surviving members began to collapse inward. New inquisitors stepped out from the others, holding massive tower shields in their hands. Shiv charged them, swinging his new cancer flail down upon a still-adjusting group of soldiers. But he felt his mana hydra stopped dead as a Biomancer among the inquisitors matched their power against his. "Alright," Shiv thought to himself, licking his lips. "Let's see."

Then something exploded from beneath his feet and drove him high into the air. A searing pain slipped through his gut, and Shiv found himself being carried higher and higher. As he looked down, he found himself impaled on the end of a lance a hundred meters long.

Shiv grinned through bloody teeth. "There you are. I was wondering where you went."

Chapter 144 (I) Capture [II]

Orcs! Orcs everywhere! They're everywhere! They're felling everywhere! We need reinforce—

-Last Received SkyCast from Expedition Force Theborn

Shiv grasped the lance embedded in his midsection, but as soon as he touched it, he felt his hands bounce off, flung back by a blast of unnatural recoil. The vibration was spreading through his body as well, opening his wound wider and wider. Shiv's Biomancy granted him insight: something about the lance's constant tremoring amplified its ability to pierce—destabilizing the structure of his flesh on a fine level. His Adamantine Adaption warred against the rider's weapon, but it continued sliding through him as if a blade being pushed through wood. His armor and flesh offered some resistance, but not nearly enough.

Avoid the lance, Shiv thought to himself, no more resisting; adapt.

One of Shiv's Biokinetic hydras reared back and bit down on his flesh. He tore his midsection open with his Biomancy, allowing him to channel a deluge of viscera and blood directly at the rider. It splashed over her at colossal speeds, and the ropes of his intestine coiled around her face. A muffled shout sounded from her as Shiv shrugged off the hurt. A chain of fear extended from the rider, and the Deathless took hold of it. However, the moment he tried to pull, it frayed and snapped.

She still wasn't scared enough for the chain to be usable, but her fear fed power into his body and alacrity to his reflexes. The world slowed as he dashed right, ripping himself free from the lance. In the same instant, another of his mana hydras swallowed his wounds, and it came alight a constellation of crystalline injuries.

He swung the crystallized wounds at the rider with his lashing Biomancy field, but her dragon suddenly descended and went ethereal. Shiv's gore passed through her body and spun through the air. The Deathless simply grunted and assimilated the biomass into his Biomantic aegis. He'd lost his cancer flail when the rider stabbed him. He needed to build a new one.

As he tried to track the dragon, though, he found he couldn't keep up with her sheer speed and maneuverability. Every time the rider and her dragon went ethereal, they became four times faster. The Deathless scoffed as he started unleashing his Creeping Void once more. A swell of blackness expanded out from his body, drenching the sky. The dragon suddenly tore past him again—there was only a distance of fifty meters between them. Yet the beast missed him, and the rider speared nothing but open air.

She continued her ascent. The dragon and her rider burst through the clouds before Shiv could fully react or follow, and he found himself glaring at a patch of dense, black clouds with no clue where his rival Chronomancer was.

No wonder Helix recommended leveling my awareness. Once she stops being so obvious and holds off from close quarters, I'm basically blind. For a beat, he considered chasing the dragon, but decided against it. The rider would be back to run him down once more. But now he knew her ways a bit better. He just needed to figure out how to deal with her speed and intangibility.

From directly above, Shiv could see thousands of gray bodies smashing through teams of inquisitorial Pathbearers. Orcs shot up from all corners of the land. A few simply leaped. Others flew. Many teleported. Some just emerged from gusts of wind. They pressed in from all directions, clenching the expeditionary force in a brutal encirclement.

Those who once stood as the Inquisition's outer vanguard were overrun, but the orcs didn't kill them immediately. Rather, they broke limbs. They peeled off helmets and began scalping skulls. They flayed flesh while keeping their victims alive. Shiv felt his stomach twist with muted horror.

Orcs never went long before they reminded you what they were.

A cacophony of screams rose above the roar of combat. The remainder of the expeditionary force retreated inward, adjusting themselves into sixteen compact formations. A wall of defenders stood along the outside, while fast-moving Pathbearers stood behind them. At the center were eight groups—columns of magi. And between the magi were two singular Pathbearers, one of whom had a gleaming bald head.

“I got eyes on Sijik,” Shiv shouted aloud. At some point, his dimensional veil burst as well; Adam could probably hear him now. This would give the Gate Lord something to track

Shiv shot down as he took in the surviving Inquisitors. To his astonishment, their morale was holding. A new barrier, a protective force, fused over them. Radiant barricades and small formations were forged by falling bolts of lightning. The Deathless also noticed weak bolts of lightning jumping between each of the soldiers, flashing from helmet to helmet before they finally soared upward, cleaving just past his body into the sky. His eyes followed that bolt as it flashed behind a curtain of thick and dark clouds, and he watched as it tore southward, likely toward Fortress-City Diego.

That’s probably someone teleporting out, or some kind of lightning-flung message,

Shiv thought. Well, Stormhalt's probably going to know about this soon.

A lightning-infused Veilpiercer exploded out from a dimensional wound and split the escaping bolt in half. Twin crashes of thunder sounded in the distance as Shiv let out an impressed laugh. “Good godsdamned shot, Adam! Now. Gotta deal with the rest.”

But as he looked down again, he found the Inquisitors shrouded by a massive, four-hundred-meter-wide dome of force. Projectiles and attacks splashed off it like water peeling over a shield. Shiv hovered in the air for a moment and considered his next steps.

A sphere of fire splashed against the Inquisition's defenses, but it quickly dissipated as the expeditionary force's Pyromancers worked their own mana in return. The same ball of fire was unleashed as a scything blast of light. Shiv instinctively looked away, but several exposed orcs stumbled back, clawing at their eyes. They were promptly blasted off the cloud by missiles launched by the Inquisition. It appeared the expeditionary force could shoot through their protections, but not the other way around.

Shiv squinted. He counted at least eight columns of dedicated magi earlier, and spent a moment observing the Inquisitors through their protective shell. It seemed two columns of magi were Aeromancers with how much electricity was flowing between them. One of those Aeromancer columns specifically seemed to be focused on generating electricity, letting the currents flow through the other soldiers present. The other Aeromancer column directed the bolts, flicking them out at distant targets, slashing at the eyes and mouths of the encroaching orcs.

But the expeditionary force was fighting a horde of Heroes and Masters. Those who were struck by the bolts were not killed. They were merely disoriented or dazed. Others parried the bolts, and a few even caught them, ripping at the whips of electricity as if they were material chains. Shiv saw the obfuscated forms of the Inquisition's Aeromancers get pulled through the air, but they were pulled back by their allies. And just then, a shroud of gravity flowed over the Inquisition. The few thousand soldiers they had left were all further imbued with greater mass, with the anchoring power of Dynamancy.

But even so, they were assailed from all sides, and the contrast played before the eyes of the Deathless. The Inquisition fought together, a singular organism moving toward unified goals. The orcs, however, were like a swarm of hornets. All of them posed a threat of their own. But their coordinated attacks were only things of improvisation, prompted by Maestros or personal interest.

Where the Inquisition's magic was concentrated, performed in concert, the spells from the orcs fell like a rainstorm, pelting them from all directions. Massive tides of flame enveloped the magical defenses guarding the Inquisition, and the barriers held, as each of the Inquisitorial magi supported one another. Just then, Valor's words resonated inside Shiv. The orcs were dangerous, the orcs were elite, but the

orcs, as a whole, were unfocused and lacked nuance with detail. That, and they were laughing. Having a joyous time torturing the Inquisitors they'd captured.

Shiv's eyes widened as he watched the orcs adapt to the Inquisition in their personal, cruel ways. They strapped wounded and maimed Inquisitors to their chests as human shields. Men, women, bots, and more screamed for their allies to stop firing, screamed for their mothers, for their makers, for a merciful death.

Some died as counter-attacks from the expeditionary force struck them, but the Inquisition was hesitating now—with many members unwilling to murder their comrades and friends so casually.

Psychopathy has its virtues, Shiv thought grimly as he started creating a new Vitae Golem. Really fucked up virtues.

Just then, as an Aeromancer lifted his staff trying to feed a final bolt of lightning into the spell his column was shaping, a Veilpiercer tore into existence right in front of his face. A gleaming arrow imbued with Pyromancy, Dimensionality, and Necromancy struck the Aeromancer at the center of his neck. He tumbled back, his spell broke, and the ball of lightning his column was trying to maintain grew unstable.

Lashing forks of electricity whipped out and tore through a good dozen automata Pathbearers—several of whom were Dynamancers. The barrier weakened. Then came more of Adam's arrows.

Infinitely more.

Shiv watched with interest as every arrow that impacted the Inquisitors became two more, then four, then sixteen, and so on. Then, a literal flood of Veilpiercers raged as a stampede within the Inquisition's

ranks. Commanders began to fall. Elite Pathbearers took wounds to their eyes, ears, optics, ankles, and joints.

Skill Evolution: Bowslinger (Adept) > Propagating Salvo (Master)

Propagating Salvo 101

Adam gritted his teeth as he tried to find Sijik in the chaos. But it was hard. It was hard to focus with all the screams clawing at his mind. He saw the things the orcs were doing. Bile lurked in the back of his throat, and Adam felt a visceral hatred kindle within his bones.

The godsdamned gray-skins were monsters. These Inquisition members were traitors, but no one deserved what the orcs were actively doing to them—the casual torture.

He was going to need to talk with Shiv about resolving the orcs after this was done. But for now, he loosed another shot. A Veilpiercer that became two on impact, that became four, that became sixteen, and then...

The orcs seized on the opportunity, hammering the magical defenses from all sides, and new cracks began to spread.

Shiv unleashed his Vitae Golem then, and this time he had enough breathing room to infuse it with Vitality Drain. Smash through that shield, kill the mages, detonate yourself after thirty spikes, try not to die. The golem shot down, and Shiv followed right after. He projected his Minor Illusion and cut off his Creeping Void.

He didn't want his allies to be fighting in the dark. Shiv also decided against using Chameleon, just in case one of the orcs accidentally hit him. Shit was chaotic enough. His golem struck the topside of their mana shield first. Cracks spread, not nearly large enough to break through. But the same crack grew into a colossal fracture as Shiv slammed down. A scant second thereafter, both he and his golem discharged. Kinetic blasts erupted off their bodies. The shields projected by the Inquisition's Dynamancers dented inward as parts shattered away entirely. At the same time, Shiv brought his Biomancy field down as well. The blood-red heads of his mana-formed hydras crashed against the barrier, unleashing a tide of mana explosions, impacting the protective dome like a falling star.

Inertial Overdrive 116 > 118

Then came the orcs, towering gray-skinned monsters imbued with titanic Physicality and blessed with implacable Toughness. Spells crashed against them and broke against their bodies as if pebbles flung against the face of a mountain. They swung their great axes, hammered with fists large enough to wrap around a grown man's torso. More shockwaves joined Shiv's, and the Dynamancy barrier maintained by the expeditionary force began to crumble and break.

But the barrier hardened for a beat, then roared with surging force. Shiv felt a shudder of pressure coming from the barrier. Instinct told him to bring his Skysplitter up just in time as well. The barrier detonated outward, and a colossal explosion flung thousands of orcs, along with Shiv's vitae golem, high up into the air and through the clouds. A crushing torrent of force slammed against Shiv, and he realized every blow he delivered, every shockwave and discharge he emitted upon the Inquisition's protective barrier, just got turned against him and the orcs.

Even so, he caught the blast along the flat of his blade and levered up. He magnified the size of his Skysplitter, and he twisted under the tidal wave of force. It took his Plaguefueled, Gravitic Wrestler, and his Biomancy combined for him to trigger Frictionless Vector and have the blast slide over him. The clouds behind Shiv were bifurcated as a jet stream of force split the sky.

Frictionless Vector 66 > 69

And then Shiv was through the broken shield. He deactivated his Chameleon and spiked himself right into the center of a magi column. He slammed boot-first down on the neck of an automaton, and the bot's body groaned as bolts and screws burst free. Shiv swept his mana hydras wide, expanding them as far as he could, making them spiral around him. At the same time, he detonated his inertial sheathe and created a pocket of blood and writhing bodies where a few dozen magi once stood. They ruptured into welters of ruined flesh inside their folding armors, and Shiv drank them in using his Biomancy. He assimilated their biomass to forge a new flail, charging through the other magi at the same time as he tried to find where Sijik was.

Magical Resistances held against his mana hydras. Shiv's fields recoiled. He slammed into the magically-hardened Pathbearers and lashed their flesh with his Skysplitter. At the same time, a new cancer flail extended from his field, and a wrecking ball of mangled biomass whipped out low.

Shiv's new cancer flail was a nightmarish implement. A mess of human limbs, elven faces, jagged teeth, and more sprouted out as clumps along the sides of the weapon. Ankles and knees shattered. Pathbearers screamed. The Inquisition laid eyes on Shiv for the first time, and rivers of fear flowed from their beings to nourish his. He felt himself grow stronger, faster, felt his mana surge with increased might. Magical Resistances shattered against his amplified Biomancy, and then his Vitae joined the frenzy as well, drinking vitality while gouging eyes and crushing skulls.

Shape of Monstrosity 103 > 106.

Whip Proficiency 9 > 10

"Enemy at the center!" an enemy Psychomancer screamed. "Close ranks! Close ranks! Rapid response!"

And Shiv saw the drill-headed automaton pushing through the formations, coming right at him. The Deathless grinned in anticipation. His dance with the automaton was interrupted by the dragon rider earlier. Now they could get properly—

A blade broke against Shiv's spine. Shiv felt his armor lose two centimeters of material, just to heal immediately thereafter. Behind him, an Assassin tumbled, spasming on the ground as their face was covered by a spray of basilisk venom. White foam erupted from the paralyzed Assassin—then it was joined by a spray of red as Shiv swiped his blade through her body. Shiv's armor was spewing vile, hissing green fluid from the veins threading its crenulations. Inspiration seized Shiv. He promptly used his Biomancy to direct jets of basilisk venom at the organics all around him as well.

Awareness 34 > 35

Multi-Tasking 18 > 19

More fear flooded into him. A lance of gravity struck Shiv, but he slapped it aside with his Magebreaker—sending it blasting through a group of Pathbearers to his left. The drill-headed bot descended from the air, his skull roaring. Shiv launched a corpse at the automaton in response as he unleashed a brief splash of Creeping Void.

The Creeping Void 112 > 113

The enemy Pathbearer immediately tore into the corpse's flesh without realizing it wasn't Shiv. The automaton drove its skull against Shiv's decoy body. Sparks flew free from Shiv's corpse. And more sparks burst out from the automaton as Shiv swung a size-magnified Skysplitter against the bot's back.

Deepest Edge 65 > 66

Deception 20 > 21

Shiv spiked himself over thirty times as he cleaved deeper and deeper into the bot's midsection. A mechanical scream sounded from the machine. It reached down to stop the blade—only for Shiv to discharge his Inertial Overdrive. The bot's head snapped back at an awkward angle as it was flung limply through the air. Shiv frowned. Well, you were a disappointment.

But before he could capitalize and finish his foe off, waves of cascading Dynamancy drove his inertial discharge back. Shiv's eyes widened, and just then he felt a crushing mass press down on his body as well. Shiv spiked his field upward as the Dynamancers pressed down. Even so, he was slowed dramatically, and spells and attacks began to smash into him from all sides. Godsdamn Dynamancers. Shiv grimaced, but he was strangely impressed by the Inquisition's resilience and how fast they adapted to the conflict.

A series of arrows crashed into his armor; most of them bounced off, breaking without inflicting any damage. However, an adamantine ballista punched deep through his chest piece, but didn't quite manage to break his skin. As Shiv ripped it out, a burst of Psychomancy caught him by surprise, but

Uva's strands wove around his head, and a clash of translucent mana exploded away from him, sparing his mind. A forest of Psychomancy strings erupted out from Shiv's cape, and it was also joined by two dozen drones that shot up into the air, screeching pitched frequencies.

Automata around Shiv went rigid, briefly stunned by whatever noise the drones were making, and Shiv took advantage of that. He cast himself three seconds back in time with his Chronomancy, and the Inquisition lost track of him. The Dynamancers lost their hold on his body for the second time, and Shiv detonated his Inertial Overdrive. As a new blast spread out, it killed a few dozen more soldiers before the Dynamancers responded, keeping the shockwave contained.

Strider of the Unbending Path 136 > 137

"Chronomancer! Chronomancer in our midst!"

"WHERE THE FUCK ARE OUR WARDS—AGHHHH!"

"CHRONOMANCERS! RESPOND! WE NEED—FELLING FUCK! THEY'RE ALL—"

Several telepathic broadcasts followed, and each ended with a building weight of panic and terror. Shiv learned why as harrowing screams drew closer to him again. The orcs were back, and pushing in from the outside. And with Shiv at the center of their formation, the Inquisitors were caught in a brutal pincer they needed to adapt to.

"Rally!" A rasping voice bellowed. "Stand and fight! The Ascendants demand it! Stand, you cowards!"

Chapter 144 (II) Capture [II]

Inquisitors bearing tower shields slammed their weapons together, and flashing walls rose before them, resembling the battlements of a stronghold. Orcs crashed into these battlements, and the shield-bearing Inquisitors on the outside cried out as they were driven back. At the same time, Shiv's Vitae golem smashed into another column of magi and detonated its sheath. Bloody mist painted the air, and the white and red form of the golem flashed gold as it reverted back two seconds in time to perform the same action again against another column of magi.

Shiv thought for a second, then triggered his Chameleon enchantment and vanished in the chaos. His Shape of Monstrosity fed his palate the flavors of morale-breaking terror along with the coppery stench of blood. And dread was addicting. Shiv applied his Psychomancy against himself—and only then noticed how Uva was tearing and breaking minds all around him.

The automata Inquisitors were also unresponsive. Their bodies were rigid, and their eyes were flickering. Shiv guessed Can Hu did some kind of machine-telepathy bullshit just now. Pretty powerful bullshit. Shit. I miss it acting as my armor.

Shiv charged through a group of magi—and found most of them with Veilpiercers in their eyes. He prepared to behead a tall elven Pathbearer—only for the poor fool to get dragged into a pocket dimension by Whisper. Orcs emerged from thin air to drag wicked blades across throats or unleash coiling serpents made from Necromancy. Shiv hissed and avoided the corrosive serpents—and felt someone bounce a knife off the back of his head. Shiv swung his knife in retaliation. It sparked off another blade as he took a boot to the chest—but Shiv pulled his field forward, tackling an invisible foe through a group of enemy Pathbearers.

As Shiv and his adversary rolled across the ground, he found himself grappling with an orc wearing a mask stitched together from flayed human faces. Recently flayed if judged by the smell.

“Godsdammit,” Shiv cursed, pulling the orc back to his feet even while the gray bastard kept trying to stab him. Shiv disabled his Chameleon and Creeping Void. He should've kept the former disabled after all. “It’s me, dumbshit.”

The orc froze mid-stab. “Oh, Insul! Apologies! Quite the quaint little slaughter, eh?” And then, like he hadn’t been trying to murder Shiv for the past few moments, the orc vanished again.

“This is absolute incoherent madness,” Uva cried out inside Shiv’s head. “What just happened was—the order would never accept something like this.”

“This is more a quality than a detriment for the orcs,” Valor said sourly. “No such thing as friendly fire.”

Shiv shook his head and continued searching for Sijik. “Where is that bald bastard? And how the felling shit am I supposed to find anything in this mess?”

The world around him had dissolved into pandemonium. The Inquisitors were retreating closer and closer together. Rippling blasts of fear bled from their very souls. Shiv looked over the heads of the Inquisitors and beheld a nightmarish sight. The orcs had strapped mutilated shield-bearing Inquisitors to their own tower shields and were using them to bash their fellows. Somewhere in the backdrop, Shiv thought he heard the sound of a wailing of a newborn—followed by a sickening crunch.

A loud burp came at the end of that. “Ah. Elven babies are the best.”

That voice—the felling fuck, that’s Male Pregnancy! Those godsdamned bastards lied to me! They said they killed hi—oh, shit! Bald! Bald! Sijik!

As a limbless body splattered against Shiv, he caught sight of a bald head as a beheaded orc blasted through a group of soldiers. Between scurrying bodies, darting arrows, and tides of fire was Master-Inquisitor Sijik. The man was dangling high in the air, and a swirling haze of ash shrouded his body. He was kicking against something unseen, and a second thereafter, an orc Shadow turned visible. Waves of shifting Aeromancy bled off the orc's body as he laughed at the struggling Inquisitor. But Sijik shaped a spell with a single gesture. The ash surrounding the man's body poured into the orc's orifices in an instant. The beast stumbled back, and his head detonated in a welter of gore as obsidian fragments hatched free from his skull.

Yep, that orc was an idiot, Shiv noted to himself. He blasted towards the unaware Sijik. At the same time, the Vitae Golem returned. It detonated itself again among the Dynamancers, and as an ambient weight pressing against him vanished entirely, the Deathless got even faster.

Screams. All Sijik knew were screams. All around him were screaming Inquisitors and deaths and orcs and so many orcs—

Something clipped his shoulder. Pain blossomed across his limb. But Sijik stared on, shell-shocked by the carnage unfolding around him. How... Why... Where did they come from...

These were scenes from a nightmare. A nonsensical nightmare. He was on the way to negotiate or force the release of the Animancy Core from Gate Lord Confriga and Compact. To claim the head of that traitor, Oldsmith. But now... Now he was caught in the jaws of madness. His expeditionary force of Masters and Heroes had been massacred in an instant.

All around him, his people wailed. The orcs laughed with glee as they battered the Inquisitors down, ripping both armor and limbs from bodies. The clouds beneath Sijik's feet vanished as the last of his Aeromancers abandoned the spell. Weightlessness took him. The Master-Inquisitor drew upon his Pyromancy and Geomancy Skill Fusion. His Ashes of the Unkindled Wrath washed around him, and he flew up while so many of his people fell.

He needed breathing room. And then—and then he needed to—

Something slammed into his chest. Sijik felt his protective ashes burst apart—and his ribs shatter. The Master-Inquisitor choked as one of the bones punctured his lung. But just as suddenly, his injured rib snapped back into place. His lung reinflated. A breath washed through Sijik's body—but he never managed to exhale as a strong hand clenched his torso.

The Inquisitor gagged as a massive humanoid shape materialized before him. For a moment, he thought another orc had its hands on him. But this was no orc. No. They wore bone-like armor that also had the texture of scales. Bright green fluid dripped from the cracks of the armor as Sijik shaped a spell.

Or tried to.

The giant squeezed. Sijik's sternum broke in half. His spell died before it could take form, and he let out a piercing cry. "Unhand me! Vile... abomination!"

The large figure chuckled amiably. "Ah, but I prefer to be called Omenborn. Inquisitor Sijik. Adam's gonna be happy to see you."

“Adam?” Sijik gasped. He writhed and struggled. His mind was awash in terror and pain. But from the sky came another voice—a voice he knew.

“Release him!” Sijik looked up to see Hero-Inquisitor Athena plunging fast atop her dragon. Relief and self-loathing flooded Sijik. For one, he was about to be saved. But he was going to be saved by an impossibly arrogant woman that thought herself his better just because she had a Heroic-Tier Skill.

“Oh, good.” The bone-armored giant laughed. “You’re back again.” He regarded Sijik and looked down at something between them. Sijik then noticed a cord connecting him to the giant. It resembled a rusted chain with barbed needles poking out from it. “Yeah. You’re not going anywhere. This won’t take long. I’ll be right back. Uva. Put him to sleep. He’s going in the garden.”

“Wait—” Sijik called out.

Then, something pierced through his broken Magical Resistance and ripped into his mind. The world turned into a haze of swirling colors and incomprehension. The last thing Sijik saw before he lost track of himself was a dimensional cape swallowing him.

Shiv’s Chronomancy field tremored as he glared at the fast-approaching dragon. Three hundred meters. Fast. The dragon flared its temporal shell first, and Shiv manifested his own Strider of the Unbending Path to counteract them. Time halted. The battlefield beneath them went still. The rider pointed her lance in-line with his skull this time, and Shiv held his arms open.

He also unleashed his Creeping Void and launched a decoy corpse to take the blow in his stead.

Shiv laughed as he watched the lance pierce through his decoy's head. He cut off his Creeping Void before it could fully swallow the battlefield, then launched himself higher. As the dragon rider drove her long lance further through the decoy's skull, Shiv lashed out with both Vitae and Biomancy to seize the offending Rider.

Deception 21 > 22

She thought she had impaled him—was accelerating even faster. Her vibrating lance drilled clean through the corpse's skull at an alarming speed. Shiv winced at just how potent her weapon. Or maybe it was her skill.

Whatever the case, it was a good thing she'd missed him earlier. That would have cost him a life without a doubt.

His Vitae and Biomancy crashed into the rider at the same time. Her Magical Resistance flared bright and fractured from the impact. The rider let out a shout of pain—

[Smite the Wicked] can be used!

Adam felt his azure dawn erupt into a supernova as his arrows took a hundredth victim. With Propagating Salvo, every person he struck with his arrow resulted in a propagation of his Veilpiercers.

The Inquisitors were hard of armor and Toughness, but with the orcs ripping through them as well, their deaths climbed.

And when they did die, Adam felt it. He tasted their vile deeds. Brief imprints of torture, of unlawful murder, of deceit, and sacrilege passed through his mind. The faces of innocents castigated for crimes they didn't commit—or merely for using a skill the wrong way—washed through Adam's psyche as well.

He tried to hold onto those memories, to remember the ones that suffered. They vanished as quickly as they came, cast off into the howling dark by the hands of the Inquisitors.

Between the orcs' jovial atrocities and these fresh horrors rushing through his mind, Adam's sanity screamed. But then something emerged from his azure dawn. A stream of light flowed out into one of his Veilpiercers, infusing it with the colors of dawn and twilight. It contained the full weight of his wrath as well—the hateful screams of undeserved victims and noble souls delivered unto undignified ends.

JUSTICE IS A LIE! a wrathful chorus of voices screamed in his head. NOBILITY IS AN UNTRUTH. THE POWERFUL TAKE. THE VILE FEED AND FLOURISH. THIS WORLD IS RUST AND RUIN.

BUT YOU STILL REMAIN. YOU. WITNESS THESE MISDEEDS. YOU. BEHOLD THE DARKNESS AND DO NOT TURN. YOU. STAND FOR THOSE WHO CANNOT. FIGHT FOR THOSE WHO NO LONGER ARE. YOU. SERVE AS THE COUNTERBALANCE AND PUT BRUTAL POWER TO VIRTUOUS PURPOSE.

JUSTICE WAS A LIE!

BUT MAY YOUR WRATHFUL HANDS DELIVER UPON THIS LAWLESS WORLD A MOMENT OF TRUTH!

And laid upon his bow was an instrument of death incarnate. Its brightness was a second star born upon the land, and as Adam tasted the power within his Feat, he cast his Awareness skyward and drew his bow back.

A dragon came for Shiv as the slaughter of the expeditionary force continued on beneath them. A dragon with scales of gold, mounted by a woman with a Corinthian-style helmet. He could see her bloodshot eyes—but more than anything, he could taste the sin radiating from her body.

She was an infection upon the world.

She was an enactor of wrongness and cruelty.

Her spirit called to his death-charged arrow, and the voices of the lost, the damned, the broken, and the meek goaded Adam to release his shot.

His eyes came aglow with Divination mana as he cast his Mark of the Seeking Clairvoyant against her. Her dragon flashed with Chronomancy—but its path was sealed by the narrative of existence.

For the first time, Adam unleashed a soul-smiting arrow, and the world faded into a chasm of growing light.

—and she tore free from her saddle, slipping out of the dragon’s temporal shell as well. Shiv prepared to finish her now that she was frozen in time—but just then, the dragon’s tail lashed out and knocked him back a few dozen meters by pure chance. Shiv turned his glare on the time dragon and promptly batted it across the head with one of his mana hydras. The dragon’s face snapped off to the side with a blast of Biomancy, and Shiv slammed into his neck a moment after.

He drew his blade back—and froze. I... Well, I already got a few basilisks. A Court Leviathan. Yeah. I can have a dragon too. I deserve to have a dragon too. You’re mine now!

Shiv struck the dragon’s Magical Resistance again, and as it shattered, he reached into its mind using his Psychomancy. Animal instincts and feral rage spilled over into his consciousness. Shiv gritted his teeth but projected an order at the dragon. “Calm! Calm! Calm down, godsdamm—ah, fuck this.”

He seized the dragon by the neck and decided to choke it out instead. He had to use his Biomancy to figure out where its arteries were to properly apply his blood-choke. The dragon thrashed for a moment, and Shiv nearly smacked himself when he realized he could have just pinched the dragon’s blood vessels with his Biomancy instead of doing this the crude way.

Or maybe not. I might just burst its blood vessels and kill it. Need more control.

The dragon wriggled hard, but despite being behind nearly three hundred meters, it couldn’t quite reach Shiv with its arms, and it couldn’t turn its head around to bite at him. It briefly tried to go intangible, but Shiv smacked it across the head to spin it. Then, he continued on with the dragon strangling until it finally went still. Its temporal shell faded. He dismissed his Chronomancy as well.

Shiv held on to the dragon with both hands as he chuckled to himself. The massive beast was limp but alive. “And now, let’s deal with—” A scream sounded behind him as the rider flew through the air, coming at him with a knife of liquid fire. Ah, there you are.

The Deathless prepared to swat the rider across the sky using her own dragon, but before he could do anything, a kilometer-long chasm of azure radiance tore open beside him, and a streak of pure light struck the rider’s chest. The world vanished into a swell of all-consuming brightness. Shiv spiked himself back as he tried to blink the blindness out of his eyes, and judging from the screams coming from below, he wasn’t the only one.

“What in the Composer’s melodies was that!” Uva cursed, seeming to flinch from the light.

Shiv grimaced and swung his makeshift dragon-club from left to right. “I don’t—” The light faded as fast as it came. And through the air came a half-melted helmet that crashed into Shiv’s chest and dissolved on impact. A helmet worn by the rider. The rest of her body was gone as well.

Shiv blinked.

The orcs below blinked.

The Inquisitors mostly hadn't noticed. Mainly due to many of them having been blinded and tortured by the orcs.

Nearby, a massive dimensional chasm remained in place. On the other side, Shiv saw Adam hovering in the distance, his own expression slack, and his hands still in the position of having just released a shot.

The Deathless and the Gate Lord just stared at each other for a beat. Then, below, the butchery resumed. The screaming restarted as the orcs got back to scratching their itches. Shiv awkwardly held his new dragon up using both hands and pulled Inquisitor Sijik out from his cape via a mana hydra. "So. I got Sijik and a new dragon."

Adam nodded slowly. "I can see that. Well done."

Shiv grunted. "So. Uh. What the felling fuck did you just do?"

The Gate Lord's mouth opened and closed. "I shot a... very angry arrow."

Chapter 145 (I) Ethics

Article X: On the Sanctity of Captive Minds and Bodies

Per the covenant of honor and sapient dignity, any Pathbearer who willingly surrenders or is lawfully captured during legal combat will be granted sanctuary from physical torture and any psionic art that seeks to mutilate their sovereign mind for information.

Failure to abide by these rules will result in the marking of the transgressing parties, deeming them acceptable targets for those bearing the Path of the Paladin.

-Article X, Treaty of Leopore

Adam and Shiv stared on wordlessly as the orcs tossed the last few surviving inquisitors upon the still-alive pile. Beside the still-alive pile was another mound of recovered equipment. Armor, weapons, accessories, and more were piled high and contained within a force bubble to ensure nothing fell loose during the transportation process. Those two piles occupied one side of the surface gateway.

The other side was characterized by three piles.

The first pile was unofficially titled "still usable corpses." These were the bodies that were still intact and therefore quite suitable for Necromancy. It spared the orcs the additional effort of reattaching limbs or adding new parts to make up for missing bits. Beside the still intact corpses were in fact a few hundred different limbs. This pile was set up at the special request of several Heroic-Tier orcs under the auspices of monetary trade. Shiv didn't know if the orcs were pulling his legs or not when they claimed that their main form of currency was the severed limbs of their enemies. He'd seen them trade mithril before, so he guessed that they were probably bullshitting him.

But on some twisted level, he found it funny too, mainly because it kept making Adam do those constipated facial expressions.

The third pile was the smallest pile of all. There were only ten items on that pile. If one could consider a misshapen infant born from a male's body an item. Right in front of the gate, Shiv and Adam continued glaring at the orcs. A violently ill Uva heaved behind them, still struggling with her surface sickness.

"Does something displease you, Insul?" Bonk asked with the sweetest voice he could muster. That just made Shiv clench his teeth tighter. He reached out with his hand as he brushed Uva's back, and she shuddered violently and continued spewing sour strands all over the ground. Nearby, Valor told her this was normal, that there was an acclimation process for an Abyssal leaving the depths. Can Hu stared distastefully at the writhing inquisitors as well. Something about the automaton's body language very much resembled Adam's.

"So," Shiv began, letting out a long, frustrated sigh. "I mean, what the fuck, guys?" He gestured at the horrific dead baby pile. "You told me that you got rid of Male Pregnancy!"

Some 20,000 orcs briefly eyed the dead babies. A few of them shuffled; most of them just shrugged.

"How do we know he did it?" Mortar asked. He rubbed at his chin slowly, as if there was a genuine mystery to solve here. "In fact, how do we know that these infants came from the bodies of men?"

"Because I found them inside male Inquisitors," Shiv snapped. These orcs were trying to piss him off. And it was working. "In fact, the only people who gave birth during this battle were male Inquisitors."
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"What a terrible coincidence!" Mortar mournfully sighed. He barely held back a snort.

Another orc smacked him on the back of the head. "Keep your face straight, asshole. We need to keep the gag going."

Mortar turned away before he could break completely, and Shiv just scowled at the horrible gray-skinned monsters. "Listen, I know you have itches to scratch. I know that you're a bunch of felling cruel bastards. But godsdamn it, we have one standard here. Just one."

And Adam couldn't take it anymore. "We have a lot more than one standard," the Gate Lord hissed. "I can't even look at this!" He pointed at the dead baby mound. "I can't look at that either!" He gestured at both the mutilated corpses and the severed limbs. "What in the hells is wrong with all of you?"

A few of the orcs looked at each other. Bonk picked his nose. "We're enthusiastic. Besides, I don't understand why you're getting so worked up. Everything turned out pretty well. You caught your Master-Inquisitor. We have about..." Bonk looked behind himself and stared at the living pile. "...I don't know, a hundred inquisitors and then some left. That's pretty good."

And from the living pile came a loud and piercing shriek. "I want to die. I want to die. Somebody slit my throat. Let there be an end..."

"Just tell the orcs to finish these poor fools off," Uva groaned, wiping spittle from her face. "This is pointless torture."

"What? Finish them? You—what?" The Gate Lord took a few moments to compose his words as his eyelid twitched. "Listen to me. I... I..." He failed. He turned to Shiv and gritted his teeth. "You talk to them. They've been standing before my Righteous Dawn, losing their bloody skill levels, for the past ten minutes, and I still see those damn smirks on their faces. Do they think this is funny? Do they find this amusing?"

Shiv winced. "Adam," he leaned over. "I don't think that's the right thing to say. Getting frustrated will just get the orcs amused."

And it most definitely was, as several of the orcs finally broke, all bursting out into laughter.

"No," an orc called from the back. "But we think you are. You are funny."

"We like your expressions," another orc said.

Tequila nodded in agreement. "They're pretty funny. You look like a human who hasn't taken a shit in three months."

Adam went still and quiet, but his face contorted more and more with every passing second. Behind him, his azure sun grew brighter as well, and more than a few of the orcs were entirely bathed in its baleful radiance, their bodies simmering as if judged by the flames of perdition. None of this was funny to Adam, not even a little, and Shiv could see his last thread of patience was fraying.

He cast a telepathic message at Adam. "Hey, take Uva back through the gate. I'll see if I can get things out here settled properly."

The Gatelord glared at Shiv from the corner of his eye. "Settled properly? How? Look around you, Shiv. We stand surrounded by atrocity."

"I mean, yeah, I can't argue about that. However, they did absolutely destroy that expeditionary force with less than a hundred losses, and we're going to be throwing these orcs at the Necrotech soon."

As he finished that sentence, a woman from the still-living pile began to shriek bloody murder, howling for her mother. Adam's teeth started grinding. Shiv held his expression in place. The orcs were watching them intently.

"I want to kill them," Adam hissed mentally.

"Yeah, I know, Adam," Shiv said. "However, if we start a fight with these orcs, or if we continue feeding their amusement, this is only going to get worse." The Deathless met Adam's stare as he tried to convey his own seriousness. "You understand why I was so hesitant to summon the orcs before? Why I was so worried? Well, this is why. We have an army, Adam, but I want you to keep this in mind, and I don't want you to ever forget this: they are not our army. We are using them just like they're using us. Every time we set these monsters loose on people, someone's going to suffer. Someone's going to bleed. Someone must!"

A flood of absolute discomfort spilled over from Adam's mind. "These Inquisitors—"

"Are dead," Shiv interrupted him. "They're torture food by this point. They're probably going to be used to satisfy whatever itch the orcs have. Going by my gut, less than half of them will probably be used for whatever false flag the orcs might come up with. The others will be kept alive by the Biomancers for as long as they can keep them alive, but I suspect that we probably don't want to find out what will happen to these people."

"I think we should just kill them then," Adam said quietly. The very thought was rancid to the Gate Lord, but what soured his stomach even worse was the prospect of just letting the orcs indulge in brutality and torture. "We should just give them whatever mercy we can."

"I thought about that too," Shiv said quietly, "but I also thought about another problem right after that."

"And what is it?" Adam asked, challenging Shiv with a cold gaze.

"You're gonna want to have Uva summon the New-Dreamt, because if we start trying to take the orcs' food away from them, they're going to scratch that cruel hunger inside of them some other way. If not with these Inquisitors, then each other, or more likely you and me, or the people in the gate if they can make it in somehow. But you especially, since they want me around for other shit."

And despite Adam's Awareness, he only just then realized Shiv's true worry. He turned his eyes away from Shiv, and he noticed just how many orcs were staring at him, studying him. They weren't just watching him because they enjoyed his miserable expressions. No. This was a dominance play on their part, a test of their ability to inflict discomfort on the Gate Lord.

Shiv continued. "They're deliberately trying to push you because it might just start a fight. And more than a few of them want that. If we escalate, maybe they'll just turn on us. The Blood Rites only allow me to recruit more orcs from those we've killed. We've killed plenty of inquisitors today. Nothing about the Blood Rites gives me absolute control over their behavior. I am their commander just because they're amused by it, but I think they'll also be amused by fighting me, or fighting you, or hurting you just to provoke me. Either we try to accommodate them, or they become a much more direct problem. That's the price of leading an army of monsters. They're going to do monster shit."

Adam looked down, and he regarded the still-living pile of Inquisitors one last time. "What if we ordered them to attack right now to continue raiding the Necrotechs? They don't need to go back. Maybe that can help them scratch their itch instead of doing... this."

"That's not going to work easily," Shiv noted. "It's not just these twenty thousand orcs. We still have over two million more that we need to feed. You wanna let them out too? Because they're going to want out. They're going to need to indulge sooner. Not later."

"Then bring them out, cut them loose, let them maraud against the Necrotechs, instead of letting them do whatever grotesqueness this is."

"Are you two talking about us, Insul?" Whisper asked. His voice was a barely veiled taunt, but Shiv gave him no satisfaction.

"Yeah," the Deathless said honestly. "I'll be with you in a second." Shiv frowned as he considered Adam's suggestion. "Didn't you say that you were worried the orcs might spread across the surface, burn villages, butcher people?"

"I am still bloody worried," Adam snapped. His posture was tense with frustration. "But I don't know if I can accept this; the casual torture and mutilation and brutality they're going to inflict on the inquisitors. I know they're the enemy, but this is beyond the pale. What about you, Shiv? Can you take this?"

Shiv considered that for a moment. "Well, I mean, they're inquisitors, though."

Adam regarded him incredulously. "What do you mean, 'well, I mean they're Inquisitors'? They're people, Shiv. They might be traitors to the Republic, but they're still people. And we should hold ourselves to a higher standard than them. We do this, it will stain us."

"They're enemies to me," Shiv said simply. But something about Adam's higher standards stuck with him. Somewhere along the line of being a Pathbearer, all the blood and carnage became routine for Shiv. Now that he thought about it, compared to a few weeks ago, his morals were getting looser...

"Listen, my first encounter with these bastards was them torturing the living shit out of Tran and Heather. I haven't met a single inquisitor that didn't try to kill me or wasn't a piece of shit. I suspect my feelings will probably not change when we have a little talk with Inquisitor Sijik in a while."

Before Adam could reply, Shiv continued, "But I know, I know that you're probably more aware of this whole morality thing and ethics thing than I am. And I think you're probably right."

Adam blinked. "You do?"

"Yeah, I just... I don't... I don't know how to put this, Adam. I don't really care about the Inquisitors that much because they're my enemies, but I don't know. Torture seems like messed-up behavior. I really don't want to get a taste for it. I certainly don't want someone to do it to me. But personally, it's something I'm willing to put up with if it means keeping the orcs under control and keeping their attention away from you or Uva or anyone else in the gate."

Adam looked like he had a lot to say, but he let Shiv talk. "Now, if you want to set them free and let them play their own game on the surface or in the abyss, fine. But I'm going to tell you this: There is no getting away from what these orcs are. So long as they're with us, they're going to be hurting our enemies. Frankly, they're going to be hurting anyone who they find interesting enough to hurt. These inquisitors are dead meat, and they're not going to be the only ones. Not by a long shot."

Adam took in Shiv's words as one would drink down a bucket of piss and shit. Misery and disgust played across his face, but ultimately, he still let out a breath. "From what I could observe of their behavior, they can be focused, especially if there's a fight to be found, even more so against proper enemies. Let's set them loose on our main targets. They're not an army that listens to me anyway, and your control over them is tenuous at best."

"Is what?" Shiv asked.

"Tenuous. Means weak."

"Maybe," Shiv said. "Maybe not. They still want to be System-favored. They still want to fight by my side. We have that, if nothing else. Look, take Uva and the others back into the gate. I'll talk to the orcs. See if I can get them to pretend to have some basic ethics."

"You think you can do that?" Adam asked, doubtful.

Shiv snorted a humorless laugh. "No, but I'm a Pathbearer, so I'm going to try anyway. If shit goes wrong, maybe they kill me, and I get some Rhetoric levels."

Adam nodded in appreciation. "Give me Sijik. I'll take him back with me. Uva might be able to dig out some useful information from his mind."

"Oh, before I forget." Shiv looked off to the side where an unmoving time dragon lay. "Take Choki there with you."

"Choki?" Adam said, confused for a moment. Then he followed Shiv's gaze and saw that he was staring at the dragon. "Choki," Adam repeated. "You named the dragon Choki."

"Yeah, because I choked it out, you know." Shiv laughed.

Adam's jaw fell open. "And I'm going to let you try to become the moral heart of the orcs."

"Yeah," Shiv said, without any sense of irony whatsoever.

The Gate Lord inhaled a long and deep breath through his nostrils. "The things I do for Blackedge's safety."

"Oh, before you go, that arrow earlier..."

"That arrow," Adam began, his voice tense, "is charged by killing a hundred terrible people. And Shiv, I can feel you right now. My sun feels you. And its glow on you is getting darker."

"What does that mean?" Shiv asked.

"Please don't become one of the hundred people I can kill to charge that arrow."

Shiv thought about that for a beat. "Wait, if I turn into a horrible bastard, could you charge the arrow by killing me a hundred times?"

"Shiv..."

"Alright. Relax. It's a joke. I'll stay good, Adam. Now let me talk to the orcs before they finally give you an aneurysm."

“Thank you. Just... have them end the Inquisitors’ suffering and tell them to enjoy their time on the surface. Let them be a nightmare for the Necrotechs instead.”

The Deathless regarded Adam for a moment. “Hey, Adam. How do you know the Necrotechs have it coming? That they deserve to die ugly deaths at the hands of the orcs?”

“They were going to—” The Gate Lord froze.

“The Inquisitors were coming for Blackedge too. But I guess they’re of the Republic, huh?”

Adam flinched.

“Forget about it, Adam. I’ll deal with it. You handle the other stuff.”

Chapter 145 (II) Ethics

Adam, Uva, Can Hu, and Valor departed a few moments thereafter. They took Choki, the time dragon, with them, Uva controlling its mind so it would follow them of its own accord. A sprawling mass of Dimensionality swallowed the dragon and pulled it across the gateway. After that, there were only the midnight breeze, Shiv, and the orcs.

"Gosh, I'm in so much pain. It hurts so bad!"

Oh, right. There were also the still-living inquisitors. The orcs stared at Shiv. Shiv stared at the orcs. He did a brief double check to make sure Adam was gone, and then he let out a sigh. "Alright, we're going to talk about a new deal, and also ethics."

The moment he mentioned ethics, the orcs broke into an uproar. Things were pelted at him. Shiv dodged left and right, avoiding severed limbs, pulped organs, literal handfuls of shit, and a thing that looked vaguely like a baby that vanished through the gateway. "Godsdamn it," Shiv cursed, holding his hands wide as he tried to get the orc to stop. "Stop throwing literal shit at me! Or babies! Male pregnancy, I'm gonna fucking kill you! I'm—I'm gonna let you kill more people if you just listen to me!"

And at that, the orcs immediately stopped. Several orcs complained about why he didn't start with that. Shiv, meanwhile, pointed into the crowd. "I saw that shit! Get Male Pregnancy out of there! Where is he?"

"Where is what?" Bonk said. The expression was one of feigned confusion. "What are you seeing, Insul? Men here can't get pregnant, last I heard. Perhaps you're experiencing post-battle stress."

"No, you pieces of shit! I saw that! And I'm gonna find that goddamn disgusting orc! I'm gonna flay myself next time, and I'm gonna..." Shiv's outburst trailed off as he watched a spread of satisfied looks splash across the gathered orcs. "Oh godsdamn it, you sick pieces of shit."

The Deathless composed himself and frowned at the orcs. "Alright, look, here's the new deal. Adam doesn't want you torturing these people, and neither do I." Another series of protests came from the orcs. Shiv held out his fist. "However, we might be letting you attack the Necrotechs of your own accord on the surface. And also raid the vampires, if you can promise to behave. We're loosening the leash. With certain conditions."

Several of the orcs side-eyed each other. "Define 'behave'," Mortar said, steepling his hands and tapping his fingers together in a wavy motion.

"No raiding random villages, flaying children, throwing dead babies at people, torturing the innocent."

"What really is innocence?" Tequila mused, staring at one of his cigarettes as if it were an instrument of great profundity.

"You know what I'm talking about," Shiv snapped. "No civilian bystanders. And they're not exactly innocent, but also no prisoners who don't pose any threat. Stop playing stupid. Look, you want to scratch the itch, fine, but have some felling self-control. Do it by killing, godsdamn it. You're gonna have plenty of killing to do too. What kind of fun are you gonna get from these ruined people?" Shiv asked, waving the Skysplitter at the sobbing pile of inquisitors. "Most of them are on the verge of death anyway. I can practically smell their injuries."

"I can make that go away," Helix said, arching an eyebrow. "First among which is keeping them alive. For some of us are actual Biomancers."

Shiv grunted, and he pointed a specific finger at Helix. Helix's left eye twitched. He waved his own finger. A brief spell pulsed into existence and faded. Suddenly, Shiv felt a horrific burn spread in his groin. The Deathless forced himself to stay upright to ignore the brutal itching. "Look," he grunted, trying not to scratch. "Felling—Helix, did you give me a venereal disease?"

"Of an extremely potent variety."

Shiv pinched the bridge of his nose and bit back a frustrated sigh. Helix waved a hand again, and the itch went away. "Alright, look. Just don't torture, and don't kill any children or non-martial Pathbearers who aren't behaving like bastards."

Bonk raised a massive hand. Shiv sighed. "Yes, Bonk?"

"Well, in my objective opinion, subjectively, I think everyone who isn't an orc is a bastard. Not including you, of course, Insul."

Shiv closed his eyes for a moment and tried to stay calm. It was the wisest thing he'd ever done, telling Adam to leave, because if Shiv was this annoyed, the Gate Lord would have probably already shot one of them by this point. "Thank you, Bonk. Very interesting. But, so that we can have a unified set of standards, how about we follow my definition of bastard, which is not based on racial supremacy, but on the assumption that someone who hurts the weak or those who don't deserve it is a bastard."

"I understand," Whisper said with a nod.

"Do you?" Shiv asked, his suspicion roused.

"Yes," Whisper continued. "I think the solution to this is that we simply bring some orc Initiates with us, and then we mind control a few enemies to attack these Initiates."

Shiv ground his teeth together. His eyelid twitched much like Adam's did. Yep, this is absolutely fucking miserable. "You know what," Shiv said, "let's just have you attack some specific people like the First Blood or Sullain's Necrotechs. Don't touch anyone else."

"What about these inquisitors?" an orc with a pointy wizard hat asked.

"Sure. Yeah. Great. Kill them."

Bonk held up his hand again. "Bonk, put your arm down or I'll cut it off." Bonk lowered his arm but kept his hand held up. "Listen, I'm literally going to let you guys roam free across the surface battleground and First Blood territory. There won't be anyone breathing down your necks or looking over your shoulder. You'll get to do whatever you want to the vampires, whatever you want to the Necrotech fighters. Just don't give me or Adam or anyone any reason to try to police you. Just don't go overboard. Keep it to killing, not tormenting."

"But that's boring," Mortar moaned childishly. "We want a war. We want a fight."

"And I want you to war and fight," Shiv retorted. "I just want you to war and fight with the right people, and do it properly. Have you got enough scratching from beating the Inquisitors bloody? They barely stood up to us. I feel unsatisfied. Why not dominate better foes? Stronger foes? Don't waste time with this."

"It's like a snack," another orc muttered. "I like snacking."

"Yeah, well, how about instead of a snack, you can get another meal. You just need to make sure that meal is a Necrotech or a vampire."

A robed orc stepped out, then. Bookworm regarded Shiv with a curious expression, and then he briefly stared at the other orcs. "How about this?" Bookworm began diplomatically, "if we agree to these terms, first, you will no longer decide what we do to our enemies in the field. We will not capture and torture them per se, but we might take a little longer when we kill them. Within reason."

Shiv considered that for a moment and decided he had to give them something. "Yeah, sure. As long as they're our enemies."

"Agreed!" Bookworm called. All the other orcs threw their fists up. "Hurrah!" There was no enthusiasm in their unified cheer.

"Secondly," Bookworm held up a finger, "we want allowances for collateral damage."

Shiv pressed his lips together as several orcs began to grin. "It has to be actually collateral," Shiv said through clenched teeth. "Not just you bastards murdering random people and then pretending it was collateral. If I catch anyone breaking the rule, your ass is getting sent back to the Tutorial, and not the nice way."

"Hurrah!" the orcs all cheered again.

"And finally," Bookworm cleared his throat, "we torture these inquisitors to death right now; quickly, and with great mercy. For old time's sake."

Shiv stared at the orcs speechlessly. A couple of leaves drifted by, and he could almost hear the sound of the faraway ocean crashing against the Tidewall in the quiet. "Did you just use 'mercy' and 'torture to death' in the same sentence?"

"Yes. Sometimes, life," Bookworm hesitated dramatically before he finished the sentence, "is very mysterious."

"It's not mysterious! You're literally just still trying to torture them to death, even after I negotiated this ethics bullshit with you! The entire thing came up because this shit bothers Adam. Mainly because they're Republic people." He saw several orcs put up their hands. He cut them off. "Yeah. I know. Hypocritical. Who gives a shit? Did you see what he did to that dragon rider with his arrow?"

The orcs grunted and nodded enthusiastically.

"Nice blast, right?"

More agreements.

"Well, if you keep annoying him, he might never do it again, out of spite. So mind his godsdamned feelings."

The orcs began to complain and grumble with dissatisfaction again.

"Well, what do you want us to do, huh?" Bonk asked, shouldering his massive club. Blood, skin, and hair dotted its length. "Do you just want us to beat them to death right now? Is that it?"

"Yes," Shiv snapped. "Just kill them mercifully."

"You see, Insul, the thing is, Insul, we just have no clue how to do that, Insul," Tequila said, clasping his shaking hands together. The orc adopted an expression that vaguely resembled Adam's from earlier, and Shiv almost let out a laugh at how absurd it was. "Can you please, please, show us, Insul, how to mercifully murder a few hundred people?"

"You pieces of shit," Shiv said for the umpteenth time that day. The orcs chuckled as a collective. "Just throw a fireball at them or something."

"But a few of them have Master-Tier Toughness," an orc chimed. "A fireball will not cut it. It most definitely won't kill all the automata."

"Yeah," Mortar said. "And personally, I think it's merciful if the automata are properly disassembled by me so they can become part of my armor."

"What part of mercy are we missing here?" Shiv growled.

"Philosophically, what is mercy?" Bonk asked. Shiv threw a severed limb at the orc, and he caught it between his massive teeth. But before the Deathless could continue his tirade, Helix waved at another orc, and he emerged from the crowd holding what looked to be a peculiar chest piece.

Shiv hesitated and narrowed his eyes. His body filled with paranoia, and he regarded the piece of armor suspiciously. It resembled a badly damaged set of armor that—wait, he could feel it with his Biomancy. It had a few white plates running down its chest and back, while its arms were layered in muscular tissue. The armor set was missing legs, and parts of the body were cracked, but there was something

about it that left Shiv on edge. Half of its helmet was still connected, and a very mantis-like face greeted Shiv.

"What the hells is this?" Shiv muttered. "What are you sneaky shits planning now? What is this? Some kind of organic armor?"

Helix took the armor from the other orc and casually walked up to Shiv.

"Yeah, take a look at this." He held the armor out before Deathless, and Shiv squinted as he examined its details.

Equipment Obtained: [Husk of the Voidmantid]

Tier: Master

Condition: Severely Wounded

Composition: Voidmantid Ceramic; Bloodroach Chitin; Deepcrawler Silk; Fleshdrinker Fungi

Enchantments > Compound Ocular Network; Antennal Resonance; Pheromonic Cipher; Master Regeneration; Magnified Vibrosense; Trauma Mantle; Myomeric Amplification; Mycelial Interface; Binding

"Master-Tier," Shiv noted. "And what the hells are these enchantments?"

"Insectoid Skills," Helix answered, grinning. With a snap of a finger, his Biomancy field pulsed, and that made the armor come aglow with blood-red mana. "It seems that one of the inquisitors managed to create a good piece of armor from the body of a Voidmantid, a terrible, vicious creature from the darkness above. It also seems that said Inquisitor added more than a few other insectoid skills to the armor somehow. There must be quite the story here. Alas, the poor fool won't be able to tell it. Still. The best thing about this armor is that it might make you less blind and deaf."

Shiv watched as the armor slowly knit itself back together before his eyes. Small strings of fibrous tissue bubbled out from its missing parts.

Helix pounced on Shiv's silence and continued. "It is entirely manipulable by your Biomancy. Understand that your current armor is not truly a piece of equipment in the eyes of the system. I think that's improper. It is time for you to be properly equipped. Behold, a proper piece of biological armor that you can learn from, that you can potentially develop your own crafting skill from. Observe the exterior. Behold its ossified ceramic plating."

Shiv glanced at Helix, who now held the demeanor of a slimy merchant rather than a Biomancer. But the Deathless couldn't resist staring down at the armor again. Its outside was ridged with pieces of pale, crystalline plating, but along the limbs were dense strands of chitinous fiber. They were midnight black and seemed almost as pliable as cloth. "Here is a dense cross-hatched weave of external chitinous fibers. Bloodroach chitin. You know such a creature is fifty meters large and can swim in magma?"

"No," Shiv muttered.

"And underneath the chitin," Helix said as he gestured with his bio-mantic field. One of the fibers was pulled out, and Shiv found another string hiding underneath it. It glistened like silk. No, it was silk. "This is Deepcrawler silk. If you press against it, you will quickly discover that its properties are non-Newtonian." The orc jabbed a finger against the silk, and it suddenly went hard. "This allows it to remain flexible during normal movements, but at other times, and under heavy impacts, it grows increasingly strong."

"Then, there are the eyes and currently missing antennae. But that's best experienced directly. After I show you how to mend the armor faster." The orc Biomancer waved a hand as the armor opened up entirely. Along the insides were ridges of threaded tissue. This reminded Shiv of a mushroom's mycelia, and it glistened invitingly, seeming almost warm. "And finally, here is a mycelial network. It allows your skin and this armor to be properly interfaced together. It will glide under your epidermis and allow you to feel your armor. In fact, it becomes like an external organ for you. An exoskeleton, if you will. More of an exoskeleton than what you currently have."

Slowly, the orc placed a large hand on Shiv's shoulder. "Insul Shiv. My dearest Deathless. We managed to find this piece of armor on a particularly hard-to-kill Inquisitor Biomancer. And though my covetous heart wanted it for myself, I said to my little greedy heart, You can starve for a while. Starve because I know someone else that might have a proper use for this. In fact, I know someone else who desperately needs a piece of armor. So..." Helix leaned beside Shiv's ear. "I have a counterproposal for you."

"A counterproposal?" Shiv said, trying to fight his own itch—an itch born of material greed.

"Indeed," Helix breathed. "You let us have a little bit of time, nothing truly excessive, with these still-living hostages... I mean, uh, victims... I mean, uh, inquisitors, and you will never see them again. Afterward, we will fight according to your..." The orc barely held back a laugh. "...ethics. And make sure your pet Gate Lord is never bothered by our actions again. You, however, need to amuse us some more. Because we need it. The amusement. To keep ourselves controlled. And ethical."

Shiv finally looked away from the armor, and he glared at Helix. "You think bribing me with this is going to make me softer? Gonna make me let you just torture those people to death?"

"Mercifully," Bonk added.

"Mercifully," all the orcs chimed in, speaking in uncanny sync.

Helix, meanwhile, was utterly unashamed. "Yes," Helix said, "I think that bribing you with this armor will make you look the other way just long enough."

A long moment passed as Shiv stared in the orc's eyes, and the orc stared back. The Deathless clenched his jaw together, and then he looked at the pile of writhing inquisitors, and when he looked behind himself, the dimensional gateway was stable. No one was coming in or out. Shiv's fingers tightened around the armor. "...and I can fuse my bone armor with this?"

"Why do you think I brought it to you?" Helix asked, his voice filled with vindication. "We're going to teach you how to get a Crafting Skill through Biomancy as well! There's more than one reason why I wanted you to have this."

Shiv stared at the orcs. Stared at the armor. Stared at the pile of groaning and whimpering inquisitors. And looked at the Surface Gateway again. "Huh. Well. Uh. You know. Just be merciful as soon as you can."

The orcs cheered. And Shiv discovered another weakness about himself: He was very, very bribable. And now the orcs knew. But that meant they were going to bring him more shit in the future...

What is mercy philosophically, anyway? Shiv pretend-ruminates while blatantly bullshitting himself.

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