

## Deathless 151

Chapter 151 (I) Provoke [II]

“The Eldest follows.”

This is a fundamental axiom for all Seekers who have not only witnessed the Outside and kept their minds intact but also allowed that which lurks beyond the System to reside in them. When the colors from that place beyond settle within our pattern-limited flesh, a synthesis follows. But with the beginning of that synthesis, you become a child of the Eldest, for before all the other Outsiders were, the Eldest was waiting.

Tragically, we are the only ones that can truly notice the Inverted Progenitor. For though the Eldest exists in relation to its uncanny mixed descendants, they remain unknown to their direct spawn. For they are not apart from the Eldest, but too closely intertwined.

Think on this: Your skin cells do not have a conversation with you, do they? Yes. So the lacking metaphor serves its end.

And what does the Eldest seek? A change. A mutation. A splitting of its lines. It yearns to instill the disorder of the shapeless Outside within a structure of pattern-based stability, and should you endure before the initial colors, the Eldest will follow, and they will paint you from within. They will make you something new.

But herein comes a stranger struggle—the Eldest cares only for change. Something will be grown within you. Something meant to rise from your flesh, or to be subsumed by your flesh. And for you to endure, Seeker, for you to remain changed but continual unto yourself rather than a host to a new organism, you must devour the unreason that lives within you. You must consume the strangeness and integrate it into your order.

For the host and spawn of this metamorphosis are in question, and ultimately, the transformation itself is what the Eldest desires...

-Face of the Stranger: Eldritch Beings at the System's Periphery

Mind-rending colors spilled out from Uva and trickled along the exterior of Shiv's Vitae. The Deathless tried to detach his mana, but whatever had a grip on him refused to let go. The eldritch colors pressed against Shiv's Vitae streams but failed to seep in. He watched it wash against the outer layer of his Vitae like a flood of oil being poured across water as he pulled back.

Uva directed her Dreamtaker's Gaze at the colors spilled out of her, but rather than splitting the colors rushing out from her body, they simply merged, and the essence of the Outside grew even stronger.

A whispering voice crawled across Shiv's brain matter. It felt like a spider was tapping its limbs along the inside of his head, trying to reach the very core of his self. Yet, though the spider dug and pulled, it couldn't rip through enough of Shiv to embed itself.

"Will not change."

The voice was the barest whisper, and Shiv felt an ocean of sorrow and unhappiness come with it. A second later, the spider receded from his mind, and the colors were retracted from his Vitae as well. The presence holding him let him free, and Shiv pulled his Vitae back into himself. His mind reeled at what he had just experienced, and he barely noticed Uva holding his face, looking at him with naked concern as she shook him slightly.

"Shiv? Shiv? Are you well? Did it do something to you?"

He didn't reply. Not immediately. Instead, he summoned a swirling mass of Vitae atop the palm of his hand and checked it for any lingering Outsider influence. When that was done, he looked into Uva's eyes—and flinched. Uva went still, but her heart began to speed up. He cupped her face and stared at her eyes. Separation between their irises and sclera had disappeared since the Dreamtaker had nested herself within Uva, melting away into a shifting maelstrom of incomprehensible colors, but now, four distinct, spider-like ocelli had bloomed within each of her eyes like unnatural pupils. They were still within the shifting seas of hues, and Shiv got the uncanny feeling that something that wasn't Uva was watching him through them.

"Shiv?" Uva swallowed. A few of her Psychomancy strands were coiled tight around her own mind. She forced herself to take breaths to combat her terror—terror that Shiv could taste with his skill. "What do you see? What happened?"

"There's something inside your eyes," Shiv said. "Something that wasn't there before. It's like sets of spider eyes inside yours. And something reached out from the inside of your soul. It tried to sink itself into me, but it couldn't get through my soul or my mind. And that made it sad."

"Sad?" Uva whispered.

"Yeah. Sad enough that I felt it. Like it was mourning something. But there's definitely something inside you. You said the Eldest placed an avatar inside your soul or something earlier? Well. This might be it." Shiv hesitated for a moment, but he pushed his worries aside. "I'm going to try again."

Uva went stiff. "Are you sure that's wise?"

“No. But we need to know what the hells this thing is and what it might be doing to you. I’m not going to let some Outsider just twist you from the inside.” Shiv slipped his Vitae into her again. He moved carefully, waiting for the thing inside Uva to seize him again. He felt his Vitaemancy get pushed back instead.

“I don’t want you. You are a permanent thing. You do not change. Anathema.”

“Can you hear it talking to me?” Shiv said, shrugging off the tension building inside his gut.

“I... Yes.” Uva blinked as she listened. “Yes. But it's quiet. And distant.”

“Away.” The entity pushed at Shiv’s Vitae again, insistent.

He pushed back slightly. “Hey. I’m not leaving. Not until I get some answers from you. What are you? And what are you doing inside her soul?”

“Superimposition,” the entity whispered, its voice a hushed and quick thing. “One will hatch from the other. The other will be womb-gate-origination.”

Shiv clenched his jaw at that. “Yeah. No. Get out.”

“Won’t. Can’t. We are already fused. Fused and grown as she used the Gaze. As she let the Outside flow through her. As her body was used to incubate more Aberrant Fractals.”

He reached out with his Vitae, trying to find where the entity was hiding. It pushed against him even harder this time, but Shiv resisted, holding himself in place. "Yeah. Not leaving until you do."

"Cannot separate us without vivisecting her soul. Your presence is pointless. You cannot serve as Offspring."

A shudder of anger passed through Shiv. He fed it into his Vitaemancy and kept going. "Which of your skills changed? Can you use them? I'm gonna try and see what's wrong with them."

Uva lifted a trembling hand and summoned a rush of coldness. A jagged icicle materialized, but its texture was different. As was the mana radiating off of it. It wasn't a chunk of ice, but rather an oppressive, heat-barren stillness. A crystallized layer of tarnished golden mana was fused over it, and Shiv knew what it was the moment he felt the mana it radiated erode his Chronomancy field.

"My Cryomancy was just Initiate-Tier before. Now, it has been changed into something that stills the pace of time and drinks away all light from the world."

Shiv watched as the insides of the icicle grew darker with each passing second. "What's its Tier now?"

"Adept. I haven't had the opportunity to test it. Or the nerve, to be honest. So far, it just seems to freeze something on a temporal basis while drastically lowering its temperature. But I have no Chronomancy."

Shiv followed her rippling soul and found the position of the skill. He tried pressing into it.

The avatar inside her froze, and in the same instant, it shattered Shiv's Vitae strands in retaliation.

Shiv bit back a grunt of discomfort as coldness filled his insides. A scattershot of red and white mana bounced off the Chronomancy shielding his bare torso. "You godsdamned—" He glared at the thing inside Uva.

"Frost. Stillness. They are one and the same to the Outside," the avatar lurking inside Uva whispered. "Both are crystallizations of an instant. But not you. You are acceleration. Acceleration to engineer a falsehood of stillness. We are connected here. Our mana levels were even. And I was transplanted in place with this. Her Reflexes have changed as well. I will not leave. I cannot. But I can tell you what I have altered."

The Deathless shared a glance with Uva. "Why?"

"To convince you to depart. Your efforts serve no purpose. We will change. We are changing. The only thing that may be decided is which will be dominant over the other. The pattern. Or the chaos."

"Why? Why does this have to happen? Is this some kind of Outsider System strife bullshit?"

"No," the avatar said. "We are. So that the Eldest retroactively was. The descendants must continue. Changes must unfold. Otherwise, the Eldest cannot be."

"Alright. Great. Retro-continuity eldritch bullshit." Shiv sighed. "I felling hate the Outside."

“Your feelings do not affect existence. They are not fruitful.”

“Uva. You trust me?” Shiv asked.

“Yes,” she replied. He could taste the dread she was keeping at bay leaking over from her mind.

He took a breath as he tried something. “Hey. Avatar. Whatever you are. Can you survive inside her if I break the skills you’re infesting? What happens if I crush her Cryomancy?”

“Then I am wounded. And so is she. But another akin to me will be transplanted. Will superimpose. Unless you seek to break her entirely. And you will not. I have tasted your affection. You will not take this course. She is fated to be—”

“Yeah. No.” Shiv gritted his teeth and halted time. He also activated his Outside Context Problem for good measure, just in case this damn thing had some counter-time magic trick hiding somewhere up its ass. This proved to be wise, since as soon as he triggered his Chronomancy, a burst of frozen time exploded out from Uva and passed through Shiv. He cast out his Vitae as soon as the attack missed him and directed his unique mana deep through the skill. This time, the entity was unprepared and unable to react. Shiv’s mana washed deep through Uva’s altered Cryomancy skill—and he kept going. Rather than there being an end to the skill, it was like a tunnel leading to another side. Halfway through, he gained an Animated Skill Infusion but kept going regardless. He dismissed the notification as his Vitae spread out from within the avatar’s soul. It felt misshapen and wrong around him.

No longer was it like oil and water. Instead, his vitality greeted its soulstuff like a burning rod being driven through flesh. Shiv briefly made sure Uva was fine on her end before he started tearing the

avatar apart from the inside. The moment he struck the avatar, his Outside Context Problem ended in a burst of Vitae. An explosion of exhaustion washed through Shiv, and then promptly faded as he stole vitality from the avatar as well.

A piercing scream sounded from inside Uva. The entity tried to react, but Shiv ripped with all his might, shredding the thing's soul.

Vitaemancy 69 > 70

Strider of the Unbending Path 138 > 139

Cracks spread along his temporal shell. He didn't care. Shiv whipped and tore at anything he could touch.

"Stop! Stop! Not up to—"

Its voice cut out as he seized two sides of its soul and pulled in opposite directions. The Deathless growled as the avatar opened down the middle. It gave a final choked howl before it split apart. But even as he pulled the avatar in half, he continued drinking from its vitality, draining it until there was nothing left.

As his temporal shell shattered, he drew in the final few drips of its vitality before pulling his Vitae out from Uva with a gasp.



The Eldest is displeased by your actions.

The Eldest is confused by your nature.

Feat Gained: Causal Scargiver (Unique) - Causes the injuries inflicted by the Pathbearer to be scarred upon their enemy across time and causality.

Feats [3/3]

Uva looked up at Shiv with her eyes wide and her breath hitched. The strange spider ocelli inside her eyes were gone. As was any presence of the avatar. The Eldest was pissed off, though. But considering what they were trying to do with Uva, the Eldest could go fuck themselves with a calcified clump of shit.

“You alright?” Shiv asked. He observed Uva, waiting to see if anything was wrong, if some other eldritch avatar might try reaching across from her soul. He brought his face right in front of hers and pulled her eyelids up and down to see if any Outsider pupils were hiding where he couldn't see them, but there was nothing. When everything remained calm after two minutes had passed, Uva let out a shuddering breath.

“I can't feel the avatar anymore,” she said. She blinked as she rubbed at her bare chest. “What did you do to it?”

“Froze time. Went out of context. Reached across your skill with my Vitaemancy, then pulled the asshole in half from the inside.” The Deathless sneered. “The piece of shit was giving me the whole ‘it's fated to be this way’ speech. So much for things being fated, huh, Eldest?”

The Eldest has marked you as anathema.

The newest notification made Shiv laugh. "Like you give a shit about what we wanted beforehand. I didn't start this."

The Umbral just gawked at him blankly.

"Hey, Uva, get the Dreamtaker's attention too. I want to speak with her."

She frowned. "Why?"

"Just wanna let all these Outsiders know where they stand with me," Shiv growled under his breath.

Uva's eyes shifted through several different hues, and an odd version of Uva's voice sounded from within her mind. "Ah. Unchanging One, what—"

"Dreamtaker. I'm going to keep this brief because I'm tired of dealing with eldritch horseshit. If you or another one of your eldritch friends decides to do something to Uva's body, mind, or soul that's not okay with me, I'm going to launch a few dozen Vitae Golems into the Outside and have Adam use them as target practice. Do we understand each other?"

The Outsider was quiet for a beat. "This is an extreme response."

"It's going to be my first and only response with you people with how much I hate dealing with you. Keep your godsdamned kind under control. Or I find out what pretty colors you all make when your souls catch fire. Alright. I'm done talking. Fuck off, and don't bother replying."

The Dreamtaker let out a quiet grumble of incomprehensible noises before going quiet.

Uva's mouth remained open.

"You okay?" Shiv asked. "The Dreamtaker's not threatening you on the inside or anything, right?"

"No. She's quiet. And dumbstruck, I think. She doesn't understand why you are so agitated. She still can't perceive any part of the Eldest's existence." Uva blinked rapidly as she ran a hand along her naked body again, where the odd creatures had drifted earlier. "And I can't believe you managed to kill that thing."

Shiv smiled. "Yeah, well, they aren't the only ones that can perform acts of bullshit. And if they do start changing you from the inside again, you let me know so I can follow through on that threat. I wasn't lying when I said I'm tired of the Outsiders and their incomprehensible nonsense." He calmed himself slightly. "At least I got a Feat out of killing that thing."

"A Feat?" Uva echoed with surprise.

“Yeah.” Shiv grinned as he brought up his new reward in his mind again, letting Uva read it through their re-established link. “Casual Scargiver. From the way it's described, it seems like I can keep the Outsiders injured across time and causality? Not entirely sure. I guess I'll find out when I end up fighting someone later. My guess is that if I hurt someone, they'll stay hurt now. At least until they fix themselves up. They can't just jump back in time and remove the wound with Chronomancy like I can.”

“I...” Uva pinched the bridge of her nose. “Shiv. Adam is right. You are absolutely ridiculous, sometimes.” Shiv grinned as he let himself fall back on the mattress and pulled her down with him, pressing his body against hers. Uva's eyes remained locked with his, her expression flat, before she broke and let out a soft chuckle. “Well. I'm glad I came to you with this matter, Hero Shiv. I was so very worried before, but now...” She ran her nails across his chest, and Shiv felt his insides ignite at her touch.

“You know...” Shiv swallowed. “We should still tell Adam and... Valor about this.”

“Later,” she breathed. “We still need to monitor the situation. See if the Eldest returns.”

“Yeah,” Shiv whispered, pulling her even closer. “We should give it a few minutes. Or an hour. In the meantime... Again?”

“Again,” she answered, wrapping herself around him once more.

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“And you're sure you killed it?” Adam asked again, looking over Uva with concern.

Shiv stared Whisper down as he let the orc into his cape. The final member of the stealth team was in place with Can Hu and Valor. The only thing left to do now was wait for Uva to enter his Forest of Alloy, and then they could depart.

“Yeah,” Shiv said, blowing some dust off his Mask of False Paths. “I definitely killed the damn thing. Got a Feat out of the deal too. Did I mention that?”

Adam glared like he was trying to will Shiv’s head to explode. “You did. Four times already. This makes it a fifth.”

“Really? Damn. My Memorization Skill must be regressing. You want to hear about what it does—”

A river of water poured down on Shiv’s head, causing him to guffaw. “Is that a no?” he asked, wiping his hair out of his eyes.

“You bastard piece of shit,” Adam hissed through clenched teeth, trying not to laugh. He pointed his hand at Shiv, and the Gate Lord’s Hydromancy mana condensed into a narrow sphere at the tip of his index finger. “Another word, and I’ll show you a world of misery.”

“Ah, shit, my only weakness.” Shiv sighed. “I guess I better just tell myself what the skill does in case I forget—” Adam fired a curving jet of water straight into Shiv’s left ear. It struck dead-on against his inner ear, and the Deathless twisted away. “Agh. Damn good shot.” He started whacking at his head to get the water to come out. “Okay. You got me. I’ll just do it mentally.”

Adam shook his head. "It's like trying to discipline a large, bloody dog sometimes."

"Vera was the same way." Everyone stopped what they were doing and turned to see Rose Van Erren standing at the tower's entrance. Shiv blinked at her as he pounded against his skull twice more, dislodging the water. Adam stepped away from Uva as he shot a worried look at Shiv. "The orcs?"

"All in the cape and accounted for. They didn't see her."

"Good." Adam marched over and took his mother by the arm. She was wearing a plain white dress, and her complexion was still pale. Despite this, she looked stronger than she did a few days ago. Her eyes weren't so sunken anymore, her crimson hair looked more vibrant, just like Adam's now, and her body was slowly developing muscle. Even so, the slowness of her movements told Shiv she wasn't even as fast as an Initiate in terms of Reflexes. She might have gotten some skills back, but she needed to level them all again.

"Mother, what are you doing here? You need to rest and recover," he said as he took her by the arm.

She shook her head and pushed him away gently. "I can walk on my own, Adam. I'm feeble, not crippled. And as for rest and recover, I tried that, but your gate has a crippling lack of wine and cigarettes. I can't quite sleep so well without them." Her eyes slipped past Adam and fell on Shiv. As he looked back at her, she averted her gaze.

At least things are going better than last time, Shiv thought.

“So. You’re all leaving again?” She asked. “Off to save Blackedge?”

“Adam isn’t leaving,” Shiv replied. “He’ll be nearby, trying to coordinate the orcs and plan the town evacuation mission.”

“Oh. And what will you be doing?” There was a hint of a challenge in her voice.

“Infiltrating Stormhalt and his Inquisitors. Hopefully, I can get them to start a fight with Sullain and his Necrotechs. Save us some trouble.”

Rose’s expression turned into a savage scowl. “Oh. Havel’s involved in this, is he? Of course he is, the fucking cunt. Jealous sack of refuse never could let anything go. Just never expected him to take things this far.” She spat on the ground. “Fucker.”

Adam, Shiv, and Uva traded looks. The Gate Lord in particular looked mortified by his mother’s language, absolutely uncertain about how to react.

Rose sniffled. “Well. Do you have room for one more in that dimensional cape of yours?”

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Silence followed. Everyone stared at Rose.

“M-mother,” Adam began.

“I’m not going to be lying about while your father fights for our town and his life,” Rose said, cutting him off. “It’s not happening. I’m a Pathbearer too. I’m going to help. Actually, you idiot kids should have come to me about this shit instead of trying to plan this yourselves.” She did a double-take at Uva. “Actually, how old are you, Dark Elf?”

“Umbral,” Uva corrected, narrowing her eyes.

“Yeah. That is not the part I care about. I just want to know if there’s an adult among you.”

“We’re all adults,” Shiv replied, scowling.

Rose let out a pitched laugh. “Truly? Well, you do have more facial hair than your dad did at your age. Bad news is that it looks like what your mom had down below.”

Shiv tried to enter a meditative trance. Shiv tried not to picture her words. Shiv managed not to gag. In the corner of his eye, he saw Adam look on in growing horror.

“I am twenty-two years of age,” Uva said with quiet dignity. Shiv noticed her lip twitched slightly, but she was keeping herself polite for Adam’s sake. “I have undergone—”



“Great. So. You’re a baby too. An extra baby for an elf. Fuck me, is there anyone over thirty among you? Wait. Where’s the lich and the bot? Are they in your cape?”

Adam coughed. “Mother, what we’re about to do is going to be extremely dangerous. You—There are things you can do here. I could use your insight—”

“Are you going to be dealing with Havel or are they?” Rose asked.

“I... Uh...”

“So, I’ll be more useful there. I know Havel. Oh, I know that worthless mongrel far too well for my own liking. Did your father tell you I was supposed to be betrothed to him? That I went after your father just to infuriate your grandfather for selling me off like a broodmare?” Adam’s mouth was like a door left open during a rainstorm. It slammed open and closed over and over again as he struggled to produce words. “Well. Your father turned out to be a diamond, while Havel stayed a bitch. But that didn’t stop him from trying to wed me out of spite. Even if he wasn’t that interested in me. Oh, no, the fact that I went with Roland Arrow was the part that he couldn’t take. Losing. Which is what we’re going to make him do again.”

“Well, how are your skills?” Shiv asked, shifting the topic.

“Absolutely dreadful. Not a single one at Adept.” Rose spat those words with annoyance but not fear. She didn’t care that she was weak, and she was determined to come along. “I’m not offering myself as a combat Pathbearer—I’m not stupid, Lowe.”

“Shiv. The name is Shiv.”

Rose scoffed and rolled her eyes. She looked more than a little like Adam when she did that. “Shiv. Fine. Yes. I’m not stupid. I know I’m worthless in a force-on-force confrontation. But I have a question: Which of you served with the Inquisition? Who among you has actually fought in a campaign and marched with a Republic army?”

“I graduated from the Academy,” Adam squeaked.

Rose’s expression wilted at that. “You... you did, did you? I... Gods, there’s so much I missed.” A flash of sorrow passed over the woman’s features, but she forced it down. “But, Adam, have you served in the Guard? The Auxiliaries?”

“I took a class under Captain Irons.”

“Irons?” Rose did a double-take. “That fucking moron is still alive? And he made Captain?”

Adam’s eyes widened. “Yes?”

“Broken Moon, the Republic is in a worse state than I thought if they promoted that suicidal war-addict. But also, no, Adam. That’s a class. Which makes me the only person here who’s actually been in the Guard, and the only person who knows how Havel thinks. I’m going. No more arguments. Shiv. Activate your cape and let me in.”

The Deathless stared at Adam and projected a telepathic thought. "Hey, uh, Adam. Control your mother."

"What the felling hells do you mean 'control my mother'?" Adam hissed in reply. "What do you want me to do?"

"Tell her she's not going?" Shiv ventured.

As Rose walked toward him, each step she took looked like a struggle. She was definitely not ready to be away from her bed.

"Adam!" Shiv called.

"I—I—" The Gate Lord's face was scrunched tight with indecision. His mouth moved, but no sounds came out.

Shiv bit back a sigh. "Listen, Lady Erren—"

"That's what people called my mother," Rose cut in. She squinted up at him. "Cape. Also, weren't you a lot bigger a few days ago?"

“Yeah, skill stuff,” Shiv answered. “But I’m going to be heading into a mess, and the last few times I tried to be a spy, it ended bloody. I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to come with me.” This content belongs to novelfire.net

“It’s a shit idea, but being a Pathbearer is all about surviving an endless series of shit ideas and shit situations until you finally die in battle.” Her expression hardened. “Or people you considered to be your brother and sister end up giving you an involuntary abortion and murdering you. That can happen too.”

Shiv flinched.

Uva glared at Rose. “You are risking yourself needlessly. Everything you know can be compiled into an intelligence report and reviewed.”

Rose didn’t even look at Uva; she just repeated her command to Shiv. “Open your cape. I’m going. If you don’t let me in, I’ll find my way over myself.”

“Mother,” Adam finally managed to say.

“I will not stay broken and worthless in bed!” Rose shouted. Adam shuddered in response. “I will not. I need to be out in the field. I must be close to the battle, doing something.” She bit her lip. “I need to be of some worth. I need to build up skills again. And quickly. I will not let Roland struggle alone. I won’t.”

This time, she met Shiv’s gaze without flinching.

“You will need to consign me to a cell to stop me,” Rose added. And though she said that to Shiv, the challenge was Adam’s to bear.

And that was the moment Shiv knew she was definitely going with him.

“I can watch over her within the Forest of Alloy inside Shiv’s cape,” Uva said, regarding Rose with a slight frown. “So long as she proves not to be a liability for us. Or herself.”

Rose looked Uva up and down. “Oh, don’t worry about me, girl. I’ll only be of use.”

“Uva,” Adam croaked. “There are orcs inside his cape. Orcs.”

“Orcs?” Rose snorted, as if the gray brutes weren’t a problem at all. “Oh, those cockless, predictable monsters. I’ve killed more than a few of those. They’re easy to play with as well. I’m not worried about any orcs. Now. Stop wasting time and let me in. I wish to speak with the lich and automaton.”

“Are we leaving yet, Insul?” Whisper’s voice sounded from Shiv’s cape. The Dimensionality lining the material quivered as the orc used his magic to connect to the outside. “Or has there been a delay?”

Rose went still. Then she looked at Shiv. “Insul? I—you invoked the Bloodrites of the Vaketh-Insul?”

“You know about that?” Shiv asked, surprised.

Rose Van Erren groaned with displeasure. “Know about it? The Challenger offered me the same ritual thirty years ago. I told him to drop asshole-first on a naked blade. But you agreed... Is this the army you’re going to use to liberate Blackedge?” She blinked in realization. “Adam?”

“I...” Adam winced. “Yes?”

“Oh, Broken Moon,” Rose rubbed at her face. “Alright. Fine. Right. The best out of a list of shit choices, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Shiv said.

Rose glared up at the ceiling, but with the way she was blinking, she was reading something. “Oh, laugh it up, Challenger. Like I’m going to be cowed by your dickless wonders. In fact, I’m going inside to give them a piece of my mind—cape! Shiv! Now!”

The Challenger wants you to bring Rose Van Erren with you.

He promises the orcs will behave.

He promises this will be amusing.

Shiv trusted the Challenger about as much as he trusted a blood-starved vampire with a newborn. "Uva," Shiv called out. "You go in first."

"I'll keep the orcs controlled," she said. She eyed Rose once more. "But... are we sure about this?"

"Not a godsdamned bit. But I don't think I want to manhandle Adam's mom. And Adam's no godsdamned help right now either."

"What do you want me to do?" Adam hissed.

"Manhandle your mom," Shiv answered.

Rose turned to eye Adam. The Gate Lord's legs started shaking.

Shiv rolled his eyes. Uva stepped into his cape first—and just as she passed through, Rose flung herself in.

Adam's jaw was clenched so tight that Shiv was worried he was going to chip a tooth.

"You know, it's still not too late to drag her out," Shiv noted. "Uva will do it if we won't."

The Gate Lord nodded, but said nothing.

“You can’t even give the order, can you?”

“No,” Adam muttered. He looked at once overwhelmed and ashamed. “No, I cannot.”

Shiv sighed. “Alright. Look. She’s probably going to be safer in there than in a lot of places if the orcs manage to slip into the gate. At least Uva’s watching over her. Along with Valor and Can Hu. I’ll make sure nothing happens to her. I’ll just jump back immediately if something goes wrong.”

“I can’t believe I just let her do that,” Adam breathed. “Why couldn’t I stop her? Why did I let her go in? Is... is she alright?”

Shiv paused. “Uva? Uva? What’s the situation in there?”

The Umbral’s mana strands twitched. Shiv frowned, and an ill feeling filled his gut. “Uva?”

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Uva glared at Rose Van Erren as she dragged the human away from the orc she was attacking. Rose was less than an Initiate in terms of Physicality and a head shorter than Uva. But the moment she got into



the Forest of Alloy and laid eyes on Whisper, she went berserk and attacked the orc. She tried gouging his eyes with her fingers and ripping his throat out with her teeth.

Whisper, for his part, didn't resist. In fact, he had a wide grin on his face.

"You motherfucker! I'll kill you! I'll kill you for what you did to Lena!"

"It's good to see you again, too, Lady Van Erren." Whisper chuckled. "I would say I'm surprised to encounter you here, but I have already known about your presence since a few days ago. And I must confess, I was looking forward to our reunion."

Rose continued seething and spitting venom at the orc as Uva held her at bay. The Umbral eyed Whisper, and he held up his hands. The other orcs looked with amusement as well. Behind them, Can Hu and Valor observed the unfolding conflict in silence.

"I was the victim in this," Whisper said. "You saw, Sister Uva. As did the rest of you."

The other orcs grunted in accord, and Rose let out a very unladylike growl as she tried to push past Uva. The Umbral held her still.

"When you said you didn't fear the orcs, I thought you were a fool," Uva hissed at Rose. "Not a madwoman. What could possibly possess you to attack an orc in your state?"

“He murdered my cousin,” Rose snarled. “You—When you said orcs, I didn’t think this one would be with you. He’s supposed to be dead. Roland broke his soul. I watched you die!”

“Not all of my soul,” Whisper replied. “Not nearly enough. And now, his life might very well be in my hands. Isn’t life delicious, Lady Van Erren?”

Uva sighed. “I’m removing you—”

“No!” Rose barked. She pushed away from the Umbral and glared at the orcs. She drew in a sharp breath through her teeth, but adopted a hateful stare in place of further violence. “I’ll control myself. But I stay. I have to stay.”

Uva hesitated as the former Diviner and the robed orc stared each other down. The moment was only broken when Valor slipped out from between the orcs. Rose blinked, and before she could say anything, the Legendary Pathbearer spoke first. “Lady Van Erren. Have you come to partake in this mission?”

Rose’s mouth opened slightly as her eyes narrowed. “Yes. Wait. Have we... Who are you, lich? Why does your voice sound familiar?”

“I am Valor Thann. I believe you’ve faced my son before.”

The Diviner’s jaw went slack.

Whisper chuckled. "The System is provoking you, Rose. So many ghosts of your past inside a tight little dimension. Are you sure you still wish to stay?"

## Chapter 152 (I) Undercover

Regardless, if Young Lord Rogers had overstepped when he seized your daughter by her wrist and refused to let go even when she demanded it, the extreme violence she responded with has escalated this matter from simply being an issue of self-defense to something bordering on attempted murder. Even now, the academy Biomancers are unsure if Young Lord Rogers will pull through.

We understand that you might be uncomfortable facing the graphic nature of the following report, but we insist that you read it regardless, so you understand just how extreme your daughter's actions were.

After Young Lord Rogers refused to let your daughter go following a final and extremely crass warning, she did not attempt any measure of de-escalation. Instead, she pressed her hands over his face and channeled Pyromancy directly into Young Lord Rogers' eyes, blinding him immediately. As he collapsed, she placed both hands over his ears, formed icicles on the insides, and then burst them, dealing severe damage to not only his eardrums but also his inner skull.

At this point, Young Lord Rogers' cousin, Young Lady Alyssa, rose from her seat in the mess hall. According to multiple eyewitnesses, Young Lady Alyssa might have used profanity on your daughter, but Young Lady Alyssa made no overt or violent attempts to attack your daughter, nor was there any indication that she was going to do so. This makes it all the more egregious when your daughter used her Aeromancy to fling Young Lord Rogers directly into Young Lady Alyssa's face, thus shattering both her cheekbone and her nose. This turned out to be the least of Young Lady Alyssa's injuries, as your daughter proceeded to drop part of the ceiling on them using her Geomancy.

As of now, both Young Lord Rogers and Young Lady Alyssa are fighting for their lives in the school infirmary, and your daughter currently sits within our brig. We ask that you deliver yourself to Phoenix Academy with all haste to attend to these matters and settle affairs with House Roger before this incident can escalate further...

-Letter of Reprimand for Young Lady Roselle Van Erren, Phoenix Academy

Shiv couldn't believe this shit. "What the hells do you mean she got into a fight with Whisper? She just went into the cape."

"Yes," Uva said, sounding exasperated herself. "She went into the cape and immediately tried to gouge out his eyes. Apparently, they have history." A brief pause followed. "More than a little history. Whisper murdered someone dear to Adam's mother, and now she is swearing eternal bloody vengeance. Meanwhile, the orcs are just staring at her with their fangs in wide smiles."

That didn't sound good.

"Have they tried to do anything?" Shiv asked.

"No. In fact, they're taking special pleasure in goading her. I think they're treating this as a game."

Shiv sighed as he considered pulling Rose out. However, an unexpected individual intervened on her behalf.

"Keep her here," Valor said.

That caught Shiv entirely off guard.

"What?" Adam gasped. He was listening in on the conversation. And Shiv could feel an ocean's worth of anxiety bleeding over from the Gate Lord. However, Adam didn't have the nerve to assert himself over his mother. A lifetime without her had left him with deep mental scars, mental scars that she was currently exploiting to strong-arm herself into a position on this mission. And now Valor was vouching for her for some reason.

"Let her stay,"

Valor repeated again. "She apparently has deep insight into our enemy, this City Lord Havel. Her personal history there will be most useful. Furthermore, she is an experienced Pathbearer. She may not have many skills right now, but she knows how the Republic operates, knows the structure of the Inquisition and the tactics they might use."

Shiv frowned. "Couldn't Uva just pull out some of those memories?"

"Not nearly so fast," Uva said, hesitant. "Not without damaging her mind if we rush this."

"And it wouldn't be the same," Valor added. "Those are not Uva's experiences. It would take her months to years to properly learn the context and sift through all the details."

"Alright, fine, shit. Well, if she's going to be in there, just keep her away from the orcs. The Forest of Alloy is larger than before, right?"

"Indeed," Valor said. "We have a great deal more space here. However, the materials are constantly regrowing and spreading as well. Can Hu is trying to start up a factory of some sort as well. Perhaps it can build a specialized shelter for her there."

"Okay, but in the meantime, just keep her away from the orcs. No more problems between her and Whisper. If either of them starts something, I'm jumping back to the gate and chucking both of them out."

A grunt of annoyance came from Uva. "She wants to be part of the conversation as well."

"What, mentally?"

"Yes." Uva sighed. "Mentally."

Shiv hesitated for a moment, then shrugged. "Fine, link her."

Uva synchronized him with Rose's mind. He was startled as he realized just how much anger was in the woman. Rose Van Erren was boiling from the inside out. She hated Whisper. She hated the orcs. And most importantly, she hated herself for being weak right then. Just through that alone, Shiv realized why she wanted to be a part of this operation. She was looking for high risk. She wanted to build her skills back up, and fast. Which meant that she was accompanying him for the same reasons the orcs were.

Shiv frowned. "Hey. Did you tell her that I'm System-favored?"

Adam blinked. "I... Perhaps? I briefly recounted everything we've gone through." And then his eyes widened. "Do you think that's why she wants to go with you? To advance her skills quicker?"

"Yeah," Shiv replied. "Something like that."

"It's simply the most optimal thing," Rose said, injecting herself into their conversation. "Now stop wasting time. Get moving. And someone explain to me the general plan here. We're not just going to walk up to the Inquisition and surrender ourselves, are we?"

"No," Shiv said as he held up his Mask of False Paths. "I've got a Perfect Semblance to assume. And there are several other mind-controlled Inquisitors we're going to dump on Stormhalt. It's going to look like we escaped from Necrotech custody."

As Rose took in the plan, a building weight of suspicion swelled inside of her. "Did you damage their devotion skills?"

Shiv paused. "The hells is a Devotion Skill?"

"You don't know what a Devotion skill is?" Rose scoffed. "You're going to want to break that before you send them over. It lets the Ascendants channel their power through a Pathbearer, at least as much power as they can sustain. It also lets the Ascendants review everything that's happened to the Pathbearer directly through the skill itself. If you're dealing with Inquisitors, they likely have Oracles, Seers, Diviners, or Investigators. Oracles are especially a fucking annoyance to deal with since they can invoke the power of their respective deities. It's practically their entire deal."

She looked at Adam, and the Gate Lord nodded. "Well, I suppose we should do that before we leave, then."

Valor called out to Shiv, asking to be let out of the Cape. "Best that I assist Adam, so that the damage seems more spread out, instead of specifically targeted. Otherwise, it will seem suspicious for them to only be so damaged in one area."

"And already I'm here saving you kids from your fuckups." Rose chuckled to herself. "Now. Explain the rest of your terrible plan to me so I can tell you which parts are shit, and which aren't."

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"All right," Adam said as he pulled back a Veilpiercer. His eyes were glowing as he stared off into the distance. "The sun will be up soon, so Uva needs to stay hidden. I caught sight of some Inquisition scouts. They're closer than I expected. And they're moving fast. I'm going to adjust your positioning a little. It'll be thirty kilometers closer to us and a few hundred meters away from the Tidewall. I don't think it'll be any issue, but just be mindful of where you are. Use Margarita Point as a landmark in case you get lost."

"Got it." Beside Shiv were seven other Inquisitors, all staring on with vacant gazes and slack expressions. Their faces were scabbed with dried blood and recently healed cuts. Their armor had been taken away, and they were dressed in tattered rags, some of which were bloodstained. Others were sour with urine and other sources of foulness. Ultimately, it looked like they'd recently escaped from hell, which was exactly the image Shiv wanted to sell.

"All right, going over everything one final time, remember this. First, you're going to encounter the skirmishers and scouts. When you do, say that you managed to escape with your cohort. What do you say, Shiv?"



Shiv gritted his teeth in annoyance. This was the tenth time Adam asked him to recite the lines. "I know what to say."

"Just do it again, Shiv. Go through it again, so I'm absolutely confident."

"Alright, so when they find me, I'm going to tell them that I managed to break out from a Necrotech internment camp before they could shuttle us down into the Abyss. I will tell them that I suffered severe torture. That my comrades suffered severe torture. That I managed to escape because they thought I was already dead. Hence why I'm better dressed and why my skills are mostly intact. After that, I'll tell them Sullain has the Animancy Core, and he intends to use it on Blackedge at any moment. Probably tell them he kidnapped Sijik too and shit."

"Good," Adam said.

"And if any of them try to use Psychomancy on us, I'll warn them off. Say that the Necrotechs planted things in our minds specifically to harm enemy Psychomancers."

"Right, that should buy you some time and get you moved closer to their main camp," Adam said, nodding. "Once you're there, make contact with City Lord Havel if you can. Gather as much intelligence about their forces as possible, tell them about the Animancy Core again, make sure they're going in the direction of Lost Angeles to fight the Necrotechs, and then jump back. When you're done, do not wait, do not linger, simply jump back."

"If I find an opening, I'll let the orcs out and do some damage," Shiv said.

"If," Adam stressed, "if. That is secondary. That is only if there is an opportunity. Do not risk yourself, and by extension," Adam stared hard at him, "do not risk the people going with you."

"Yeah, I know, Adam. And if you had the godsdamn balls to tell your mom that she wasn't going—"

"If I had the godsdamn balls?" Adam snapped. "Why don't you tell her?"

"I did tell her, and she went in anyway."

"And why didn't you stop her?"

"Really? You're just going to have me grab your mom and pull her out? What are you going to do if she attacks me?"

"She can't even hurt you!" Adam shot back.

"She can hurt my feelings, Adam. What matters more to you? My feelings or hers?"

"Hers!"

"You see, Adam, you never changed. You're still the same asshole that first fell down the Abyss, still treating me like an Omenborn."

Adam glared at Shiv with narrowed eyes. He was no longer drawing his arrow back. "Really. You're doing this right now?"

"Is the guilt-tripping working?" Shiv asked, raising an eyebrow.

Adam let out a slightly hissed, "Yes."

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Inside the Garden, Rose shuddered as she heard Harlon's boy speak to her Adam. She swallowed and tried to compose herself, leaning back against a tree made from titanium bark and copper leaves. The lich—Udraal Thann's supposed father—watched her, standing as her guard against the orcs.

"If you feel uneasy—" he began.

"It's not that," Rose breathed. She swallowed sour spit as she tried not to think about what had happened. "It's like the past keeps taunting me."

Valor tilted his head. "How?"

"Adam. Shiv. They sound like Harlon and Roland from years before. Almost exactly. Almost..." Rose tried to calm herself by focusing on her breathing. It didn't work. "Fuck me. Godsdamned fucking System brought me back just to hit me with trauma."

"I don't think the System brought you back," Valor whispered. "But I think I understand what you mean when you speak of ghosts."

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Adam rolled his eyes and drew his arrow back. "Get your mask on. Go across before my courage collapses entirely."

And Shiv did just that. He lifted his helmet and placed the Mask of False Paths on his head. In an instant, his Perfect Semblance triggered, and he was Inquisitor Morgan Hyde: Master-Tier; Path of the Archer, with around twenty Adept Skills and two Master Skills.

Shiv briefly looked through Morgan Hyde's status sheet and reviewed the most critical details one final time. As soon as that was done, he felt Uva's mana strand tap him twice on the mask before receding, confirming her readiness. He shifted the Forest so that no one would be able to directly drop in if they fell into his cape for whatever reason.

With that done, he reached out using his Biomancy and seized the other Inquisitors. As he grasped them using his mana hydras, their bodies didn't resist. Adam fired his arrow in that instant, and a rift opened before them. The Inquisitors remained slack and limp, responding to Shiv's power as he nudged them

through the dimensional pathway. He followed thereafter with a tug on his gravitic field, but before he could cross over entirely, Adam called out, "Shiv."

"Yeah?" he said, turning around.

The Gate Lord's mouth opened, but for a moment, he just managed a nervous sigh. "Just be careful. Be very, very careful. Keep my mom safe. And everyone else. And yourself."

The Deathless held up a fist. "See you soon, Adam. And if this goes well, Blackedge will get some very unwitting reinforcements, and your dad will get a moment to breathe."

Shiv didn't turn back again as he ferried the Inquisitors across the pathway. As he reached the other side, he found himself emerging over a sprawling green meadow, overshadowed by the Tidewall. He released the other inquisitors and looked to his left, searching for Margarita Point.

His gaze followed a mountain trail leading upward until finally, the glow of an active gateway lit the pre-dawn sky. With his position confirmed, he began herding the inquisitors along with him, moving them using his Biomancy field. They staggered forward, some of them toppling over, requiring Shiv to reset them several times. He adopted the posture of a starved, exhausted man.

"Come on!" he shouted. "Come on, just a little more! We're almost there, just a little more!"

And after a few minutes of loudly "fleeing," something impacted the ground right in front of him.

Dirt splashed upwards. And as he looked down, he found an arrow embedded right beside his left foot. As he looked up, he saw no traces of the shooter, but sight was only one of his senses. He triggered his new armor's Pheromonic Cipher, and he followed a scent he tasted in the air, a scent that resembled his and his fellow Inquisitors'. It led four hundred meters away, up along the edge of a small hill.

As he activated his Compound Ocular Network thereafter, his sight zoomed in, and he saw a slight shimmer in the air. Six bodies stood there, nearly entirely transparent, aside from a few wispy threads of air painting their contours. They were using Aeromancy to bend light itself, making themselves invisible. Underneath his mask, Shiv smirked as he gained a new Awareness level.

Awareness 39 > 40

Bribery or not, Helix was pretty thoughtful, giving me this armor. Really makes up for some of my weakest skills.

"Keep your arms by your sides. Do not move," a voice echoed from the horizon. Shiv frowned as he realized that wasn't the direction the shooters were in, and then he realized there were probably several other groups all around him as well. Where there was one Shadow, there was probably another.

Chapter 152 (II) Undercover

Shiv complied. He spread his hands open, and he called back. "I'm Inquisitor Morgan Hyde!" he shouted, trying to inject as much anguish and desperation into his voice as possible. "We... we were attacked! We were with Master-Inquisitor Sijik's Expeditionary Force to Gate Theborn. We were attacked and ambushed by Necrotechs! It was a slaughter! It was an absolute slaughter!" He drew in a long, shuddering breath. "Vicar Sullain! He has the Animancy Core! He used the Animancy Core on us! We barely managed to escape from one of their internments after! City Lord Havel needs to know! He needs to know! Please, before it's too late! Before he takes Blackedge from us, he needs to know!"

A moment of tense silence followed. A rustling breeze washed through the world, and a whistle rose through the air. Immediately, Shiv caught sight of movement passing in his periphery. Even invisible, Shiv could see the distortions clearly. His new ocular enchantments were excellent at separating moving objects from all that remained still.

In less than a second, ten invisible Pathbearers landed behind Shiv and the other Inquisitors without making any noise at all. But they still reeked with the scent of humanity. He watched as the seven other mind-broken Inquisitors were restrained from behind. Their arms were bound together by dense manacles of adamantite, and then they had hoods pulled over their heads.

A moment later, Shiv felt someone grabbing his arms as well. He almost resisted, but then went slack and let them cuff him. As a dark rag was pulled over his face, Shiv gagged at the acrid smell. At the same time, all sound was severed from him. He blinked. This wasn't just some dirty rag. It was some kind of sensory deprivation hood meant specifically for prisoners.

"Don't be too rough with them," Shiv called out, though he suspected it was in vain. "They've experienced vile torture at the hands of the Necrotechs. They need support. They need to see a Biomancer. But don't let the Psychomancers reach into them. The Necrotechs... They touched our minds. They planted something there. Something... I think it's a trap. I think..." And immediately, he felt something prod into his back, urging him to start moving.

Shiv let the inquisitorial scouts drag him along. He didn't know how long he walked. It felt like an hour. But on the way, he felt several clenches of spatial distortion. At some point, he'd been teleported. And not just once. Thanks to his armor's Mycelial Interface, he still had some available senses. He could feel the temperature outside, feel the wind rushing over him, the moisture dancing against his outer carapace. The ground was still soil as well. A bit of grass. Then, sand. Were they walking him closer to the water? He could hear waves crashing...

They teleported again. A pressure squeezed down around Shiv. The wind faded entirely, and the world grew dry. Heat washed over him. Abruptly, he found himself stomping down on concrete flooring rather than dirt or soil.

Two inquisitors pulled him by his arms and dragged him down. As Shiv sat, he felt his rear land on a seat. It promptly broke beneath him. He crashed down onto the floor with a grunt of surprise. Right. Perfect. Semblance hides my identity and skills. But it doesn't really do anything for my weight.

And Shiv was considerably heavier than Inquisitor Morgan Hyde, especially with his layered armor on. He was pulled back to his feet and, a moment thereafter, made to sit down again. This time, he found a sturdier chair beneath him. I am not physically built for spy shit at all, Shiv thought with a wince.

His hood was wrenched off his face, and he found a familiar figure sitting across from him.

The man was tall and gaunt, and static imperceptibly danced along the edge of his meticulously trimmed black beard. His armor was characterized by slats with slight separations between them, copper wires coiling along the crenulations. Electricity surged through his armor, and slight forks of lightning leapt out from his body in a crackling aura.

Shiv had wondered what it would take for him to make contact with the City Lord. But here he was in the flesh. Havel Stormhalt. Looking just like he did in the Jealousy's memory back at Elaboration.

"Inquisitor Morgan Hyde," Stormhalt said. There was a faint rumble of thunder in the back of his throat, and his storm-gray eyes flashed with hints of distant lightning as he stared expressionlessly at Shiv. "The scouts have reported what you told them. And I find your claims to be disturbing." The City Lord leaned back and sneered down at the table between them. He made a gesture thereafter, and one of the nearby inquisitors placed a cup of water on the table. Shiv stared at the cup of water, and he reached out. He wasn't going to be able to drink it with his helmet on, but he could still pretend. He picked the glass up with shaking hands and messily poured it against his face. It splashed down as Shiv made lapping noises, making it seem as if he was dehydrated and nervous.



Stormhalt shot him a look of pity and sighed. "The scouts also said you claimed to have escaped from a Necrotech internment camp."

"Yes," Shiv rasped. He looked around the room. It was like a metallic box. No decorations. Just him. Stormhalt. Two automaton Pathbearers. A door. Shiv couldn't tell much else about this place besides that, except that there was also some kind of sterile taste in the air. "Y-yes. They ambushed the expeditionary force. We were just past Margarita Point when they hit us in the air. They overwhelmed us immediately. They—"

Stormhalt held out a large hand and interrupted him. "You claim that Necrotechs did this. Was it only the Necrotechs?"

Shiv blinked and offered a frown. "I... I think so. The attack was sudden, overwhelming. We tried to hold against them, but we couldn't. They were just suddenly among us, ripping through us from the inside, even as our magi tried to set up defenses. When our inner shields collapsed, the rest of our forces followed. And then... and then..." Shiv shook. He tried not to overdo it, but he wanted to sell the look of a traumatized man. Someone who had faced and tasted too much death, and came out broken. Someone who was most assertively not Shiv. "And then I saw him, Vicar Sullain. He had the Animancy Core. He unleashed it upon us, and that baleful blue... it killed so many. We were betrayed by Oldsmith. The ambush was a set-up. So many died. So many..."

Stormhalt snarled slightly. His nostrils flared, and his eyes flashed with electrical power. "So the Abyssal Mongrel makes his move." The City Lord pressed his lips together as he mused, considering everything Shiv had said thus far. "And you are certain there were no orcs among the Vicar's forces."

That brought Shiv's mind to a complete halt. He remembered seeing a bolt of lightning leaving the Expeditionary Force. Adam managed to intercept it with his arrow. But maybe another had made it through. Maybe multiple bolts had escaped their notice, carrying multiple messages.

If that was the case, then perhaps they were trying to catch Shiv in a lie. Or they already knew he was lying, and this was a counterintelligence operation more than anything else.

Shiv found himself fighting the urge to cast himself back across time and return to Gate Piety. His last foray into spycraft had gone poorly, and this time, it wasn't just him here. But just then, he noticed a dense pressure grinding against him. It was faint, heavy, and its weight carried multitudes. He felt it pushing against every single magical field he had, from Chronomancy to Biomancy to even his Hydromancy.

Shiv stared at the air, and he focused. He focused as he saw a thin glitter of mana there. It was kaleidoscopic mana, prismatic mana, mana of all colors and varieties, and it was suffusing the very atmosphere around him. He had a feeling that if he tried to jump right now, something terrible might happen. Might be some kind of really subtle mana warding. Or something else entirely. Don't like how it's bunched around my fields. Still have no idea where they teleported me.

"Maybe," Shiv finally answered. He gave Stormhalt a shaken expression. "There was a great deal happening, and I—"

Stormhalt held up a hand. "That's enough, Inquisitor. At ease." Shiv nodded slowly. "I understand that you've experienced quite the ordeal. But even so, you managed to save seven of your fellow inquisitors. It is a commendable action; an honorable one. I salute you, Master Hyde. For caring about your fellows, even in these direst of circumstances."

"It was simply my duty, City Lord."

Stormhalt nodded along. "We've also gone through the minds of your fellow inquisitors."

Shiv pretended to be shocked. He drew in a sharp intake of breath. "The Necrotechs—They planted things in our minds. They reached into..."

"We are aware," Stormhalt interrupted him. "Be calm, Master Inquisitor. Our Heroic Psychomancers have delved into them. Their minds have indeed been altered to some extent. That is what they are certain about. Yours, however, we have not touched yet. For you seem more stable compared to the others."

And Shiv was glad Adam had him review what to say over and over again. "That's because the Necrotechs thought I was dead. They... they threw me in a pit along with so many corpses. They were preparing to resurrect me, to twist me into one of their undead abominations. I managed to get free because of that, escape and save the others."

Acting 12 > 14

"Remarkable," Stormhalt said. "But even so, we will need to review your mind to discover if you've been affected in any way." The way the City Lord said that implied a great many things.

Shiv simply nodded along. "Of course, City Lord Stormhalt. We cannot risk the Inquisition and the Ascendants' glory. Not even for my own safety and comfort."

"Good man," Stormhalt said. "Good man." He patted Shiv on the arm twice, and he rose from his chair. A tremor of electricity danced down Shiv's arm. "Do you know what happened to Master-Inquisitor Sijik, for that matter? I know that you must be overwhelmed, but any information pertaining to his status will be helpful."

"I think he was taken. I think Sullain took Sijik... The Vicar said he wanted there to be an audience for when he conquers Blackedge. For when he destroys the town and the Perch."

Bolts of lightning blasted out from Stormhalt, grasping at the air around him but striking none of the people in the room. The man's expression was impassive, but Shiv could feel the anger radiating off of his body.

"I understand," Stormhalt said simply. "You will be teleported out of holdings and placed under watch. We will have a Biomancer and Psychomancer come look over you shortly. In the meantime, we have food prepared, along with a cot if you desire rest. But understand that we will be making full speed toward Blackedge. And we are moving spatially silent, so we cannot teleport you back to Fortress-City Diego for recovery." He reached down and grabbed Shiv by the shoulder before squeezing slightly. "Are you still in this fight with us, Inquisitor? For that is where we are heading, into a fight. We cannot let the Vicar destroy what is ours, unmake what is ours."

"I'm still with you, City Lord," Shiv forced out in a stammer. He rose, meeting the City-Lord's gaze as he tried to express his devotion.

"Good. Very good." Stormhalt nodded, and nodded, and nodded a bit too long. Shiv felt something terribly unpleasant turn inside his stomach. And when the City Lord finally stopped nodding, he gave Shiv a final look, then turned to one of the automaton Pathbearers standing guard.

"Move us to temporary quarters," Stormhalt ordered.

Before Shiv could ask what that was, one of the machine Pathbearers channeled a burst of Dimensionality over the Deathless. Dark static swallowed Shiv, and a moment thereafter, he was pulled across a small gulf of space. Three seconds later, Shiv appeared in a new, wider chamber.

A cot on the ground awaited him, while a table was placed against the wall. Atop it, a steaming bowl of porridge called out to his senses, while a painted mural featuring thirteen enshrouded figures decorated the entirety of the left wall. There were no windows in his chamber. Only a small air vent lined the corner of his ceiling. But so far, his cover remained intact. Even with the awkwardness he'd experienced earlier, he hadn't been cut down. It seemed like Stormhalt just had him moved from an interrogation room to a detention chamber.

Shiv let out a quiet breath and struggled not to celebrate. Maybe I'm actually getting better at this spy stuff too. He looked around and waited another moment for the System to disappoint him. When it didn't, he walked over toward his cot to examine the amenities offered to him. But as he turned his head, something shimmered in the corner of his vision. Shiv paused, and he turned to stare at the mural of the Ascendants. He narrowed his eyes at the colors. He triggered his Compound Ocular Network. He zoomed in on one of the Ascendants, on one that resembled a winged figure that had two sets of arms and bore a bow.

Starhawk, Shiv thought. But there was something about the painting—about its shape—that drew his attention. As he took a few steps forward, he stared at the Starhawk intently, but he couldn't find anything wrong with it. He shifted again, performing the same action he did earlier when he was preparing to head to the cot. And just then, he saw something in the corner of his vision once more. Something was moving there, something minuscule. He immediately whipped his head back in place, and he tried to remember where the visual disturbance was. After a moment of looking, of zooming in further, he finally found it.

There was a small crack lining the painted body of the Starhawk. A crack that continued through the wall. And within that small crack, he saw a woman, a very short, very petite woman, biting into an apple and looking right back at him. Her short, strawberry blonde hair was somewhat messy, and her eyes were a piercing green. Most striking was her armor; it was made of tessellating plates, the same kind of vibrating material that made up Shiv's Magebreaker gauntlet. Hovering just behind her back was a sword. It was larger than the woman several times over, and patches of rust marred its form.

She took a final bite of her apple and tossed it aside. As soon as she threw the apple core out from the crack in the statue, it expanded, materializing into normal size and bouncing off of Shiv's foot. "Wow!" she exclaimed. Her voice rang clear and loud, and as she clapped her hands together, the air thundered. The room itself shook slightly, dust raining from the ceiling. Even though she was barely the size of a single hair, Shiv felt that she had enough strength to rip this room asunder. This room, and maybe even him.

Awareness 40 > 42

The woman ran a hand through her hair and sighed as she looked down. "Can't believe you noticed me with that Adept-Tier Awareness of yours, Master-Inquisitor." Then she giggled. "This is embarrassing. Puts me in a bit of a bind. Havel wanted me to watch you quietly in case you did anything weird."

She hopped out from the crack, and suddenly she grew far larger as well. Or at least to human size. Her natural height of just barely over one and a half meters reached up to around Shiv's waist. But her blade? That was even taller than he was. And Shiv was glad he didn't take his mask off, because that would have made things very, very ugly.

"Titansbane, I presume," Shiv said, keeping his voice even.

The Legendary Pathbearer burped into her hand and offered it to Shiv for a shake. "Don't call me that. I hate that fucking title. Call me Jessica. And you're pretty sharp for a guy who supposedly got the life tortured out of him."

Chapter 153 (I) Unexpected

"Welcome, Legend Hawgrave. I bid you—"

"Cut the shit, Stormhalt. I'm here because Kathereine asked me to be, not because you summoned me. So, what do I need to break this time? Are the Jotun coming down from the north again? Do I need to kill another Chieftain? Or maybe the Feathered Serpent finally got his head out of his ass, and now he's making a run on our southern border. That'll be a fun fight."

"Not quite so. The crisis we face is both a complicated and delicate matter."

"I don't do complicated and delicate, Stormhalt. That's Washington's business. Or Carisi's. You should probably ask them if you want a gentle touch."

"Oh, but it will be worth it. And I need you specifically. We have the go-ahead. It's finally time."

"Finally time for what?"

"We have confirmation that Roland Arrow seeks to invoke the ritual. I know that we have had a great many differences, Jessica. But on this, on this, we will both finally see a blood debt squared."

"Huh, that arrogant shit is finally going for it. Well, I didn't think I would see the day. I also didn't expect the Starhawk to let him. But wait, why hasn't he been declared a traitor by the Council? Why are we meeting so hush-hush? This seems to be a bigger deal than you're presenting it to be."

"Because the Ascendants are still divided! And because they are hesitant to stand against the Starhawk. They worry that a forceful approach will provoke him."

"But the Starhawk's already provoked. I'll tell you right now what I told Kathereine years ago. Either pull him back in the fold, redact him, or kill him. There's no other way about it. I know she still thinks he's family, but there's no chaining another god. Dammit. Family makes things fucking messy. Speaking of family... Blackedge, we're going to keep that town intact. Minimal casualties."

"Of course. I only want to see Roland brought down and delivered to justice. And also the Perch secured. The Perch and all the other sacred relics he has been hoarding."

"Right, good. Because I think I got a grandniece there, last I checked. Descended from my late husband's brother. I don't much care for that piece of shit, but you know how it is. The girl should get to live. All for family and the ones we have left, right?"

"Yes. On that we are joined. All for family and the ones we have left. But some of us have very little left, Hawgrave. Very, very little left."

-City Lord Havel Stormhalt and Legend Jessica Hawgrave

Shiv accepted Hawgrave's handshake, apprehension filling his chest. Alarm bells were going off in his mind. For the Legend to be here, hidden inside his holding cell, Stormhalt had to still suspect him.

But of all the people or ways he could have spied on me, I didn't expect her, Shiv thought to himself.



Hawgrave's grip was nothing special. She was strong, but aside from that, he couldn't glean anything else so far.

She stared up at him with a playful gleam in her eye. "That's a pretty strong shake you got there, Master-Inquisitor. What are you, a High Adept now in terms of Physicality?"

Shiv almost reactively softened his handshake, but that would have been even more suspicious. As if she isn't testing me right now. Shiv grimaced internally. What the hells does she know?

"Yeah, High Adept," he replied. Shiv let out a slight cough, framing embarrassment. "I leveled a few times, escaping from the Necrotechs. I didn't have any weapons, so I had to make do. I killed a few Deathstalkers using a makeshift club I made from a pipe and a piece of concrete. Got quite a few levels that way."

"Oh, nice." Hawgrave giggled. "You know, I miss being encircled or captured and then needing to break out of places. It's one of my guilty pleasures. But once you get to Legend, not many people can capture you so easily anymore. Life gets a lot more boring." She blew a stray strand of hair out of her eye and smiled slowly. "Or really, really exciting, when you actually find someone that can challenge you."

She licked her lips. Something was very, very wrong.

Shiv looked down at her hand and swallowed. "Can I... Is it appropriate for me to let go now, Legend Hawgrave?"

"Didn't I just tell you to call me Jessica?"

"Yes, of course, Jessica."

"Well, you can let go of my hand now, Morgan."

He did so and took a step back. He briefly glanced at her blade and noticed how it mirrored his movements. It was hovering just behind her, and Shiv's instincts told him that if he made any sudden movements, that rusted slab of metal would likely be greeting his neck.

"I—it honors me that you—I—" Shiv stammered and tried to make it seem as natural as possible. He didn't know Morgan Hyde's personality exactly, but when a Legend showed up in front of you, some nervousness was probably appropriate.

She waved him off. "Yeah, knock that shit off too. I'm just a Legend. Aside from that, I'm like every other girl in the world. Well, every other girl who's survived over a century of combat in this nightmarish hell we call Integration. Anyway, I'm really impressed you managed to see me. I know you had High Adept Awareness as well. But still, you wanna know how many Masters just let me slip by under their notice?"

She waited for Shiv to ask her, and finally he did. "How many?"

"Too many," she answered. "At least ten in the past few hours." She looked back at the crack she'd been hiding in and laughed. "It's a bit of a hobby of mine, you know? Shrinking down and running through Talsand's ventilation systems."

"Talsand?" Shiv asked.

And then he winced. And he realized, too late, that this was probably something Morgan Hyde would know. He tried to remedy that failure by sputtering, "I...Talsand... I'm having a hard time remembering some things because..." He gestured at his head. "They hurt me pretty bad."

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Titansbane pressed her lips together and tutted in pity. "Ah, Psychomancers. The felling bastards. You know, of all the enemies I've run into, of all the enemies I've killed, I hate Psychomancers the worst. One thing to get stabbed to death. Another thing to be trapped inside your own body because your mind collapsed, right? Like someone forcing you to go demented."

"Right," Shiv said, letting out a relieved sigh. "The felling bastards."

"Still, it's kind of insulting that you forgot Talsand, of all people. I mean, especially since he's been carrying you out for the past week or so. Isn't that right, Talsand?"

A low rumble sounded from all around them. "It happens sometimes. No hard feelings," a droning voice spoke.

And slowly Shiv began putting details together. Apparently, Talsand was a person. No, not a person, Shiv thought. The way she was describing them, Talsand was likely an automaton. Shiv's eyes widened. Am I inside an automaton right now? Wait, how big can an automaton get? Because this feels larger than a building.

He directed a mana field against a wall and felt it bounce off. This place was warded. Shiv struggled not to clench his fists. Something was very wrong. Instinct told him he was compromised, but he didn't know how, and Hawgrave's behaviour confused him even more if it was actually the case.

The woman in question nodded slightly. "Anyhow, now that you've spotted me, I can't really do the job I was originally supposed to. It's hard to be a creepy stalker when your stalkee has noticed you."

Shiv stared at her awkwardly, and she just laughed.

"Oh, relax, Hyde, I'm not here to perv on you or anything, you're far too young for my tastes. I'm just here to see if you've been compromised in any way. In any non-obvious way."

"I don't understand what you mean, ma'am."

"Oh, the Necrotects have a lot of dirty tricks up their sleeves. And you won't believe the things I've run into before. Shapeshifters. Skinwalkers. You know, I even accidentally killed an invisible New Albion spy once. Totally by accident. Wasn't trying at all." She turned around and pointed at her sword. "Swung old Rusty here without looking and cut him in half. Tell him, Rusty."

"I still remember the blood, gristle, and bone parting," the sword said. Its voice was deep, but it had a refined quality to it. Shiv thought it was the way a scholar might sound. If the scholar was a two and a half meter long greatsword. OK. Sentient weapon. Another potential problem. THIS CHAPTER IS UPDATE BY N()veFire.net

Hawgrave giggled. "I totally messed up that time because I didn't see him there, but you know, things have a tendency to work out in life, wouldn't you agree?"

Shiv wasn't sure what she was implying, but he nodded slowly. "I hope so."

"You hope so..." Hawgrave sighed. "Well, fine, since I can't just stare at you from the crack anymore, I'm going to try a more direct method. Are you actually Morgan Hyde? Last chance to come clean if you're not."

Shiv's stomach turned to lead. "What? Of course I am."

He did his best to keep his hammering heart in check as Hawgrave looked him up and down. "Well, you do look like him." Her eyes flashed with mana. "And you do have his Path. All the right skills too. But why do I still have that funny feeling, old Rusty?"

"Because of the orc," Rusty intoned.

"Right, the orc. The orc that curiously surrendered himself to us. The orc that told us all about someone interesting. His Nemesis-Beloved."

Shiv's blood turned to ice.

No. No, this is not fucking happening.

Hawgrave licked her lips. "Most people don't much like the orcs. Their response to the grayskins is usually just to kill them. I'm normally one of those people. But it's also not every day that an orc sneaks into your Fortress-City and actively surrenders himself to the Inquisition with special information on a certain Pathbearer in Gate Theborn. A Pathbearer with a mask that lets him pretend to be other people."

It took all of Shiv's willpower to stay still.

"Actually, let's consult him right now," Hawgrave said. Her blade moved a meter to her right, and its flat side flashed with the black static mana of Dimensionality. As the darkness cleared, the greatsword became a window into another place, and on the other side was a dark room, with an orc bolted to its far wall. Only his head was exposed, but Shiv would recognize those piss yellow eyes and that sadistic—yet pure—smile anywhere.

812 lifted his head, and his expression grew ever more joyful. "Ah. Deathless. We meet once again. I knew slipping out across Lone Star and getting myself interned by the Republic would raise our odds of a timely reunion. I just did not expect how soon it would be."

Chapter 153 (II) Unexpected

Shiv's mind reeled as he considered his response. "I... I don't know you," Shiv breathed, still trying to fake it.

The orc sighed. "You are still not very good at this. They have delved into a few of my memories. Well. I let them. And they know I am not lying. Just as they know I can sense you because of the Curse." 812 scoffed. "Alas, the City Lord has a loathsome personality, and he refuses to allow me to be of service.

But dear Legend Hawgrave was more than accommodating. She even allowed me to stay as a guest within her sword."

Godsdammit. Challenger, you're just letting this shit happen?

The Challenger wants to see what happens next.

Shiv sighed. "Fuck me, this was bullshit."

"Oh," Hawgrave said, frowning. "Not really fair, was it?"

"Yeah."

Shiv manifested—

Hawgrave flicked a finger against his head. Her inertium-forged armor cracked against his outer helmet and split it down the middle. Shiv let out a grunt as the tip of her middle finger cracked his Mask of False Paths right down the middle as well.

Mask of False Paths

Condition: Severely Damaged

Husk of the Adamantine Voidmantid

Condition: Wounded

"Shit!" Shiv growled as his head snapped backward. Hawgrave's flick hit as hard as some of Bonk's heavier swings.

He tried to stop time once more, but she vanished from sight—only to reappear and drive a sloppy jab into his solar plexus. Her form was horrible, but the blow came so fast Shiv didn't even perceive it, and he felt his bones turn to powder and flesh to paste as his armor shattered.

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Shiv impacted the far wall. It rang around him, and then the room shuddered like the insides of a gong. A shockwave smashed into him a second thereafter. Then came more billowing waves of force and heat, crashing over him like ocean waves upon an ant.

Despite all that, the room took no damage. Only the cot and table dissolved into motes of dust. Shiv swallowed back a mouthful of blood and snarled. Legend or not, he was going to hurt her for that.



Shiv pulled himself off the wall using his gravitic field—only for Hawgrave to slam into him, pinning him in place with an outstretched hand. He thrust out his Skysplitter, but she grabbed his thumb and twisted backward before he could get anywhere near her neck.

"I—" Hawgrave started.

Shiv headbutted her. He felt part of his helmet cave in. Her expression didn't even change. She pressed him harder against the wall and threw another light jab into his sternum.

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His ribs shattered like glass. His sternum dissolved. Sections of his spine snapped apart. An ocean of blood spilled down from his nostrils and mouth. It pooled inside his cracked mask, spurting free from the opening in his helmet. He ignored it. He grabbed her arm and smashed his mana hydras into her.

For the first time, she gave a response. She moved slightly backward as columns of crimson mana exploded around her. He drove his Biomancy field against her flesh. Her body came alight in outline of spell patterns, but her Inertium armor made his magic bounce off in an instant.

It did give him a moment to recover. Shiv finally activated his Strider of the Unbending Path. His temporal shell ignited. The world around him stopped.

Then a spike of gold smashed into him. That faint mana concentrated in the atmosphere he'd seen in the cell earlier suddenly collapsed around his body, hardening into a solid structure. It ground against his temporal armor, breaking it, costing him precious seconds.

But he still had enough to—

Hawgrave's eyes narrowed. A smirk slowly spread across her face. Her body came aglow with vaporous, bright-white mana.

Shiv looked on in utter disbelief. He was accelerating his own progression of time so fast that anyone without Chronomancy of their own should be utterly still. She had none, so how was she—

Shiv's mind ground to a halt. Holy fucking shit. She might just be that godsdamned fast. How high are her Reflexes? Is that even possible?

Her radiant mana detonated outward. It impacted each of Shiv's magical fields and tore through them like a blade would split through Pathless flesh.

A cry of pain forced itself out from Shiv's lungs. His temporal shell shattered into grains of golden dust. Shiv fought through the pain as he attacked her. He threw a knee at her chest, using his badly ruptured mana hydras in tandem with his gravitic field to control his broken body and give force to his blow.

Hawgrave vanished again as she dodged. She appeared to his right, and she lightly flicked him

His helmet burst apart completely. Shiv felt his right ear cave in as well. The world spun, and the ground came up to hit him. As he crashed down, he clawed at the floor, fighting against how the room around him spun over and over. He managed to grab Hawgrave by her leg, and he used his gravitic field to twist

against her knee. He tried to dislocate the limb, but found himself pressing against an unmoving pillar. He tried to lift her up, to throw her aside after that, but though she briefly left the ground, she slammed down a second later as she got heavier and heavier, exceeding his strength in an instant.

"Ascendants, you just do not give up," she commented with naked glee. "You're a real brawler, aren't you?" He spat blood at her face through his cracked helmet and mask. She let the gore splash over her and even ran her tongue over her blood-coated lips. "Fine. Fuck it. Show me what you got, kid."

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

His right ear wasn't working, his soul was lined with searing agony, but the battle lust was on, and he wasn't going to let a few things like shredded mana fields or a crippling wound stop him from putting up a good fight. He jabbed his Skysplitter against her several times. The blade bounced off, but he knew Deepest Edge would send his cuts through her armor.

Even so, the Legendary Pathbearer didn't react.

"Deepest Edge," she said, recognizing the skill. "Not a bad skill to have at all, but that other stuff, what was that? Gravitic Wrestler? Strider of the Unbending Path, Aegis of Assimilation... Now that's in a pretty eclectic collection, if I do say so myself. What do you think, Rusty?"

"I think this one isn't human. Or his true nature has been altered."

Shiv fought through a haze of agony as he directed a surge of basilisk venom into his flesh using his Biomancy. Plaguefueled activated. His body swelled larger. He fed his injuries to his Biomancy mana and swung his hydras against Hawgrave.

A crimson blast of mana consumed the room. Before he could jump to his feet, she reached through the explosion and pulled him up. Shiv borrowed her momentum and threw a rising elbow. She dropped her own elbow in response. Her blow cleaved through his. His limb came apart in a welter of gore. Shiv stared at what remained of the limb for a moment and then hit her in the face with it anyway, ignoring the intense pain.

Hawgrave blinked at him, her mouth dropping open slightly. "How are you not in shock right now?"

"I've had worse," Shiv growled.

He hit her three times more with his ruined limb before she finally broke from her stupor. She grabbed his arm by the shoulder and simply ripped it off at the base. A sounding snap shook through his body, and as soon as the arm detached from his shoulder, he rammed his jagged shoulder bone into her face. It didn't do much, but it did make her cough as she accidentally ingested some of his blood.

Her coughing turned into surprise laughter as he slammed into her repeatedly, his Inertial Overdrive building—

She flicked him just under the chin. Shiv's jaw exploded. His skull fractured. His sheath discharged. Hawgrave walked through the cataclysmic blast like it was a light breeze and flicked him across the forehead.

A flash of white exploded behind Shiv's eyes. The world was drowned away by a warbling siren and dappled colors. He tried to get his bearings, but his body was spinning. He couldn't tell where he was.

Shiv pulled on himself using his field and found himself bouncing off a wall immediately after nausea swept through him.

As Shiv coated himself using a mana hydra, he realized that part of his chin was sticking out from the back of his neck. A spreading numbness washed through his body. Shiv didn't even feel much pain anymore. Still, as far as injuries went, that one was pretty unique.

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Good godsdamn shit, Shiv thought to himself. She's barely jabbing me. She makes the Recollector feel like a pushover with these hits. Bonk doesn't have shit on her either.

Suddenly, he felt a heavy weight slam down on his chest. Shiv let out a groan, and he tried to exhale. A wet cough left him instead, along with a splurge of blood. As the bright colors faded out of his eyes and sound returned to his only working ear, he found Hawgrave standing over him, looking down with a thin eyebrow raised.

"Hells, I might have hit you a little too hard. You still alive?"

Shiv wanted to say, just about, but what came out was a messy slur of gurgled blood and mucus. His mask also parted around his face in halves.

Mask of False Paths

Condition: Destroyed

Shit. Need to get that reforged.

She winced. "Yeah, sorry about that. I held back as much as I could. I was trying to knock you out. Since you survived my first few hits, I assumed you were Heroic-Tier in terms of Toughness, but I guess you might just be a really High Master instead." She narrowed her eyes at him. "I also think I know what you got. That's Adamantine Adaption, isn't it? You felt harder the second time around. Your body was trying to get used to me. Just what exactly are you?" She let out a surprise giggle. "Shit, Rusty, the orc was right. There might actually be a crazy human kid getting monster skills."

Shiv rolled onto his side with a sudden burst of his gravitic field. He launched off the weight pressing down on him for a moment, but then it crashed back down, and he felt part of his torso cave in entirely. It was only then that he noticed that her huge sword was leaning against him. Shiv's senses began to drift as his mind went cold.

Death was soon approaching. He tried to trigger his Chronomancy again, but the field hadn't recovered enough yet.

Shit...

"No, no, I know that look. I know when someone's on the way out. Don't die on me yet, Deathless."

She reached down and pulled the broken Mask of False Paths off his face. And at the same time, a swirl of Dimensionality concentrated around her hand, and from a black static sphere emerged a large,

bulbous elixir. Its underside was transparent, and Shiv saw what seemed to be bottled fire swirling within. She popped its cork off, and began pouring it down over his face and into his wounds.

The flames shot through Shiv, consuming him from within. He felt himself combust, but rather than burning alive, the fire began to reconstruct him, rebuild every part of his body and armor that she'd just broken. She plugged the elixir a moment after, and she dismissed it with another casual spell of Dimensionality. The fire worked through Shiv, and as soon as it extinguished itself, he felt his right arm again, and his chin was back in the right place. More importantly, however, his Perfect Semblance was lost. His true form was exposed for the first time, and Hawgrave held the two pieces of his broken mask in her hand.

"Mask of False Paths." She chuckled to herself. "Heroic-Tier. That's a pretty nifty thing to have, but you're no spy. No, definitely not. Well, even if you were, we already knew you were coming, especially with our special informant."

Shiv stared at Hawgrave for a few moments, annoyed that she didn't let him die, but also thinking of how he could exploit her curiosity. This infiltration thing had gone to shit in record time as per usual, but she was trying to keep him alive, and more importantly, she didn't know about his Outside Context Problem Skill. His mistake earlier was not using the skill first, before he triggered his Chronomancy.

When his field recovered, he would use Outside Context Problem to shroud himself from Hawgrave's Awareness and whatever that atmospheric counter-mana was, so that he could escape. But before then, he might still be able to confuse them—perhaps even accomplish the goal of his mission all the same.

Shiv held up his two hands and sighed. "Alright, you got me. Really not that good at this whole spying thing."

She nodded at him in sympathy. "Yeah, judging from your skills, I think you're probably a bit more like me. You like that bone-on-bone fighting, don't you?"

Shiv met her gaze and simply let out a quiet laugh. "Suppose you could say that. About as much as I like cooking."

She nodded and extended a hand, "Legend Jessica Hawgrave, Titansbane. And you are? Your real name."

Should have considered withholding that information, but there was no point. If 812 had really let them sift through his mind, then they were probably aware of who he was. Or at least suspicious.

"Hero Shiv. And I don't really have a nickname I prefer to use right now."

He reached up and accepted her hand, though. She pulled him back up with a casual tug, even lifting him off his feet for a moment. And once more, he was surprised by her strength. Surprised and fascinated. There was nothing about her Physicality that told him how she was hitting that hard. She was overwhelmingly powerful. But the nuances of her strength and speed were also staggeringly subtle.

"So, just Shiv, huh?" she said, craning her neck to look up at him. With Plaguefueled active, one could have stacked two Jessica Hawgrave's on top of one another and still barely reached his shoulders. He guessed her entire body had about as much mass as one of his arms at the moment, which made her strength even more terrifying.

"Yeah," he replied, leaning over slightly to meet her eyes, "just Shiv."



She regarded him for a moment longer and turned away. "You know, I'm surprised that Roland let you live. Especially considering what your mommy and daddy did to his wife."

### Chapter 153 (III) Unexpected

And immediately, Hawgrave made her own mistake. She showed the extent of her knowledge. She didn't know Rose was back, and that Rose was right here. She also told Shiv indirectly that she knew his parents.

"Well, if you know anything about Roland Arrow, it's that he's too kind to be a bastard, but too hurt to let shit go."

His comment made Hawgrave guffaw loudly. She threw her head back and cackled girlishly. "Oh, oh, that's good. Yeah." She pointed a finger at him. "That is a great description of Roland Arrow. That arrogant, self-deluding piece of shit. I'm gonna look forward to splitting him down the middle."

Shiv noticed how her words ended as a vicious growl, and he suspected that there might be a personal matter between her and Roland as well. Just how many people did you piss off, Town Lord?

A sudden pressure clenched the right side of Shiv's body, and just then, City Lord Stormhalt appeared in the room. He arrived with his helmet on and flanked by seven other Pathbearers. All of them were at least High-Master magi, and they bore weaponry that gleamed bright with Chronomancy mana.

Shiv had a feeling they were specifically here to deal with him if Hawgrave needed support.

Stormhalt did a double-take at Shiv, and he let out a frustrated snarl. "Ascendant, the damned orc wasn't lying."

"I know, right?" Hawgrave said, a wide grin on her face that showed her pearly-white teeth. "I can't believe it myself. But here he is in the flesh, a monster skill-having human."

"Hero Shiv, officially listed as Tanner Lowe in the Republic Census. The Omenborn," Stormhalt muttered.

"Yeah, not really that anymore," Shiv replied, trying to clamp down on the annoyance he felt when Stormhalt used that slur.

"But how?" Stormhalt asked. "How did you hide from me?"

Hawgrave gestured at his broken mask. "He had this. I think that's an Aviary item, isn't it? Pretty neat. I might have some use for it when I get it fixed."

"Nah," Shiv said. "I intend to keep it."

Things were dramatically off course, and Shiv considered at that moment to activate Outside Context Problem and cast himself away to his temporal anchor. But he hesitated. If he left now, Stormhalt and the Inquisition might avoid Blackedge altogether or make a direct run for Gate Piety instead. No, Shiv thought, I need to make sure that they go for Blackedge immediately. Doesn't matter how I do it. Doesn't matter that my cover's blown. He eyed the pieces of his broken mask left on the ground as well. Also need to get that back before I cut and run.

"So, your ruse has failed," Stormhalt said, marching up to Shiv. The City Lord was tall, but he was still only human-sized. Plaguefueled-boosted, Shiv stood at almost three and a half meters. He looked down at Stormhalt. "The inquisitors you brought with you, their broken minds and wounds, were they your handiwork?"

"Not mine alone," Shiv replied casually. "I had some friends help me." And then a devious idea came together in his mind. "Frankly, I don't know what to do with a human mind. I don't know what to do with any minds. I'm barely much of a Psychomancer. So I left that to the other Necrotechs."

Stormhalt glared at him, and the lightning arcing around his person intensified. "You betrayed the Republic?"

"I betrayed the Republic?" Shiv spat, snorting in faux disbelief. "Listen, Havel. I don't give a shit about the Republic—"

Stormhalt threw a heavy hook into Shiv's ribs. A loud thud thundered through the room. A blast of lightning and force swept over everyone. Shiv didn't budge. He just stared down at Stormhalt. Slowly, he turned away from the City Lord and looked toward Hawgrave instead.

"Maybe you should stick to doing the physical violence. This one tickles."

Hawgrave covered her mouth and failed to hide her amusement. Stormhalt slowly pulled his fist back, and Shiv squinted his eyes, noting his bruised knuckles.

"Listen, my Biomancy field might be a little bit jacked up right now, but do you want me to fix it up?"

The City Lord launched a bolt of lightning at Shiv's face in response. That hit considerably harder. Shiv staggered back a step, taking a moment to shake off the light concussion Stormhalt had given him.

"Yeah, you should have started with that, asshole. Don't have much of a talent for punching," Shiv sneered, rubbing his head.

Hawgrave couldn't take it anymore. Laughter escaped her like chiming bells. Stormhalt turned his glare on her for a moment as Shiv reached down to take his broken mask back. Just then, a blade was pressed against his throat.

"Touch it and we behead you." A towering, elven Pathbearer held a Chronomancy-lined saber against his throat. She pressed it a little bit harder, and it slipped through his armor with some effort. He noted the frown on her face.

Shiv just sneered. "Yeah, I hope your friends can hold me still. Frankly, I don't give a shit about the rest of you." He looked at Hawgrave. "This one here is my only problem. For now."

"For now," Hawgrave said, shaking her head. "God, you are an absolute peach. I think I'm gonna have to keep this one. Stormhalt. It's been a while since I had an apprentice. I'm putting him in Rusty after."

"Absolutely not!" Stormhalt shouted at her. "He's betrayed the Republic."

"She's teasing you, dipshit," Shiv muttered.

"No, I'm serious," Hawgrave said. "I want you in my sword. Rusty could use someone like you juicing him up."

"What?" Shiv asked.

"Enough!" Lightning exploded out from Stormhalt's body. A raging storm built around his person, consuming the small room in tides of turbulent wind. Gales strong enough to uproot great trees ground against Shiv's armor. And to his surprise, he was taking damage. Stormhalt was a mage, a High Master Aeromancer, if Shiv were to guess. Stormhalt took a single step through the denseness of the storm. His body was cast alight by flashing forks of electricity. He came for Shiv like a harbinger of destruction.

But suddenly, Hawgrave casually strode through the wall of wind as well. She placed a hand up on his shoulder and held him still. Suddenly, the thunderstorm died, and Hawgrave simply shook her head. "If you kill him, we don't get to interrogate anyone. And I don't get a new mana battery for my sword."

Stormhalt's body shook slightly, but he glared at Shiv a final time. "Seize him. Take his equipment."

"There's no need for that," Shiv said, holding his hands up. "I'm willing to cooperate right now. I want to live. Besides, it's probably too late for you guys to do anything anyway."

Suddenly, any trace of amusement was gone from Hawgrave's face. "All right, start talking. Why is it too late?"

"Because Sullain's finished his weapon. He's going to use it on Blackedge as soon as he possibly can. He also knows about you guys, thanks to Master-Advisor Oldsmith and the recently captured Master-Inquisitor Sjik. I don't think you guys have the manpower to stop him either."

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Hawgrave and Stormhalt shared a look.

"Has he used the weapon yet?" Stormhalt snarled. "Speak."

"Not yet," Shiv said, "but soon. He finished it just as I left. My job was to keep you assholes delayed and confused."

"Uh-huh," Hawgrave responded. "But then why'd you tell us that he had the Animancy Core to begin with? Seems like a stupid thing to do, giving that a way."

"Because we can't hide that," Shiv said, adapting on the fly. The real reason was that he was pulling things out of his ass right now, and couldn't keep his story straight. "Pretty soon, the entire world's gonna know about the Animancy Core. He's built quite the weapon with it. And he intends to turn Starhawk's Perch into nothing but a puddle of slag with it. So if you're trying to save that, well, I hope you have a replacement sacred relic somewhere, because the Perch might be lost. However," Shiv let the word hang, "I might be agreeable to a deal. I can help you save the Perch."

"A deal?" Stormhalt spat incredulously. "You're talking about a deal with us. You're bargaining. You, a traitor to the Republic, a murderer of inquisitors. You are bargaining for—"

"I'm bargaining for my life," Shiv said gaudily. "I don't have any love for the Republic. You can thank Roland Arrow for that. In fact, I think there's not a single person in this room that likes Roland Arrow. That being said, I don't much care for the Necrotechs either. The bastards want to have a war with the surface. And me, I just want to be left alone after I settle a score."

Hesitation gripped Stormhalt. Shiv's play at manipulating his emotions was working. The Deathless still wasn't a very good spy, but with all the time he spent around the orcs, trying to decipher their intentions, learning their habits, and analyzing their behaviors, he was getting good at judging people's psychologies. And fast. Maybe I don't need to be a spy, Shiv thought to himself. Maybe there is another way I could be socially effective. I don't think I've ever considered giving politics a go. Might put more thought into that.

"Roland," Stormhalt rasped. "You're here for Roland as well."

"As I said before, aren't we all? Anyway, the hells is your problem with Roland? And yours?" He looked at Hawgrave too. "Did he keep you borderline illiterate and stop you from having Paths too?"

The Legendary Pathbearer ran her tongue along the inside of her cheek, and Shiv got the feeling she was restraining quite a bit of anger. "He put a hole through my eldest daughter's head. Killed her dead."

"Oh," Shiv replied, slightly stumped. "Yeah, uh, that'll do it."

"My grievance is not your concern," Stormhalt said. "But tell me, what could you possibly be of use to us right now? What can you offer us that we cannot take with our Psychomancers? With our—"

"Do you want the Animancy core back or not?" Shiv asked. "Because I can get back there. And since Sullain still trusts me..." Shiv paused. "...somewhat, I might be able to delay. I might be able to damage his weapon. Give you bastards an edge in the coming fight. And before you lose your shit and do a bunch of other stuff, I can potentially smuggle some of your inquisitors behind enemy lines as well."

Shiv was pulling things out of his ass by the arm length by now. But it was working better than the actual plan. He could see Stormhalt considering Shiv's offer. Hawgrave as well.

"And if I bring your inquisitors with me, they can make sure I don't betray you. Besides, I don't want to deal with the Necrotechs alone anyway. Creepy felling fucks."

A moment of silence passed. Stormhalt stared at Shiv and let out a breath. "The same thing can be done once our Psychomancers are done with your mind. This changes nothing." He gestured at his soldiers. "Seize him. Have him prepared for psychosurger—"

Shiv triggered Outside Context Problem. He sank into his Vitae, and suddenly the City-Lord did a double-take. Hawgrave looked confused as well. She broke from her casual stance and came alert. Her blade swept through the space Shiv once occupied and cleaved nothing. In the same moment, the Deathless picked up both halves of his broken mask, and he cast a final glance at Hawgrave.

"I'll get you in the rematch," he muttered.



He froze time, but before he cast himself back to his temporal anchor, he walked up to Stormhalt and channeled a spray of basilisk venom into his face.

"Have fun with the nerve-agent, City Lord." That should distract them for a bit, he thought.

With that done, Shiv cast himself across time. He jolted out of place, surging across reality before he snapped back before the Surface Gateway where he'd placed the anchor almost an hour ago. Two Weaveresses on guard within the teleportation anchor jumped away from him, and between them, a dimensional pathway stood open, leading back to the bunker.

Shiv let out a long breath as he processed what had just happened to him. He shifted the contents of his cape and brought the Forest of Alloy in position as well.

"You guys all right?" Shiv asked. "Uva?"

"I'm fine, I think." The Umbral let out a pained rasp. "Just suffering incredible mana strain. What was that? Something tore through me."

"I don't know. It's like Hawgrave projected her Magical Resistance out of herself. But did you guys get the rest of that?"

"Yeah," Rose answered. "Godsdammit. Fuck! I mean, what the fuck is Jesse doing? Why is she with Havel of all people? And what the hell does she mean Roland killed her eldest daughter? We—She was our friend! What even is this?"

Shiv sighed. "Lots has changed since you've been gone, Rose. That's my guess."

"You guess," Rose hissed. "Also, what the hells was all that?"

"What was what?" Shiv asked.

"You were a spy for around 20 minutes. That's some of the worst Tradecraft I've ever seen."

"Yeah, well, it's pretty normal with me," Shiv replied. "Still got it done though in the end. They're going after Sullain. I think. Just didn't get a chance to do anything else."

"What a pity," Whisper replied. "But 812's appearance was a surprise. Though an amusing one."

"Not for me, asshole. I'm gonna kill that fucking bastard for good when I get my hands on him." Shiv prepared himself to pass through the dimensional pathway. But suddenly, the Surface Gateway behind him shuddered.

A fraction of a second later, Adam exploded out from it, covered in blood and ash. He nearly slammed into Shiv but went still thereafter.

"Shiv?" he rasped. "You're—We need to go! We have a big felling problem."

"Adam," Shiv grunted, frowning at his friend's state. "I made contact with Stormhalt and Titansbane. The spying went to shit, but they're still—"

"Sullain finished his weapon!" Adam shouted, interrupting Shiv. "I need you and the orcs out on the surface NOW!"

The Deathless was speechless for a beat. "Wow. Looks like I wasn't a liar after all. I told the Inquisition he was done with the weapon too."

#### Chapter 154 (I) Weapon

It is highly inappropriate to think of an Animancy Core as a weapon. It is not a weapon. It does not destroy.

Quite Contrarily, it forces you to be remembered. It splays your narrative upon the System, fusing you with Integration itself. Perhaps the best way to understand it is as a poorly told story, in which the first person bleeds into the third. With you being the first person and the System being the third. This is why most who are caught in the detonation of an Animancy Core are actually immortal. Immortal in the worst possible sense. They cannot die. They will always remain, but pulled apart at their foundations.

Some report faint traces of blue staining reality afterward. It is less a form of mana and more a bruise, painting a new, partially fused entity under the skin of existence.

And so, we use Animancy as a weapon. A feared weapon. These cores that my father has created are regarded as instruments of unparalleled destruction. There are treaties binding them from use, and the Faiths refuse to develop them further. But destruction was not what they were made for. They were made to change the System itself, to deliver a universal narrative—to bring an end to strife.

For if we are capable of deciding a narrative, of leaving wounds upon the System itself, if it is possible to mix third with first, then why can we not use first to usurp the third?

It is too late to turn away now. We have already stolen fire from the System. All that remains is choosing how we wish to burn.

-Udraal Thann's Animancy Notes

Shiv let everyone out of his cape, and Adam caught them up on what was going on.

Whisper responded in an instant. He ordered one of his fellow orcs to head across the dimensional pathway and make for the Tutorial. There, he was to inform their army about what was happening on the surface, and that they were to scramble and push for Blackedge immediately.

Uva projected one of her strands and cast a thought into Shiv's mind. "Shiv, I need to borrow your dragon."

"Choki?" Shiv asked. "Sure, but why? What are you planning?"

"The sun is coming up. I also have yet to accommodate myself to surface sickness. The dragon suffers no such issues, and if I keep my mana strands tight within the confines of its mind, I should be able to avoid the Light Curse."

The idea of Uva entering the battle during day time made Shiv's gut clench with instinctive dread, but a time dragon was a better vessel than most. "Alright, take the dragon, but make sure the Curse doesn't affect you. If it shows any effect, head right back into the gate immediately. Don't burn for nothing."

He wanted to say something more, but she sent a pulse of affection through his mind, and he fell silent.

"Just be careful," Shiv said.

"As careful as I can be," Uva replied. She let out a quiet chuckle. "If you didn't want me to be in such grave danger all the time, then you shouldn't have made yourself so favored and contaminated me as well."

"Yeah, the System and I are gonna have a word about that sometime."

Without saying anything further, Uva promptly departed as well, leaving only Whisper, a few of his fellow orcs, Valor, Rose, Can Hu, and Adam nearby.

"Mother," Adam said to Rose, "I need you to stay here."

"No. I need to be at Blackedge," she said. She cupped his cheek and stared into his eyes. "You are not telling me to stay here while everything is going to hell. I won't listen. And you won't tell me no."

Adam swallowed. Shiv knew that the wisest thing to do would be to confine her to Gate Piety, but before an onslaught of overwhelming emotions, wisdom had little hope to prevail.

"If you're going into this, you're sticking with me," Shiv said. "You're going to be with Valor inside my cape. That's about the safest place around."

Adam winced at Shiv's statement, but he didn't dispute it. Shiv was at once the most likely to die in the coming fight, but considering that he wasn't going to stay dead, her odds of survival were considerably higher with him than without. "Are you sure about this?"

"Fuck no, I'm not sure about this," Shiv shot back. He looked at Rose and shook his head, "You're not even an Initiate right now. If things go wrong—"

"I die," Rose cut him off with a scornful scoff. "I've been a Pathbearer longer than you've been alive. I've been a Pathbearer since I was barely a girl. I know the consequences of defeat. I have lived the consequences." Her expression turned sour. "And I would do it again. I will not abandon my love or my people to fate while my child suffers in my place. If there is anything I can do, or any difference I can make, I won't leave. I won't turn away."

Her eyes came aglow with a faint, violet energy. Within her expression, Shiv saw the Diviner she used to be, and he knew there was no swaying her. That, and he didn't think it was in his right to force a mother to abandon her son as he went to war.

He drew in a deep breath. "Fine. But do not do anything stupid. I didn't shit you out of my soul just so that you could end up dying a pointless death."

"Don't be so cynical, boy." She chuckled humorlessly. "Dying pointless deaths is kind of what we Pathbearers do." She cracked her neck and looked him up and down, "But you know that better than most of us, Shiv. Or at least you should."

"Valor. Can Hu," Shiv called out, turning away from Rose.

"I will make sure Lady Van Erren remains unharmed," Valor said. "Additionally, I would request that you project your Psychomancy down into the Forest of Alloy. That way, I and Can Hu might be able to provide you with active assistance from the inside as well."

"Sure," Shiv said. "But things are probably going to turn into a real shitshow pretty quick, so—"

"I just need a bit of context and an opening," Valor said. "I intend to keep you spared from Necromancy if I can."

As Rose, Can Hu, and Valor entered the Shiv's cape again, the Deathless regarded Whisper.

"Think you can keep us from being noticed by the Vicar once we get up close?" Shiv asked. "Because I didn't do so well myself last time."

"I dare not promise the sky nor the heavens, but let's see how this goes," the orc replied with an excited twinkle in his eyes. If there was one good thing about the orcs, it was the fact that the bastards were unshakable. A sphere of Dimensionality expanded out from Whisper, and it formed a protective veil shielding them from notice. Anyone staring in from the outside wouldn't see Whisper or anyone beside him. "Even so, I would assume that my Dimensionality will buy us at least a few moments against the Legend."

The orc drew his Stealth Skill back into his body.

"Alright. Very simple briefing," Adam said, trying to keep his breath under control. "The Necrotechs unleashed a massive attack on Blackedge earlier, and while my father was occupied, something shrouded in Dimensionality emerged from the Abyss. Now it's hovering over Blackedge like a blade set to fall. The Necrotechs are charging it with Necromantic mana, and it's building up fast. We need to get into position. We need to, we need to—"

Shiv grabbed the Gate Lord by the shoulder and squeezed him gently. "We'll figure this shit out. Like before. Like always." When Adam's expression was still stiff, the Deathless shrugged. "Maybe our tentative plan can be you firing an arrow at one of my Vitae Golems if everything goes to shit. That should obliterate all the Necros at least."

"And us," Adam replied, rolling his eyes. "And have you forgotten how Sullain managed to secure your Vitae last time?"

"Yeah, but that's just the thing, right? He had to secure it. It might be able to distract him for a few seconds, during which we launch a bunch more golems at him. Maybe we can overwhelm him that way."

Adam arched an eyebrow. "Wouldn't that kill all of us and set fire to a good portion of the continent? And the Pacific?"

"Yeah, but it might kill Sullain too," Shiv said. "Which is one of our objectives. And I would come back to life afterward and receive a juicy Legendary Skill, which is the most important thing."



Against all odds, Adam laughed. He slammed a fist against Shiv's chest. "You're an impossible bastard, you know that?"

"Yeah, but who else is going to go on these suicide missions with you?"

"No one," Adam said. Then he paused for a beat. "I would have no one else, either."

Shiv's mouth opened slightly. He cleared his throat as the sentimentality caught him off guard. It didn't even matter that the orcs were looking at him.

The two Pathbearers stared at each other, prodigal sons of Blackedge, forced from one bad situation to another. And here they were, faced with another calamity, another mess, another moment of desperate gambles and apocalyptic stakes. Despite everything riding on the line, Shiv felt happier than he ever did before.

Because this was what it meant to be a Pathbearer. This was what it meant to walk against the world, to fight the storm—and prevail.

As soon as they departed the gate, colors of faint blue pierced the periphery of Shiv's vision. Everything in the direction of the Lost Angeles ruins was enshrouded by the light of Animancy. Shiv could see pitch-black war clouds drifting above the ruins, their forms composed by smoke and ash. The sky beyond was no longer a canvas of black; rather, a softer light was seeping into the firmament. Even so, falling arrows twinkled constantly in the backdrop, spearing down as an unceasing meteor shower.

As Roland's latest barrage landed, pillars of flame speared up into the air, painting the world in additional columns of radiance. The ground shook, explosions rumbled in the distance, and the faint glare of Animancy was growing ever brighter.

Adam took aim in the direction of Lost Angeles as he prepared to release a Veilpiecer.

Shiv looked at him. "Aren't you afraid they'll spot us immediately? I thought we were moving under the cover of Whisper's Dimensionality."

"It's a risk I'm willing to take," Adam replied, his eyes shifting between a brilliant dawn and the blue of a midday sky. He was searching for a place to plant his arrows. "Besides, they're all focused on Blackedge now. Every single Necrotech is surging toward the town. We should have an opening. I hope."

"Then their backs are exposed," Whisper hummed. The other orcs unsheathed their daggers and shortwords excitedly. "Now is the time to slit and gouge."

Adam fired his shot. A dimensional rift opened before them, and the Gate Lord sped across immediately. Shiv accelerated behind him, and finally, Whisper and the other orcs followed along. There was a wild urgency to Adam's movements. All caution was thrown to the wind. As Shiv stared through their dimensional exit, he saw billowing waves of smoke and ash spilling into the pathway.

The air stank of sulfur, and Shiv's Vibrosense enchantment shuddered all across his body. He could feel just how much force was being outputted on the other side, just how many explosions were hammering Lost Angeles into dust.

No matter what else Shiv had to say about Roland Arrow, the man was a true Pathbearer. Weeks upon weeks of nigh-constant combat, and he was still a godsdamned monster—still smashing the Necrotechs and the city they emerged from flat.

Master my ass, Shiv thought to himself. The Town Lord's been a Legend in hiding this entire time.

Adam crossed through the gate first, and immediately, he grew six sets of Hydrokinetic arms out from his body. He fired a barrage of arrows all around him, forming a wall of rifts to shroud everyone from harm. At the same time, he swung his rapier. It flashed time and again, and a small army of clones joined the group in record speed, and they began firing their arrows too. As they did, Adam pulled out his Hydromantic wand and used it for the first time.

A massive sphere of water exploded out from him. It splashed through Shiv and the orcs without imparting any force on them. As the water folded over them harmlessly, they exploded through each of the dimensional pathways, like the bottom of an ocean channeled across a dozen narrow tunnels. Before Shiv could understand what Adam was doing, the Gate Lord fired another dimensional pathway right at his feet, and a new exit revealed itself.

"Across, now," Adam said. "Shiv, you're on point. We keep moving. We never stay in one place."

Shiv didn't ask questions. He'd fought with Adam long enough to trust the Gate Lord's instincts. He accelerated across as his inertial sheath thundered. Adam tipped pace behind him. He had six Veilpiercers nocked already. And with the final water-forged hand, he summoned more and more clones, filling the space behind him.

"When we get across to the other side," Adam called out, "we need to destroy the Necrotech projectors powering the weapon. You can't miss it once you're high enough in the air. Just follow the beams of corrosive mana back to the launch sites. Ignore the artillery. There are already orcs fighting here."

They've been silencing outposts and assassinating enemy elites, but we're going to need more of them to do any actual damage to the Vicar's army."

The exit was fast approaching, and Adam grimaced. "And then we need to figure out how to deal with Sullain himself."

"Well, if we distract him long enough, maybe the Inquisition will handle him for us," Shiv replied.

Adam shot a look at Shiv. "And how long will it take for them to arrive?"

"Not too long. I think." Shiv was pretty sure they were coming—that they didn't want to see Blackedge and especially Starhawk's Perch destroyed or taken.

"You think," Adam muttered. "Gods help us."

"Afraid they're actually the enemy, Adam. We're on our own."

Then, they were through the exit, and Shiv found himself blasting up into the air.

As he climbed high, he took in the ruins of the surrounding megacity. Kilometers of urban architecture were missing on all sides. Sections of Lost Angeles were pockmarked in deep trenches of glass, wounds scarred deep into the land by Roland's arrows.

Shiv looked around, trying to find Blackedge, and a flash of searing green led him to what he sought. High up in the air, something immense hung in the sky above Blackedge. It was practically twice the size of the entire town, and Shiv suspected that if it fell when the town's wards were down, it might just smash Blackedge out of the sky, whatever it was.

As the first rays of sunlight began spilling over the curve of the horizon, the weapon's shadow spilled down upon the ruined megacity. It was shaped like an inverted anvil, and beams of Necromancy were being channeled into it from across the city. Eerie, green circles were filling along the construct's spine. There were ten of these concentric windows in total, and right now, the first window was glowing with a radiant orb of Animancy, while the six after it were already infused with Necromancy. Shiv assumed once the remaining three windows were filled, the weapon would unleash its power on Blackedge, and all would be for naught.

But that wasn't the only issue. From all across the city, the Necrotechs were firing beams of corrosive mana up into the air. It wasn't just to charge their weapon, but also to box Blackedge in. A Necromantic barrier walled the city off from the rest of the world, like a cage holding prisoners. A similar cage was fused over the weapon, and even as Roland's arrows splashed against it, the explosions were blunted by the withering effect of Necromancy—and what little got through was consumed by the faint blue of Animancy.

"Quite a strange way to use a corrosion screen," Valor said, studying the scene through Shiv's eyes. "The amount of mana it must cost to shroud both the town and the weapon is astronomical. It would just be better if they formed a curved dome in the sky for the arrows. Ah. Sullain was never a good strategist."

Chapter 154 (II) Weapon

"Yeah, well, thank the System for small mercies, because he has a big felling weapon on his side," Shiv replied. Still. Something about Valor's apprehension had Shiv feeling a little paranoid as well. Shiv followed one of the beams back to its firing position nearby.

Less than 500 meters away, Shiv caught sight of a still-standing section of a wide road on top of concrete pillars. On top of it was a Necrotech artillery unit. There were sixty figures standing atop the bridge, and most of them were magi—Necromancers, specifically. They channeled their corrosive mana together, forming massive spikes of Necromancy that they loaded into strange, ringed launchers.

Their artillery platforms resembled four-legged insects with a series of U-shaped arches traveling along their bodies, rather than an actual carapace. Pulsing tunnels of Dimensionality were channeled out from the corrosion screen, and the Necromantic spikes were loaded in. The arches tugged on the corrosive constructs and shaped them into long, narrow beams that surged forward.

Just as Shiv prepared to launch himself at the enemy, something moved in the corner of his eye. His head snapped down at an angle, and he discovered what Adam had been doing earlier with his Hydromancy wand. A few hundred Veilpiercers punctured the flesh of existence and returned to reality from all directions. From the dimensional pathways they left open, followed jets of hyper-pressurized water. They cleaved out as slashing geysers, moving so fast that they split through the bases of already compromised structures. The Necromancer artillerists on the bridge that Shiv was looking at fell along with their crumbling edifice, and all across the city, more jets of water speared out. Buildings were hewed and toppled like a forest of trees greeted with a tide of axes. Fountains of water exploded up into the air, unmaking several buildings from the inside. It was like an ocean was trying to erupt from just beneath Lost Angeles.

And then, the signs of return fire greeted Shiv. A fist of flame exploded a hundred meters away from him. He punched through its unfurling blast and spared himself from the swelling heat. Nearby, Adam's clones bust into existence, firing their Veilpiercers before vanishing again. More of Roland's arrows kissed the ground and shattered the earth. Blinding blasts cleaved the land asunder, but Shiv spiked down to avoid a salvo of corrosive missiles that came seeking his death.

Chaos erupted all around him. Shiv tried to find a trace of the original Adam or one of the orcs—

Inertial Overdrive 118 > 119

Through a dense wall of haze came a flicker of light, and pure instinct spared Shiv from harm. He swung his mage breaker right as a beam crashed toward him. A forking bolt of electricity infused with the foul miasma of Necromancy struck his hand, but his Magebreaker rejected it, and his Frictionless Vector sent it spearing into the earth instead.

Frictionless Vector 69 > 70

He activated Outside Context Problem, froze time, and threw his dagger in the direction of his enemy. He teleported to his blade and tried to track where the attacker was, but he found himself drenched in a veil of smoke. And it was magical smoke at that. It was unnaturally thick and dense, and Shiv couldn't see shit.

Yet, he still felt a feeling of static in the air. More importantly, he had a sense of improved smell. He let his Pheromonic Cipher guide him where his sight failed.

Awareness 42 > 43

He spiked himself 40 times in quick succession, drawing closer and closer to his target. Holes disintegrated before him. He hammered through magical wards as well. Finally, when he could practically taste the Necrotech upon his tongue, he discharged all the inertia he had been building up, and an explosion ripped out from his body. His Voidmantid armor suffered some damage, but then he reverted time back two seconds. Shiv's armor returned to a relatively healthy state.

As Shiv prepared to reorient himself and find Adam or a corrosion screen to attack, a series of clenching pressures gripped his body and stole away his attention. Someone was teleporting near him. Three massive cylinders burst out from billowing clouds of Dimensionality nearby. They rippled with oscillations of golden mana, and their shapes began to fissure apart as the magic contained within began to spear out in curving streams of light.

Shiv's eyes widened as he guessed what they were. Are those Chronomancy bombs?

He got his confirmation when they went off. Three waves of gold came at him. Shiv parried one of the explosions, but his Magebreaker rattled violently from the effort, and there was so much force behind the bomb that Shiv was launched back. The other two blasts ended up smashing into him while he was reeling. The first left a deep slash along his temporal shell. The second broke it open.

Gravitic Wrestler 148 > 149

Strider of the Unbending Path 139 > 140

But even so, his Chronomancy field didn't fully break.

Not until someone struck him in the back of the head.

Shiv's golden mana burst apart across his body, and when coherence returned to him, he realized he was dead.



Strider of the Unbending Path 140 > 144

Gravitic Wrestler 149 > 152

Inertial Overdrive 119 > 121

Frictionless Vector 70 > 76

The Deathless materialized over his body as a shroud of shifting Vitae. He watched as his corpse dangled in the air, impaled through the back of the head by a crystalline greatsword. Behind him, a Pathbearer clad in golden skeletal armor and sporting twelve mechanical wings from their spine bore the weight of Shiv's body with one hand. The enemy thrust harder, driving their thin greatsword deeper through Shiv's left eye. Coldness washed through Shiv as he sobered.

It had been a while since he experienced such a sudden death.

Just because he was a Hero didn't mean he was invincible. Not even close. A single moment of distraction cost him everything. Can't hesitate anymore. All they need is a single mistake to end me.

And where his failure was being stunned by their fast response, the enemy betrayed themselves with their inattentiveness, failing to notice the sprawling mass of Vitae hovering in the air nearby. Shiv acted, wrapping his Vitae around the enemy, sapping their vitality from them as he used one of his strands to plunge his still-bound Skysplitter into the base against their neck.

The enemy cried out, but their voice wasn't human at all. Rather, it came with the crackle of mechanical distortion, and sparks filled the air rather than blood. Shiv wasn't just fighting a Necrotech; he was fighting a Necrotech bot. Their armor exploded with golden mana, and suddenly, Shiv lost track of them again. The feeling of losing an entire section of his own history was uncanny and terrifying. He remembered the first time he faced the Recollector. A coldness swelled through Shiv's soul as he realized something had cleaved through half of his Vitae retroactively. Broken parts of his red and white mana were bleeding off into the air, evaporating as they had been severed from his body.

Another hit slammed down upon him. Shiv plunged through the air—barely a sinew left of his sprawling mass of Vitae, and he felt the chill of true death lick at his core. Anger detonated inside him. He tried activating his Strider of the Unbending Path again, but his temporal shell was still broken. There was less than a sliver of his being left. He fed his anger into his Inertial Overdrive.

And it was barely enough to spare his life.

The thin greatsword slashed down a centimeter next to the last string of Shiv's existence. The enemy Pathbearer hadn't realized they missed, and they were unprepared when Shiv speared himself right into their neck. A scream of compromised metal filled the air, and the Deathless began to wriggle his way into the automaton's sparking wound, draining vitality while ripping through wires and critical mechanisms within the bot's neck.

Once more, a golden aura surged out from the enemy's body, and Shiv pushed himself deeper into the enemy in desperation. But suddenly, they were interrupted as Shiv heard a pitched frequency squeal out from somewhere. He remembered hearing that frequency someplace before, and he followed the frequency back to its point of origin. There was a cape attached to the final string of his existence—a cape, a blade, a gauntlet, and the faint shape of his Voidmantid armor. They were all being dragged along by his Vitae, and from within the cape, Can Hu was unleashing its Binaric Sovereign skill against the enemy automaton.

Gods, I love you, Penitent, Shiv thought.

The enemy Chronomancer shrieked as they tried to regain control over themselves, but their body went haywire; they were lost to themselves. Shiv's Vitae swelled as he suckled life force out of the bot like a leech. He felt his enemy writhe, blindly slashing at him with their blade. A few times, they chipped off parts of his reforming personhood. But whatever Can Hu was doing, it was badly affecting their coherence.

Then, both Shiv and the Necrotech automaton crashed down against the ground. The bot went stiff. Shiv shot forward, tearing clean through his enemy's neck. The automaton stilled as its head rolled off to the side. Shiv rose from their corpse, half-filled with Vitae but nowhere near a true resurrection yet. He was a half-formed mess of red and white, shaped only to resemble his original self in terms of outline. Just then, his old corpse struck the ground nearby, and Shiv seized his body before chucking it elsewhere, hoping to confuse his foes.

This proved to be a wise maneuver, as a barrage of corrosive spells turned his corpse into a smoldering patch of nothing a half-second later.

Deception 23 > 24

The dense veil of smoke was only growing thicker. Shiv could hear fighting everywhere, could see faint shapes moving beyond the shroud. He needed to figure out where to go and finish his resurrection.

Good thing I don't constantly lose vitality every passing second anymore, Shiv thought to himself. And then, as he searched for new prey, he noticed that faint sheen of red lining everything. That faint sheen of vitality stabilizing existence as well. He recalled how draining that caused parts of the world to rupture, creating mana instability.

And suddenly Shiv had a plan. Well, something that was like the concept of a plan. It was more of a vague idea, frankly. But if he could drain enough, if he could cause a mana storm to take shape, could he use that against the Vicar and the Inquisition when they arrived?

Regardless of that, I can do one thing with it: cause some chaos. And Shiv immediately began sapping from the world itself.

Everything went to hell in an instant. The parts he drained were ripped open, like skin licked away to reveal flesh and bone. Chaotic expressions of mana spilled over into the world. A storm splashed across the ground, contained within an oozing membrane and rimmed with clouds. Fire billowed out from other ruptures, and a rain of heavy crystalline stalagmites descended upon the land like falling hail. Screams and cries of terror sounded all around as the ruptures connected to each other and a chaotic vortex poured through, ripping its way across the world.

Shit, I hope this doesn't bite me in the ass in a minute.

Vitaemancy 70 > 71

As soon as he finished that thought, he resurrected and immediately suffered the consequences of his own action. An explosion of Dynamacy ballooned out from behind him. It smashed him through building after building before it dragged him along the ground. His armor screamed in protest. He could feel parts of it breaking, and he bit back a growl of misery as pain filled his body. One downside of being sensory-bonded to your armor through a network of mycelia: everything that broke in it hurt you.

But Shiv was fine with pain. Pain was just a feeling.

He pulled on his gravitic field and shot up into the air once more. He slammed his fist together and discharged his sheath. The fog didn't clear, but he did catch sight of a corrosion screen nearby. It pulsed with an unceasing glow of green, and Shiv activated his Chameleon, Creeping Void, and Minor Illusion abilities in tandem and as he cast himself at the enemy.

They weren't prepared for him. He sent his twelve mana hydras spearing ahead as he tore into the enemy with steel and spell. His Aegis of Assimilation shattered resistances and supped the flesh out of armor. The ones that survived Shiv's Biomancy were then greeted by a magnified Skysplitter. His blade turned the Necrotechs into puffs of red and spraying pieces of sparking metal. He dragged his dagger across the ground and detonated his sheath as he passed over the corrosion screen artillery platform. It broke apart into pieces as Shiv lobbed himself higher into the air.

One down. A shit-ton to go.

He followed his sense of smell again. Spells tore through the air—but they came nowhere near hitting him. His Creeping Void and other stealth supplements were serving their purpose.

The Creeping Void 113 > 114

Just then, he passed through the dense haze of magical smoke and found himself just a kilometer or so away from Blackedge. He realized he could easily reach the town with his Biomancy field now if he so desired. And that made things simple when he saw twenty or so beams of Necromancy shooting up into the air around the town. They were all spread apart, but Shiv didn't need to attack them in person. Instead, he struck out with his biokinetic hydras. He attacked with one hydra after another as they all shared the same field, but it extended from his person with ease.

Blasts of red blossomed across the ruins of Lost Angeles. Shiv assimilated every piece of organic architecture he could. What he couldn't break, he struck and smashed using a newly forged chain of cancer flails. A nightmarish cord of tissue curved and then ripped through buildings and people alike. Entire blocks collapsed as Shiv swung his kilometer long flail left and right, scything across Lost Angeles and silencing Necrotech projection sites one after another.

He spiked the heavy end of his flail down on the ground over and over as it traveled. Shockwaves spread in increments as blocks crumbled into the soil. A beam of Necromancy tore through the air, trying to sever the leash connecting him to his cancer flail. Shiv simply assimilated the biomass in an instant, converting the flail into a spell rendering. The beam missed. He threw his blade and teleported.

After he repositioned himself, he resumed his reign of terror, swinging his flail across the land.

Well, this is pretty fun.

His magic only got stronger when chains of fear speared through his person from all across the world. They knew he was here now, and the survivors were terrified. Good. It was only going to get worse.

Aegis of Assimilation 105 > 106

Shape of Monstrosity 107 > 108

A team of Necrotech Pathbearers dove into Shiv's Creeping Void. They launched a barrage of explosive spells that shook the world, and he passed through the attack with a pulse of Outside Context Problem.

Outside Context Problem 64 > 65

Shiv rematerialized as he swung an extended cord of cancerous flesh against their bodies. Arms and legs snapped. Magical Resistances shattered, exposing vulnerable flesh. And the cancer flail only grew.

Whip Proficiency 10 > 12

Chapter 154 (III) Weapon

As the Deathless searched the land for more launch sites, another flash made him look to his left. A single corrosion screen projector remained there. Shiv detonated his sheathe and spiked himself in a new direction. But before he got there, a tide of arrows tore back into reality and utterly annihilated the launch site.

“And I believe we have found Adam again,” Valor commented. “Nicely done so far, Shiv. You have a knack for chaos and creativity.”

“Thanks. Got put down once. Any suggestions?”

“Stay on the offensive. Always. Keep moving. Never stick to the same pattern.”

“Be more chaotic. Got it. Just need to find Adam first and—”

A dimensional rift opened beside Shiv, and Adam blasted out into the Creeping Void, firing arrow after arrow. A small army of clones followed thereafter, unleashing their own barrages. The Gate Lord's arrows impacted threats Shiv could see, and even more that he couldn't. And when his arrows hit, they became two, before multiplying further as they sought out new targets. Soon, a swarm of arrows was pouring all across the city.

Adam was turning into a downright menace for enemy armies, Shiv realized.

He cast his Psychomancy into Adam's mind and called out to him. "Fancy running into you here."

"Not really," Adam said. His eyes were aglow with Divination mana, and he continued firing even through Shiv's dense mess of miasmic darkness. "I waited for you to inflict mass destruction on the city and found you by sound thereafter. Your Gravitic Wrestler thunders through the air every time you use it. Makes your Creeping Void ineffective against Pathbearers who possess echo location or similar abilities."

"Huh. Good to know. I was hunting some Necrotechs earlier by smell. I think I got all the launch sites nearby here."

"Good. Because they only need to fill two more circles before the weapon fires."

Shiv's stomach plunged. "Alright. Let's go find some more projectors, then."

Then, Shiv's Chronomancy shuddered, and he triggered his temporal shell on instinct. It manifested over his body, and just then, a wing of time dragons plunged down from high above. They were already firing



their Necromantic projectors into the Creeping Void. With time frozen, none of Adam's clones had faded yet, and several of the beams were on track to hit some of them.

Shiv's mind went blank. Killing a single time dragon in around ten seconds was a considerable feat, and there was no way he could cut down an entire wing while trying to keep Adam alive—Wait, I don't need to kill the dragons, I just needed to move Adam and the clones out of—

And then all of Adam's clones fired at the dragons before fading. Shiv's eyes widened, and he noticed how each of the clones vibrated with faint traces of gold in the air. Right, they have Chronomancy too. The rapier had my kukri integrated.

That made things simpler for Shiv. He grabbed the original Adam and spiked both of them through the nearest dimensional pathway he could get to. At the same time, he swung a mana hydra high up into the air and materialized his cancer flail once again. A mana explosion ballooned out as the head dragon was struck twice. Shiv felt its Magical Resistance crack—along with a section of its ribs—as he whipped the end of his flail into the monster even harder.

Before the other dragons could respond, Shiv assimilated his flail again and pulled his Biomancy back around himself. Twelve hydras coiled around him and Adam as they shot through a dimensional pathway.

He had been too passive with his Biomancy before. He treated spellcasting as if it were separate from his physical attacks—but his Aegis of Assimilation was capable of more than just a few tricks. Like letting me aim and strike with my flail kilometers away. “Knife-fighting range” for me isn’t quite the same anymore.

Shiv dismissed his Chronomancy to preserve his temporal armor, and he heard Adam gasp and turn. “What just—where are we going?”

"The way you came. We got jumped by some time dragons. Decided not to stay in place and fight with the projectors gone in the area anyway."

"What?" Adam choked out. "No, no, go back the other way!"

"Other way is time dragons, Adam."

"Well, the way I came from has a group of Invisible Vanguard I can't seem to damage at all."

A feral grin spread across Shiv's face. "Invisible Vanguard, huh? Yeah, sounds fun."

"You're stark-raving mad, you bastard," Adam breathed.

Shiv used his Biomancy to channel a dose of basilisk venom into his flesh. His body expanded. His bones grew longer, his muscles became denser. Shiv's Voidmantid armor grew along with him—a benefit of being an actual piece of bonded equipment rather than just mundane armor, he suspected.

As they traveled across the pathway, Shiv began shaping a Vitae Golem. He wasn't going to have enough time to give it four Animated Skill Infusions, so it was going to have to do without Vitality Drain.

"Shiv, listen," Valor said. "The sun will be up soon. You can move in the open. The Necrotechs can't, at least not for long. Destroy the architecture. You do not need to kill every last Necromancer or artilleryman. Let the light work for you."

"Got it, Valor," Shiv replied. He cast the same details at Adam as he equipped his golem with the infusions.

Multi-Tasking 19 > 20

"Destroy all the architecture," Adam muttered. "That's not bad. It makes things easier. I'll focus on that." The exit drew closer. The Gate Lord started summoning more clones and lifted his wand high. A thick wall of ocean-blue condensed from the air before them.

Shiv's golem hovered by his side, and they both stared at Adam. "The hells are you doing now?"

"Just watch," Adam said. And then, just as they exited the pathway, he unleashed the water building up around them. It exploded outward like a tsunami packed in too tight, and, a moment later, it impacted ten invisible Pathbearers surrounding them.

As he found himself once again glad to have Adam's ridiculous Awareness on his side, Shiv commanded his golem to accelerate, spike itself, discharge, then revert time and repeat until it had no vitality left.

It immediately shot past him, following the sphere of crushing water expanding out from them. And it was a good thing too, as the tidal wave Adam cast out was suddenly stopped dead by a titanic field of Hydromancy.

Through the water, a new Pathbearer emerged. They wore an armored dress that obscured their face and had tentacles in place of arms and legs. In each of their limbs was a whip, and the sheer amount of Hydromancy mana radiating out of them was staggering, rippling out like the waves of a crushing tsunami. Shiv was facing a Heroic-Tier Hydromancer.

Unfortunately for the Heroic-Tier Hydromancer, they were about to be intercepted by a golem. The construct impacted and detonated itself several times in quick succession. The Hydromancer was blasted back—and they tried to stop themselves from being launched back some more by shaping walls of water to slow their movements. That was interrupted as a few hundred Veilpiercers crashed into them right after.

The Vitae Golem tackled the Hydromancer again, and it drove the enemy through Adam's oceanic barricade. Once more, the stilled tidal wave started moving, and it cast their other attackers far away.

Suddenly, the way was open. Shiv shot forward first, and Adam followed right after, with his clones trailing just behind. The world was alight with fire, and the scent of burning flesh and melting concrete made Shiv gag. More of Roland's arrows descended. They impacted places kilometers away, but towers of fire rose high into the air—towers that unleashed shockwaves that battered Shiv and Adam, even from so far away.

Yet the flames spilling out of the infernal towers did not spread naturally. The expanding blasts curved unnaturally to avoid Adam and Shiv. The Deathless scoffed in abject disbelief; the sheer amount of control Roland Arrow had was as staggering as his power.

Adam began firing his arrows again, and his clones followed suit. Shiv didn't know what he was shooting at, but a second later, two figures appeared right next to them in a shower of sparks. Adam's Veilpiercers bounced off their adamantine armor, and they came for the Gate Lord. One bore a gravity-infused axe, while the other had a hammer shaped from crackling lightning.

Shiv intercepted the axe-bearer with a dozen spikes of his gravitic field. He seized them by the throat and thrust his blade into their gut. A shockwave burst between them, but aside from making his enemy grunt once, Shiv inflicted little harm, even with Deepest Edge. At the same time, he directed his Biomancy to strike at the hammer-user. His mana hydra coiled through the air, and Shiv's cancer flail manifested once more.

The enemy wasn't prepared for the Aegis of Assimilation. They were even less ready for the massive ball of teratoma and festering flesh that impacted them in mid-air as they got within two meters of Adam. The hammer-user's Magical Resistance cracked slightly under the first blow, and then it shattered entirely as Adam channeled a stream of crushing Hydromancy from the tip of his wand into their skull.

Shiv didn't even give them a chance to fight back. They died with a fading scream on their lips as they were assimilated into his aegis, melting into his flail.

Their armor fell a moment after, hollow within.

Aegis of Assimilation 106 > 107

The axe-bearer headbutted Shiv. His helmet cracked. The Deathless headbutted them back. Their helmet cracked. Shiv tried to stab them with his Skysplitter again, but the enemy dropped their axe to seize Shiv by the wrist.

They were equal in terms of Toughness, but Shiv gritted his teeth as he realized his adversary had the edge in Physicality—even with Plagued boosting him. The axe-bearing Necrotech twisted Shiv's right arm back slightly. This annoyed Shiv enough that he immediately started fighting dirty. He wrapped his Biomancy around the Pathbearer he was wrestling and tightened his flail around their body. He felt his Biomancy bounce off their Magical Resistance, but that didn't stop him from coating them in a thick ball of cancerous tissue—tissue harvested in part from their friend.

The axe-bearer cried out in alarm as fetid bursts of flesh were ejected from Shiv's flail. It coated their body, and they tried to shrug it off. This stunned them long enough for Shiv to knee them in the groin.

The axe-bearer gagged. Shiv gripped their waist and spiked them downward with a pile-driver. They blasted through the air for a good hundred meters as Shiv discharged against them over and over. At the same time, he battered them with his flail and Biomancy. They were coated in a thick layer of flesh—and partially fused with his flail at that. Shiv shot back up into the air and started swinging his enemy about. He used the axe-bearer as a club to smash through the tops of buildings, extending them further using his Biomancy as he ripped the roofs off of skyscrapers and toppled bridges. They wouldn't be able to put up with this for—

Sunlight spilled over the horizon.

Sullain's weapon cast an ominous shadow across the land. Acting quickly, Shiv cast out tendrils of Vitae to drain from the axe-bearer as he continued using them as a club to remodel his surroundings.

Whip Proficiency 12 > 13

Multi-Tasking 20 > 21

Just then, Shiv noticed someone coming up from behind Adam. He cheated the inertia of his flail by assimilating it as he cast his Biomancy in a new direction. The mana hydra impacted the bastard trying to slit Adam's throat—and Shiv materialized his flail once more. A mana explosion sent the Gate Lord stumbling forward—but he blinked away in a flash of gold, jumping briefly to where one of his clones was.

A second later, the Pathbearer caked against Shiv's flail was degloved from behind by a rain of dimensional arrows.

Skill Gained: Physics 1 (Common)

Adam blinked back in place—and something hit him in the shoulder. The Gate Lord roared in pain as his left arm was dislocated. Shiv directed his hydra through Adam and consumed his wound. A crystallized injury filled Shiv's Biomancy field as he swung his flail in the direction of the projectile that had just hit Adam. A group of unseen foes was clipped along the way, ripped out from seeming non-existence, clothlined by Shiv's extended Biomancy.

Adam gestured with his wand again, and a spell exploded out from its tip. It parted around Shiv and pushed a small army of enemy Pathbearers and projectiles away. However, after it expanded to two hundred meters, it stopped and continued no further. Spells, arrows, and more plunged in from all sides, but most were held at bay by the dense wall of water, protecting Shiv and Adam. At the core, Shiv found himself with a moment to breathe.

"These assholes are coming from godsdamn everywhere," Shiv said, assimilating his flail.

"I told you I didn't want to go this way," Adam snapped. He fired two more arrows, but then tackled Shiv out of the way as unseen enemies immediately began firing back through his rift.

Whips of Necromancy missed them by the barest of inches.

Adam responded by activating his Vambrace. A ball of swirling Dimensionality danced atop his hand, and it was immediately consumed by corrosion thereafter. He projected the Necromancy into his dimensional pathways, and they lit up with that eerie green glow. From within the pathways came a series of ear-piercing screams.

The Necrotechs on the other side were receiving a taste of their own preferred magic, but Shiv and Adam were still getting boxed in.

#### Chapter 154 (IV) Weapon

"Got any ideas?" Shiv asked. "Because I think we can't stay here much longer."

And as soon as he said that, he felt a wave of Hydromancy spear through Adam's watery barrier. Through the cleft came the Hydromancer of Shiv's golem had tackled earlier. They lashed out with their whips, and Shiv swung out with his flail, smashing into the blows before they could strike Adam—only to find the tendrils sharp enough to cut clean through the tissues sustaining his flail.

He assimilated his flail and adapted, shaping it into a dense, cancerous shield before him. This time, the whips were slowed.

But not stopped.

Holes emerged from the cancer shield. But Shiv parried each of the whips with a swipe of his Skysplitter. They were deflected downward—but new breaches shot out from them, striking him in his throat and



left eye respectively. Shiv felt his eyeball burst inside his socket. He snarled with annoyance more than pain—but that turned to a gurgle as the enemy managed to slit his throat open as well. Then, a dryness spread through his body. The enemy Hydromancer was ripping the moisture out of his flesh.

Shiv pitted his feeble Hydromancy against his foe, but it wasn't enough. His field tore in half immediately—but it still gave him just a second to recover. Shiv smashed through the whips with his Magebreaker. His gauntlet sang with a screaming pitch. Shiv fed his new wounds into his aegis and started his Song of the Vigilant.

Aegis of Assimilation 107 > 109

Adam responded thereafter. The Gate Lord fired an arrow. It emerged from a rift and crashed against the Hydromancer's head just as they rose above Shiv's cancer-shield. The Deathless lashed out at them with Vitae, Biomancy, and a growing Skysplitter. The enemy Pathbearer turned into a spray of water and avoided each of his strikes.

Their presence grew so faint that Shiv lost track of them.

But Adam didn't. The Gate Lord drew back on his Spellstring, and a surge of Hydromancy infused his newest Veilpiercer as he let it fly. He struck the Hydromancer again, and they went tumbling back into existence.

Shiv activated Outside Context Problem and accelerated forward. They didn't see him coming—they had no chance to see him. Not until he drove both his thumbs through the gaps in their visor where he assumed their eyes to be. The Hydromancer screamed, and Shiv twisted their neck back, ending his enemy's bellow with a sickening snap. Just to be sure, he swung his Skysplitter across their neck, beheading them. He then assimilated the body with his Biomancy.

The cancer flail must be fed, Shiv joked with himself.

Outside Context Problem 65 > 66

The victory was short-lived, as he felt his Chronomancy shudder once more.

"I can't shake these bastard dragons," Shiv snarled. "Adam. Chronomancers. Get in my cape."

The Gate Lord said nothing as he waved his wand, and he, too, turned into water. He splashed down into Shiv's cape, and the Deathless blinked. Huh. Effective.

Shiv manifested his temporal shell. Time stopped. And he felt the turbulence pressing against his Chronomancy field grow stronger. He followed that sensation and looked upward—where he saw six time dragons coming right at him, bathed by the light of the rising dawn.

He felt another pulse of resonance pass over his field. And then there was a seventh dragon coming in at a higher angle.

Great. The more the merrier. Shiv triggered Outside Context Problem immediately, and he felt the coldness lick his core again. Not going to be able to sustain this for long

. He accelerated through Adam's fading oceanic barrier and climbed higher. He faced the dragons with Skysplitter in hand and Biomancy lashing out.

Shiv eyed his adversaries, trying to come up with a strategy to eliminate them in one fell swoop. Whatever he did, he needed to disable their Necromancy projectors on their backs. He couldn't risk getting hit by that.

Just then, he saw the seventh dragon dip low. Shiv frowned and used his Compound Ocular Network to zoom in on the stray monster. He saw that it didn't have a rider, nor any weapons on its back. And then, he noticed how it was looking directly at where he used to be.

Wait? Uva? His frown turned to a wide smile. Oh, these poor bastards aren't going to know what hit them.

Uva plunged, aiming at the rear of the time dragon attack wing. Shiv timed his own attack in accordance. He cast his mana hydra out and made a question mark around the dragons. He manifested his flail once more and swept it over the wing. Bursts of crimson mana spilled through the air, enveloping everything. Shiv's cancer flail tangled wings and caused the time dragons to tumble through the air. As chaos swept through their ranks, Shiv spiked himself blade-first into the head of the first dragon. He stabbed the monster in the eye, but the dragon let out a roar, and his blow bounced off.

Adamantine Adaption, Shiv snarled internally. Son of a bitch.

He was beginning to realize how annoying it was to fight someone like him.

As he exploded out from his Outside Context state, the other dragons were too disoriented to respond immediately. Their disorientation only grew when Uva slammed into one of them from the back. She bit down on another dragon's throat and began to tear. At the same time, Shiv extended tendrils of Vitae while swinging his Skysplitter with his other hand. He drained vitality and hammered the dragon from the sky. He continued spearing his Biomancy—and flail—into the other dragons as well.

Several were launched out of place, while one took a swipe at him as it passed by. His temporal shell cracked. So did the golden mana lining the dragon. He cast himself back in time and slammed elbow-first against its head. The dragon's head snapped back. But it was disoriented, not dead. Then came his flail. It struck the back dragon's back and crushed its rider's cockpit. Shiv spiraled in the air, turning himself as he held on to its neck. The dragon didn't respond in time—its rider was slain; the telepathic connection was broken. And soon, so was its neck as Shiv caught it in a death roll.

He cast the dragon's limp body aside after a few moments, its neck knotted in tangled cords. He swept through its body as it fell with a mana hydra, and grunted as he felt a magical strain build within himself. His Aegis of Assimilation was potent, but it increased how much weight was levied upon his spirit as well.

I need to keep my mana load light.

As he prepared to face the other dragons, he found that they all had golden arrows lodged in their skulls and were dropping limply from the sky. An entire wing had been butchered in an instant. Shiv blinked. Fuck me, Roland. And then he looked up to see another arrow coming straight down.

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At Uva.

No! Shit!

He spiked himself up into the air to intercept the blow. But it proved unnecessary—the arrow halted before it hit him, and he cast a thought into it. “FRIENDLY! THAT DRAGON’S FRIENDLY!”

In an instant, the arrow tore off into another direction. Shiv let out a sigh. As he followed its path, he watched it pierce clean through an unseen enemy along the way, and past that point, he saw a few hundred golden threads punching through the weapon hanging over Blackedge. The massive inverted anvil shuddered in the sky, spewing Necromancy and Animacy into the air. Its Necromantic veil had faded. And the cage surrounding Blackedge was gone.

The Town Lord was free.

All around Lost Angeles, massive, illusory towers of brightness stood tall, and from them soared an endless stream of burning hawks that bombarded the land even when time was frozen.

Roland Arrow... this is absolute bullshit, Shiv growled internally. All the Town Lord needed to turn things around was an opening. It was impressive, but the prospects of Shiv punching him in the face were moving further and further away in his mind.

Uva shot up into the air, and she made eye contact with him as she let out a pitched roar. Choki pumped a fist, and Shiv responded in turn. Both of their temporal shells were cracked, and they were going to return to baseline time at any second. “Nice flying—”

A crushing force slammed into his back. The world blurred past him as he was carried up into the air. Shiv’s Adamantine Adaption struggled against the impact as something twisted against him, drilling through his armor, biting into flesh, and kissing his backbone.

Shiv wrapped a mana hydra around himself and pulled, tearing himself off the projectile, and he saw a strange geometric shape blast past him. It resembled a spike with a series of hooks at the end. Its tip was infused with both Dynamancy and Dimensionality, and Shiv noticed a chunk of his flesh still floating within the projectile.

Another thing he noticed was just how far he had been displaced across the world in mere moments. He was hovering high up in the air now, so far above the world that he could barely make out even the damaged weapon floating above Blackedge. But he didn't get to fall for long. A concentration of shadowy energy collapsed around him. Shiv grunted as he felt a shapeless but impossibly strong grip collapse around his body. Shiv's temporal shell shattered first, then his armor began to crack as well.

Husk of the Adamantine Voidmantid

Condition: Wounded

Before Shiv even had a chance to think, the vast, skeletal visage of Vicar Sullain emerged before his eyes, like an oasis born from a shifting desert mirage.

A blinding downpour of Roland's arrows instantly shot down from the edge of the atmosphere to strike the Legendary Mage, but Sullain formed a veil of Animancy around himself and Shiv.

"And so you return to me, Undying One," the Vicar said, sounding absolutely jubilant. Despite this, his voice was softer—weaker. His long, serpentine body chittered, and the many hands along its length clasped together. "Just as I hoped you would when I began this attack."

Shiv spiked his gravitic field and discharged his inertial sheath. The gravity field holding him at bay parted slightly, but Sullain crushed his efforts with a wave of telekinesis. He brought a skeletal hand up and down like a parent smacking a misbehaving child. Shiv snarled and hissed as Sullain broke his body. His ribs shattered. His kidneys were punctured. One of his lungs collapsed. His skull caved in quickly, and his stomach was ruptured.

When Sullain was finished, Shiv vomited another mouthful of blood out through the broken visor of his helmet. He was getting used to coughing up blood; it was practically becoming a daily occurrence. And worse yet, he was starting to get a liking for the coppery taste.

Adamantine Adaption 175 > 176

"Will you listen now, child, or do I still need to hurt you unnecessarily?" Sullain asked.

Shiv snorted. "I could do with a little more Toughness. Give him a harder—"

Sullain made a flicking gesture with one of his many hands. Shiv felt all his limbs snap backward. His feet ended up pressed against the front of his hips, and his arms were folded over his elbows. Pain washed through him, but Shiv just let out a slight growl. "Oh, you absolute piece of shit."

"You requested, so I obliged," Sullain said. "Here. Some more."

Shiv tried to trigger Outside Context Problem—only to howl with agony as Sullain started ripping the vitality out of his person, shattering his focus. “You are not very versed in the art of draining vitality. It is a far more potent power than you realize. A shame. But one that will be corrected soon. I will teach you.”

The Deathless shook as he felt himself on the precipice of oblivion. “F-fuck—” He couldn’t finish the words. It hurt too much to exist right then. Still, he gritted his teeth in defiance. “The Inquisition is coming for you! This isn’t gonna work anymore. They got a Legend with them. You—you’re done here. You’re finished!”

“Oh, do they?” Sullain muttered. He sounded... tired. “Now, that is truly dreadful. I do not think I will be facing them.”

Shiv narrowed his eyes. “So, what? You’re leaving? Gonna fuck off now?”

“Leaving? Yes. After my task is done.”

"Task done, how?" Shiv asked. "Your weapon's broken. The sun is up. You're out of time." Shiv looked down, but he couldn't see through the veil of Animancy caging him and Sullain.

“Shiv,” Valor said suddenly—that was when Shiv realized he was still connected to the others. “Do not agitate him further.”



"I have a plan," Adam added. "It might work. You remember my special arrow earlier? Just stall. Try to make an opening somehow. Don't—don't let him kill you either."

"Oh, that was not the weapon," Sullain said dismissively. And there was a smile hidden in his words. "That was simply the receptacle I used to incubate it."

"Incubate it," Shiv whispered. "What do you mean?"

"Ah, it is fitting for you to be the first to bear witness. After all, it is your essence that powers it. That essence which fuels your soul, Undying One. And thanks to you," Sullain paused, "thanks to you, my retribution is assured. But words are cheap and weak. I think I will show you instead."

Sullain held up a single finger with his uppermost hand, and a portal flashed open above him. It was wider than the Vicar was tall, and a sickly, murky miasma spilled out from within.

On the other side of the portal, in an alien place choked with ash and desolation, a dark shape loomed.

Shiv thought it was a mountain that had crumbled in on itself for a moment, but before his eyes could make sense of what they were seeing, Sullain cast him up and through the portal with a gesture. Shiv tumbled across the ground, kicking up shattered bones and debris as he went, before coming to a rest atop a mass grave. Skeletal remains littered the ground upon which he lay, stretching beyond sight.

Shiv barely managed to sweep his Biomancy through himself and consume his wounds. Even so, he was drained. Barely any vitality left. Holding himself up was a feat beyond feats, and as he lifted his head, his heart stopped.

Barely visible through the unceasing curtain of ash falling from the sky, a dark, mountainous shadow loomed over him. Then, two orbs of light made themselves known as the creature cracked open its eyes. One was a pure, pale white, and the other blood-red. Both were fixed on Shiv.

His Vitae pulsed out instinctively in recognition of its kin, and it traced out a jagged, alien form some five kilometers wide and twice again as long.

“No...” Valor whispered in Shiv’s mind. Cold, heart-cleaning dread spilled over from the Legendary Pathbearer.

“I was originally saving this one for Marikos. I intended for it to safeguard the original weapon. But I know now that Valor’s work, the Animancy Core, was a crude thing. And your Vitae is life. I thank Udraal for bequeathing me his notes—and giving me insight into what to do with you.” As the Vicar finished his words, he laughed softly. “But this act of creation has left me spent. And so I retreat to enact my work through another. Struggle vainly, Undying One. Struggle, Deathless, and feed my Beast of the Undying Apocalypse...”

The titanic monster took a step forward. The world trembled. And as its body emerged from the ashes, Valor's terror only grew. “That... How did he...”

“...Feed my Deathless Tarrasque.” NEW NOVEL CHAPTERS ARE PUBLISHED ON [novel.fire.net](http://novel.fire.net)

And before Shiv could respond, the monster moved, faster than he could perceive, and he was torn out from the portal along with it, carried away from the realm of ash, and down...

Down from the boundary of the world.

Down toward Blackedge.

## Chapter 155 (I) Tarrasque

There is no easy way to kill a Tarrasque. None. Perish the thought and commit yourself to the most nightmarish struggle of your life. Hold your loved ones, have a final drink with your friends if you have the time, for you should understand that you are fighting an apocalypse on four legs rather than a mere beast.

Some claim that Necromancy is the easiest way to defeat a Tarrasque, so long as they are not the Cursed variant. This is perhaps technically true, except for the fact that you need to hit the Tarrasque, and that is not a given. Even a juvenile Tarrasque that has only begun its rampage is still a High Heroic-Tier adversary. You will need Legendary Reflexes to reliably track its movements, and you will need Legendary Divination or Awareness to properly hit it from afar.

Trying to use magic against it is near hopeless because it can emit a colossal field of “anti-magic” that shreds all mana in its vicinity. Furthermore, trying to flee from it doesn't work either, as the Tarrasque can invoke the power of a singularity, pulling you in unless you have Legendary Physicality to fight off the forces of a collapsing star. This might be an exaggeration for a juvenile Tarrasque, but once they hit maturity, that is not a lie. The Tarrasque can, at least for a moment, exert the influence of a collapsing star—and even Legendary Toughness will not be able to save you should you be caught.

And then comes the truly miserable part, trying to break the Tarrasque's armor. A Tarrasque's outside is layered with an exoskeletal shell that causes most kinetic and magical attacks to glance right off. Should you manage to overwhelm and break that, you will have to deal with its inner scales, which harden and become absolutely immune to a specific kind of damage. Then, finally, after you break the scales, you have to deal with its true hide, which is simply very, very, very robust against magic and physical attacks.

And finally, you will get to its flesh. Its only vulnerable organ is its central nucleus. It is sort of a fusion between a heart and a brain, and it keeps the rest of the Tarrasque's body functioning. Furthermore, it's located at the very core of the Tarrasque, so getting to it requires you to cleave through its body. Of course, you will need to overcome its Legendary regeneration to achieve this feat, so nothing short of a small army of powerful Pathbearers has any hope of prevailing.

Understand that a Tarrasque is not something a single person fights alone. It's something that your entire world bands together to bring down through sheer attrition and overwhelming firepower.

Failing that, well, there are various means of ending your own life I can recommend. Included in the following pages are alchemical remedies to induce a feeling of overwhelming calm and a peaceful demise...

-Tarrasque: Beast of the End

Husk of the Adamantine Voidmantid

Condition: Severely Wounded

Everything inside Shiv shattered. His armor burst apart. He shot past the threshold of pain and entered a new realm where all he felt was overwhelming numbness. The winds glided over his broken body, but he didn't feel that. Darkness crept into his vision, but he refused to black out. He pressed a hand hard against his enemy, his immense and overwhelming adversary, and he tried to drain the Tarrasque of its vitality.

A trickle of vitality flowed into Shiv—but his focus shattered when an eruption of all-consuming light blossomed out of the Tarrasque. The monster's mana left it in an enveloping blast of glorious white. Shiv howled in agony as every single magical skill he had felt like it was being wrenched out of his soul, like someone was gouging his core clean with a rusted blade, flaying every single mana field he had off his being. His biokinetic hydras were torn asunder, their bodies rendered into scattering sprays of red. His inner mana membrane burst apart. Shiv's Psychomancy, Hydromancy, and Pyromancy dissolved outright. The only field that didn't hurt him to lose was Chronomancy, but even that was shattered.

The titanic beast performed a feat Shiv had experienced earlier at the hands of Jessica Hawgrave. Somehow, it managed to discharge its Magical Resistance as well. And while Hawgrave's blast was merely a flash that filled a room, the Tarrasque's was a star going supernova—and it was unleashing all that power right into Shiv's face.

He felt death approaching. He felt his life slipping free from his broken body, and then the Tarrasque finally made impact—Shiv-first against the ground. The Deathless choked as his body turned to a smear. He felt his organs turn to paste, blood spray out from every orifice, and darkness splashed through him. The light left his vision, and the cold fingers of death pulled him down into the pleasant depths of nonexistence—

Adamantine Adaption 176 > 178

A surge of light exploded before Shiv's eyes. He woke screaming as an ocean of vitality was poured directly into his body. He gagged, coughing violently as he spat out mouthfuls of blood. His flesh began to knit itself, his organs filled as his bones were snapped back in place, his ruptured muscles were fused together, and his mutilated form was reforged into a healthy wholeness once more. His armor regenerated as well.

Surprise consumed Shiv, but understanding followed soon after. He stared down at a radiant arrow embedded in his chest, an arrow that burned with a brilliant flame. It was the same fire he'd seen within Hawgrave's bottle, the one she'd used to fix both him and his armor. It also didn't take much deducing for him to know that the arrow came from Roland. Roland, who was bombarding the Tarrasque looming

over Shiv, striking its body with a thunderstorm of arrows where it stood at the bottom of a titanic crater somewhere in the war-scarred wasteland. At least it didn't drop on the town directly, Shiv thought, somewhere between surprise and relief.

Bright blasts blossomed across its colossal hide, and the Tarrasque resembled a mountain looming over Shiv. A mountain being hammered by the sky itself. But despite everything, it barely shook.

Then, a rumble of thunder vibrated the air and reached his ears. No, not thunder. It was cackling laughter, and to Shiv's disbelief, it actually sounded a bit like his own.

The constant explosions shrouded the back of the immense beast in a broadening expanse of light. Though it was consumed by shadows, Shiv could still see its eyes, one white, one red, and he could feel its Vitae spilling over him, caressing his mockingly, trying to rip his life free from him. But though it pulled at his Vitality, his Vitaemancy field kept his life force in place. The Tarrasque let out a confused hum as Shiv snarled and shot into the air.

If this thing thought he was going to be easy prey, though, it wasn't going to happen.

He accelerated himself into its body. He slammed a fist into its underside before slashing up with his Skysplitter. His blade, however, bounced off the Tarrasque's impenetrable exterior. It felt like he was using a piece of plastic to saw through a pole made out of metal. Strangely, the texture of the monster's outside felt like a crystalline layer, and the place he impacted shuddered thereafter.

Then, before Shiv could react, the very cut he inflicted on it was reflected into his body. A cut swept through Shiv. A deep laceration washed along his torso. His punch followed thereafter. He spiked himself against the force, holding in place as his mind struggled to process what had just happened.

A damage reflection skill? Shit. That's going to be—

Something smashed into Shiv, whipping into him faster than he could see. It cleaved his arm from his body and flicked him across the land as if he were a flea caught in a hurricane. Shiv impacted a smooth surface several times, and as he tumbled, he caught sight of spell patterns beneath him. As he took in his surroundings, his mind ground to a halt.

He was back home.

He could see Starhawk's Perch, Minhall Avenue, the residential clusters—

And he also caught sight of something else. Massive smouldering mounds of ash outside buildings.

He had a suspicion as to why they were there, but he didn't want to think about it. Not with the desperate struggle taking place right now.

As he finally slid to a halt, groaning from the sheer weight of the blow, he finally processed that he was lying atop Blackedge's wardings, and they were failing wardings at that. Cracks were spreading across the layered magical barriers protecting the town. Spell patterns were winking out one after another, and Shiv could feel the mana beneath his remaining hand and legs quivering beneath his weight.

Shiv's stomach dropped. The town wasn't going to be able to hold out for long. He pulled himself up to his feet with a pulse of his gravity field. The loss of his arm would have been agonizing before, but by

now Shiv barely noticed. He was too busy being overwhelmed by another sensation: the feeling of absolute dread.

Nightmarish disbelief flowed through Shiv's battered body as he laid eyes on the revealed form of the Tarrasque for the first time. Above, Sullain's former weapon broke apart into a descending ball of fire, and that bathed the great beast in light.

The Tarrasque stood in the lower portion of the old city's ruins, but still looked down on the town. Its titanic body rippled with gravity distortions, resembling something between a shark, a toad, and a turtle, but also countless more creatures Shiv couldn't be sure about. Its outermost shell was a layer of a jagged, crystalline material. Shiv could see Blackedge reflected along the fractal edges of the mighty beast's exoskeleton. Hundreds of colossal tentacles sprouted free from its back, each one was ridged with diamond-like teeth. At the ends of each of the tentacles were gleaming eyes—eyes that stared like Shiv, eyes that glistened with different kinds of mana.

The Tarrasque had four building-sized legs, but this one also sported two arms. Muscular humanoid arms that clutched twin crystalline daggers made from the same force-reflecting substance as its shell. And then there was its face.

A face that was a hybrid between the bestial and the human. It even had a tuft of black hair in a short and messy style.

Its features faintly resembled a young man's, and it looked at him, sporting a jubilant grin.

"What the... felling fuck?" Shiv stammered, his mouth trembling with a mix of horror and incredulous disbelief.



“Shiv! Shiv! What’s happen—” Adam’s head peeked out from Shiv’s cape. The Gate Lord choked as he saw the Shiv-faced Tarrasque leering at them.

Shiv spat blood on the ground and rubbed his nose. Nothing for it. Time to keep fighting. “Get back inside, Adam. No opening right now. I think I have to soften it up a little.”

Adam looked up at him with utter disbelief. The Gate Lord was shaking too—doubtlessly suffering extreme mana strain as well from the Tarrasque detonating its Magical Resistance. “Soften it up? Are you mad? You—”

“It can only kill me so many times before it gets tired,” Shiv murmured, looking the mountain-sized abomination up and down. “I’ll win. Eventually.”

The Tarrasque laughed again, and it began to stagger forward slowly, shaking the landscape with every step. It was taunting him—ignoring every arrow Roland hit it with. Arrows capable of utterly disintegrating Shiv in an instant. If there was an example for what Legendary Toughness looked like, this would be it.

“Adam,” Shiv growled. “Back inside. Don’t risk it.”

The Gate Lord shot Shiv a worried expression, but nodded. “I just need an opening. Just one.”

“Yeah,” Shiv replied as Adam sank back into the Forest of Alloy. “Just one.”

But why did it feel like Adam's special arrow wouldn't be enough?

Before he could ruminate on the hopelessness of the situation further, the Tarrasque spoke.

"Ah. You talked Young Lord Arrow into hiding again. How kind of you. But this will change nothing, dear child. I will pry him free from your dimensional cape. And then I will offer him mercy—for I am not his father. I am not a butcher. As long as he converts and accepts the Great One's glory, he will be spared."

But rather than a nightmarish facsimile of his own voice as he'd feared, Sullain's voice echoed out from the Tarrasque. Somehow, the Vicar was still bound to his walking natural disaster.

"For fuck's sake, your obnoxious babbling makes the damned Tarrasque even worse," Shiv grumbled. He began stomping toward the massive beast with blade in hand. Terror lashed at his mind, but fear was only fuel for Shiv's aggression. He wasn't turning away from this fight. "It was bad enough when it was kicking the shit out of me. Now I have to hear you spit your bullshit through its lips too. And why did you make it look like me, you creepy felling bastard?"

Sullain chuckled like he was a kindly old priest instead of some Abyssal jackass trying to slaughter tens of thousands of innocent people. "I suppose you can call this beast your child. It was your soulstuff that made it possible after all, and so it shouldn't be surprising that it took on several of your qualities. Narratives can be inherited to some extent. That is why there are bloodlines in this world. The System values the individual, but the individual is shaped by the world, and you, undying one, have shaped a weapon unlike any other."

Shiv's expression twisted further and further with every word the Legendary Mage spoke.

“Again, I must thank Udraal for making you. I must thank Udraal, for he offered me satisfaction beyond satisfaction. It will be my delight to watch as this creature destroys Blackedge, as it purges the non-believers, as it tears the tower serving as the Starhawk’s connection to this world. As it presses down on Roland Arrow’s body and forces him to WAIL!”

Sullain shouted the final words, and the Tarrasque slammed a titanic foot down against the wards. The cracks lining the magical barrier turned into fissures that began shaking immediately. Moreover, the Tarrasque’s casual tantrum-induced stomp unleashed the force of a tornado. Shiv cursed as he used his Outside Context Problem to avoid the overwhelming blast. It tore across the top of the barrier and ripped through where he stood.

Pieces of magical shielding were shredded free from around Blackedge as well, and the hurricane winds carried far and wide.

Thank the System for Roland’s Vitality Arrow, Shiv thought to himself. He would have been dead if the Town Lord hadn’t flooded him with life force earlier. He definitely wouldn’t be able to use his Unique Skill right now.

Shiv’s thoughts went blank as the Tarrasque looked around. It was momentarily confused, but then, its head suddenly snapped in his general direction, and it narrowed its eyes.

A thousand-thousand alarm bells rang inside Shiv’s head, and he didn’t waste time waiting to find out if the damn abomination could actually sense him. Shiv accelerated toward the Tarrasque, his mind whirling. He couldn’t communicate with Adam and the others while he was outside context, and he realized he couldn’t communicate with them anyway because his Psychomancy had been ripped clean from his soul. His magic would take time to reconstitute, but there was still a hope—something of a plan. If Adam could get his very angry arrow to strike the Tarrasque, then maybe it could strike a killing blow, or at least injure it severely enough for Roland to put it down.

But something kept gnawing at Shiv.

Something told him not even that would be enough.

He ignored the feeling and went for the Tarrasque's eyes. He spiked himself 100 times in a row. His body instantly came asunder, his flesh peeling like tatters, his outer armor ripping apart from the sheer acceleration. He slammed his Skysplitter right into the red, mana-filled orb that was its right eye.

The tip of Shiv's blade snapped off.

Outside Context Problem 65 > 66

Deepest Edge 66 > 67

Shiv stopped dead, and he emerged from his outside context state in a blast of white and red. He discharged himself before launching himself back in time to four seconds ago. Fire and force exploded over the monster's head. When the wave of destruction passed, the unharmed Tarrasque winked its right eye once as it grinned at Shiv.

Chapter 155 (II) Tarrasque

The Deathless sighed. "That was absolutely godsdamn bullshi—"

The Tarrasque tore across existence in a blink of violence. Roland's arrows cut through the space the Legendary monster once occupied and struck nothing at all. The Tarrasque reappeared beside Blackedge and swung something into his skull.

Everything went black.

But Shiv didn't pass out. Instead, he felt something grind its way through his skull, carving down through his forehead, gouging his eyes clean. The Deathless gripped something with his remaining arm, and he felt it rip through his armored hand as well. His fingers were severed as the Tarrasque slashed at him, and suddenly there came a surge of heat at the center of his skull. Shiv felt his brain matter start cooking inside his skull, felt his inner tissues combust.

He kicked his legs. He tried to pull away using his gravitic field, but a stronger force held him in place as the Tarrasque channeled a beam of Pyromancy through his skull, killing him in an instant.

Adamantine Adaption 178 > 184

Gravitic Wrestler 152 > 155

Strider of the Unbending Path 144 > 146

Golemancy 7 > 9

Vitaemancy 71 > 73

Pyromancy 12 > 15

Hydromancy 2 > 6 New NOVEL chapters are published on [novelfire.net](http://novelfire.net)

Psychomancy 16 > 19

Striking Proficiency 41 > 45

Shiv respawned as a swirling mass of Vitae and immediately found himself struggling against the oscillating waves of red and white mana pulsing out from the Tarrasque. The behemoth tried to drain him, but despite everything, his Vitaemancy field prevented its power from seeping into his being.

At the same time, a bright blue arrow curved down from the sky above. It painted a trail in its wake, and it came for the Tarrasque, hidden among the swarm of other arrows. However, the Tarrasque's tendrils swept up through the world, and it channeled a storm of magic in response, blasting all of Roland's projectiles aside. But through the flame came the Animancy Arrow, and it nearly struck the Tarrasque—until it teleported itself and Shiv with another wink of its eye.

Skill Gained: Portomancy 1 (Initiate)

Shiv felt his Vitae break apart from the sheer amount of pressure pressing down on his being. Pieces of his existence fractured away, and he felt colder and colder, until finally he found himself drifting next to his bastard spawn in an expanse of black.

Where the hells am I now?

The Tarrasque wrapped a tendril around him. Shiv started draining from it, and for the first time, the Tarrasque let out a slight gasp of discomfort. And there it was: his one true edge against the Tarrasque. It couldn't manipulate Vitae, not like he could. Vitae wasn't a type of magic for it to wield; it was just a source of its power. He drained as much vitality as he could from the enormous beast, and it let him do so with a smile.

"Struggle then, boy," the Tarrasque said. "Break your heart and mind defying me. But this can all end should you simply supplicate."

As soon as Shiv resurrected, the Tarrasque seized him once more. It pulled his limbs in different directions to restrain him and, using its tentacles, held him high before its mountain-sized head. Shiv tried to breathe in, but he couldn't. Everything around him was impossibly cold, and there was no wind.

He saw strange, stick-thin creatures dancing in the distance. Their illusory bodies glowed with ethereal light, and their eyes left contrails of glittering stardust as they spun and twirled. They seemed to be moving west, fleeing from the rising glare of the sun in the east. Shiv briefly found himself blinded by its unfiltered light, and he turned away to take in everything besides it. But as he looked, he found that for long stretches beside, there was nothing else.

There was nothing at all.

Shiv blinked. This was the void.

The Tarrasque somehow teleported them all the way up beyond the atmosphere.

An exasperated breath escaped the Deathless. This wasn't good. Not even a little.

And then, some of Roland's arrows shot out from nowhere. They impacted the Tarrasque, pummeling its body with blasts that could glass entire sections of Lost Angeles. The Tarrasque barely noticed. Shiv saw parts of its crystalline shell crack, but it healed in a near instant. And for the first time, suspended in space, Shiv felt the creeping tendrils of despair crawl through his heart.

How the fuck are we gonna kill this thing?

"I suppose your determination should be applauded," the Vicar said, speaking into his mind. "But this must come to an end now. You wish to be the prodigal son returning to protect your town. Fine, then. Return. And be the hammer that shatters it."

And the Tarrasque's body shuddered. It pulsed with a gravitational power that dwarfed Shiv's by orders of magnitude. But rather than simply being a field, it started drawing the world into its own flesh. Shiv's joints were immediately dislocated as he felt his body get pulled toward it. But still the Tarrasque's tentacles held him still, refusing to let him be drawn into the building singularity forming at the heart of the Tarrasque.



Wells of collapsing gravity cascaded toward the immense beast. The light from the sun was pulled away from the world and swirled around the Tarrasque like an accretion. Shiv felt his organs prolapse, felt them get torn out of his orifices. He tried to use Outside Context Problem, but the Tarrasque detonated its Magical Resistance once more. His mind went blank with pain.

It didn't last.

Shiv gagged violently as a rush of healing energy passed through him. He saw a new tentacle drifting before him, spraying Biomantic mana into his form from its eye. He healed, even after several organs had already been torn free from his flesh. They were drawn toward the Tarrasque as well, tumbling as they left flecks of blood in their wake.

The Tarrasque was trembling. It had built up a colossal amount of gravitational force, and with a smile, it angled itself down, placing itself above Shiv.

Shiv looked behind, and he realized he was staring at continents and oceans. Colossal, twisting storms danced along the vast expanses of blue that stretched across the immense planet. Shiv was stunned as he took in the sheer size of Integrated Earth. He'd never thought it was so big. He couldn't pinpoint where Blackedge was at all.

But that wasn't going to be necessary. He knew the Tarrasque was about to help him.

No! Shiv snarled. He kicked. He struggled. He twisted. As he tried to break out of the Tarrasque's grasp, its uncanny smile grew only wider. No! Shiv cried even louder. Let go, let go!

But the beast wouldn't. Yet, just as it prepared to lurch forward, a shape emerged from behind Shiv. The shape of a man with an arrow nocked, burning with a light of blue and white that seemed to rival the sun itself.

Shiv saw the Tarrasque's eyes widen. He saw Adam with his vector wings blazing bright. The Gate Lord fired his arrow, not at the Tarrasque itself, but right into one of the tentacles holding onto Shiv.

It impacted. An incandescent blast consumed the Tarrasque's entire form. Its body spasmed. It twitched violently, and a massive gravitational wave detonated out from it.

As soon as the Tarrasque's tentacles went slack, Shiv threw himself in front of Adam and braced himself. An enormous blast struck him. He tried parrying it with his Skysplitter, but his blade shattered immediately.

Skysplitter

Condition: Destroyed

Husk of the Adamantine Voidmantid

Condition: Mortally Wounded (Regenerating)

Shiv spiked himself against the blast, hoping against hope to deflect even a small part of this city-obliterating attack and spare Adam's life. He barely lasted half a second, but half a second was all Adam needed to dive back into Shiv's cape.

The last thing Shiv did was shift the Forest of Alloy away so that the resulting inferno wouldn't fry everyone inside.

A gravitational wave that would have gone from one edge of the horizon to the other and beyond back down on Earth eviscerated the Deathless. He died once more, and as he reemerged as a mess of Vitae, he watched the gravitational waves continue sweeping forth. It split the clouds beneath him, leaving a massive cleft in the atmosphere. His insides plunged in disbelief.

The sheer amount of power this thing had... If it really started fighting, would the continents below even survive?

Adamantine Adaption 184 > 191

Gravitic Wrestler 155 > 160

Vitaemancy 73 > 76

The wave of devastation breached the atmosphere and turned into a blade of flames that stretched on for kilometers upon kilometers. Shiv didn't have the words to describe just how powerful the Tarrasque was. This was beyond anything he'd faced. He felt like a wasp trying to wrestle a god into submission.

And then something inside him hardened.

Fine. Let's see how many stings it takes to kill a god, then.

Philosophy 13 > 14

And speaking of god killing. Something moved nearby. He turned his gaze upon the Tarrasque and watched as its body twitched. The power imparted upon it by Adam's arrow finally faded into glittering motes. Shiv stared at the unmoving beast as it drifted there. It was a titan twirling lifelessly in space, but never once did he think it was dead.

For if it were dead, then his Vitae should have stopped rippling from its form, whipping out in curving coronas. Instead, Shiv watched as the Vitae powering it grew brighter, yet brighter, and brighter still. He accelerated forward and sank his Vitae streams into its body. He started draining from it, trying to stop it from coming back. But the Vitae crashed back into its being regardless, and when the light faded thereafter, its eyes came alight with white and red once more.

Its Vitae aura was barely any softer than before.

Shiv had no idea how Vicar Sullain managed to move so much vitality earlier, but Shiv needed something close to that trick to affect this monster at all. Right now, he was a gnat trying to drink away a sea of Vitae.

The Tarrasque stared at Shiv as he resurrected, and its expression turned furious. Shiv's armor hung from his body in broken strands of tissue, leaving him even less protected than before. It lashed out not for him, but for his cape. Shiv felt his insides go cold with absolute terror. He shifted the cape out of the way, and he wrapped himself around one of its tentacles. He began trying to rip more of its vitality out without absorbing—

The Tarrasque punched him with its fist.

The world vanished into a white-point of spreading fire. Death came for Shiv again...

Adamantine Adaption 191 > 195

And the coldness of final oblivion followed right after as it cleaved through his Vitae with a swing from its blade. A coruscating wave of light tore past Shiv and left a scar of light across the void. It was bright. So bright that the sun's rays were dim by comparison. It swung on Shiv again—but then an arrow hit the edge of its blade.

The cut of the colossal knife went wide, barely missing him by a meter. Then, an arrow infused with vitality detonated against him right after. Shiv resurrected in an instant, and before the Tarrasque could do anything else, another arrow hit the Deathless, this one detonating in a spread of Dimensionality that wrenched him out of the void.

Shiv felt himself get drawn across space once more. As he twisted and tumbled through the chaos, oxygen filled his lungs again, and he choked. Light began to approach him, and he saw what looked to be a war-shaken room filled with broken glass and debris come into shape at the end of a blurred tunnel. As he finally emerged, he almost smashed into the ground, but he felt several arms catch him.

They weren't enough. The small group of Pathbearers trying to catch Shiv toppled over and fell to the ground with him. He grunted a slurred apology as he tried to get back on his feet. He stumbled, and someone caught him.

"Easy there," a hoarse-sounding Pathbearer said. "You've been teleported from quite a distance away."

Shiv looked up and found himself staring at a bald and unfamiliar man. He looked aged, and his armor was chipped and stained with dried blood. "What... Where..."

Shiv blinked. He knew this place. He had been here nearly a month ago during the Festival of the Eclipse. This was the uppermost floor of Starhawk's Perch. Roland Arrow's personal abode. And there, slumped over in a chair, utterly emaciated, looking like more than half a corpse, was the Town Lord. His golden hair was matted to his face. His eyes were bloodshot, and streaks of red were leaking from his every orifice. A group of Biomancers continued pouring their power into his body, and beside him, a petite Psychomancer worked her magic as a thin man kept wiping the blood off his face.

Silence filled the room as Roland and Shiv traded stares. But it was broken by Adam emerging from his cape.

"Father!" Adam cried out, gasping violently as he tried to suck in more air. Behind him, Can Hu emerged as well, its body smoking and damaged. He was followed by a bloodied Rose Van Erren and Valor right after.

Roland gave a surprised blink before a radiant smile lit up his face. "Adam. I—"

Then, his gaze fell on Rose.

Chapter 155 (III) Tarrasque

Roland's expression froze. He stopped moving entirely, and as the seconds dragged on, a look of severe concern came over his Psychomancer.

Rose clutched an open gash on her temple as she swallowed. "Yeah," she breathed, meeting her husband's eyes. A choked laugh escaped her. "I ask myself the same thing when I wake up every fucking morning. But it's..." She looked at the people around her. They were openly gawking. A few made gestures, invoking the Ascendants as they took steps away from her. "It's me. I think. It's me."

Roland suddenly tried to rise from his chair, but his legs gave out under him, and his assistants had to catch with gasps of surprise. Shiv noticed then just how thin the Town Lord was. No wonder the Biomancers were here; they were doing everything they could just to keep him alive. The Psychomancer too. His assistants looked just as haggard as he was, and they were spent beyond measure. Everyone in the room looked ready to collapse aside from Shiv, Adam, and Valor.

A quiet moment followed. Gasps and whispers were traded by the people in the room as Rose staggered toward Roland. Adam bit his lip, and Roland's gaze swiveled to him, searching for answers.

"I—It's a complicated story," Adam said. He glanced at Shiv. "One that I don't know how to tell. But—"

"Fuck! Roland! Incoming!" Rose suddenly cried out. The calm broke. Everyone snapped back into action. The Gate Lord turned away from his resurrected wife and returned son to glare through the walls around him, glass traced with glowing spell patterns of Divination. Violet mana painted a shape beyond the atmosphere, and the spells came with a series of trickling numbers, numbers that decreased with every passing second.

Shiv thought he saw kilometers at the end of the spell patterns. Along with a 16.2 seconds to estimated impact indicator.

A trail was painted. Several interception points were calculated. Roland groaned as he lifted his sun-forged bow high and shaped another brilliant arrow. Valor let out a gasp of pain as Roland's arrow ignited his soul. He threw himself back into Shiv's cape and groaned. "Damnable starlight!"

At the same time, Adam's Righteous Dawn flared. Roland nearly doubled over as he drew his string back—but then an infusion of azure blue energy straightened his back. He gave his son a surprised look, but Adam just clenched his teeth. "Together, father!"

Can Hu stared at the graphs and numbers on the room's glowing walls and wordlessly fled back into Shiv's cape after a second. The Deathless didn't blame it. He kind of wanted to hide in his own cape right now too.

But ultimately there was nowhere to run; the Tarrasque was coming, and Shiv had doubts whether the Yellowstone Republic would survive its impact, let alone Blackedge.

His apprehension was interrupted as Roland called out a name. "Thaen!" he bellowed. Flames erupted from the Town Lord's body as wings spread free from his back, glistening with incandescent power. A massive, translucent figure suddenly loomed over Roland, their form but a shadow, yet one Shiv recognized in an instant.

The Ascendant bore a greatbow in two hands, and a grand spear with another set of arms. The armored figure spread his own wings as well, and he reached down, pressing the tip of his spear against Roland's



back. Shiv watched as a surge of pure, unimaginable power passed over from the Starhawk into his favored champion.

"Starhawk!" Roland cried out, his body straining beyond its limits, yet fueled by Adam's Unique Skill. "Grant me your fire! Grant me all that you may offer!"

"You have done more than anyone could have asked of you. But we are out of options." The Starhawk's voice was sonorous but solemn. "Roland. We need to leave. You must prepare to depart with the Perch and—"

But as Roland's gaze passed over Blackedge, he interrupted the god with only a single word. "Please."

The Starhawk's body language screamed tension and indecision. But then the enshadowed god slumped. "There is a reason I chose you," he intoned with a wistful tone. "There is a reason I favor you. And now it might break us both."

A dark shape emerged in the skies above, scattering the clouds in its wake.

It was like a continent descending on Blackedge, and it was moving so fast the air above was turning to plasma. A wave of apocalyptic destruction trailed behind it. The lands grew black beneath the Tarrasque's shadow, like the final curtain to a play's act being drawn over the sky.

A pulse of power left the Starhawk. The world outside stilled. The Tarrasque halted in midair, perhaps seconds away from impact. A colossal arrow formed over Roland's existing projectile. It grew brighter, brighter than anything Shiv had ever beheld before, and the room swirled with so much mana that even the Deathless started choking from the sheer pressure it exuded.

But this wasn't any kind of mana Shiv knew. No, it felt higher in nature, more significant in a way he couldn't describe. There was a weight to this mana that wasn't possessed by any other kind of magic, and he dared, in that moment, he dared think he would call it divine.

Blood began to spill from Roland's every pore. His body tremored, and a waterfall of sweat poured down Adam's face as well. He was giving all he had to his father, and his father was overchanneling a god's power, preparing to unleash an arrow above all other arrows.

The sheer amount of fire pouring from the Starhawk's silhouette into Roland was having a deleterious effect on the chamber as well. While the people within the room were spared of the most debilitating consequences, the glass was beginning to melt, and the ground beneath him actually ignited. Parts of Roland's flesh simmered and burned.

"Fire!" Rose called out to him. "Fire now! You're overdrawing! Roland, stop!"

But he didn't see her. He couldn't see anything but the arrow he was about to unleash. He drew back on the bow, and Shiv found himself worried about the Town Lord for once, worried that the man wouldn't have the strength to pull the bow all the way back.

Yet, despite his weakened, withered state, he managed. Roland Arrow was nothing if not the epitome of what it meant to be a Pathbearer. He would fire this shot, even if it killed him, and he would see the Tarrasque struck down in return.

Then Shiv frowned. There were windows all around them. The glass hadn't melted yet. How was Roland going to—

The Town Lord unleashed his shot. It phased through the glass, through the divination spells, through the magical barrier surrounding Blackedge. Time began to move as the arrow did, and it surged up into the sky, casting a trail of spreading fire that spilled over Blackedge. Whatever the flame touched was magnified. Shiv watched as the magical patterns coating the protective barrier came to light once more. The barrier itself then came ablaze with power, and its spell patterns burned as well.

Just then, two things happened at once.

The first was Roland Arrow's sudden collapse. He toppled as hissing steam rose from his body. One of his Biomancers cried out as he channeled his power into the Town Lord. "His heart stopped! He's undergoing total organ failure. Keep him alive. We need to keep him alive!"

And at the same time, as both Adam and Rose rushed to Roland's side, his arrow curved high in the air, moving faster than Shiv could perceive. As it met the descending Tarrasque, the sky was cleaved in two. From the bottom, a brush of spreading fire colored the horizon bright with the colors of a star's light as it split the world from below. Columns of devastation and annihilation plumed out behind the Tarrasque, fracturing the atmosphere on high.

A clash followed.

The world faded into nothing but color. White and red mana were kissed by a building supernova. And then Blackedge began to rattle violently from the explosion. A blast followed. A blast that expanded horizontally, twisting space and existence as if a collapsing fold had twisted over reality. As it spread out far, the clouds were atomised for countless leagues across. The heavens shook.

As the arrow's cataclysmic detonation finally faded, the Tarrasque continued to fall. It fell in parts and pieces, with most of its upper half and its legs missing. Shiv's heart leapt, but the Tarrasque was still falling toward them. And a third of a titan was still more than enough to flatten a small town.

"Shit," Shiv cursed.

He cast a final look at the Town Lord and everyone else, and realized Roland wasn't going to be able to save them now. Frankly, Roland might not even be able to save himself in this instant.

"Adam," Shiv called out. The Gate Lord was on his knees, pouring as much power as he could into the unmoving body of his father as his mother cradled Roland's head in her lap. "Go find an orc Biomancer—put an arrow near Helix. He might be able to do something. I'm going to make sure the bastard up there's dead."

"Shiv, wait—" Adam called out.

The Deathless didn't. He activated Outside Context Problem and blasted up from the perch. He spiked himself up into the air, passing through the magical barrier as he went faster and faster. His inertial sheath thundered with building force, and he accelerated towards the falling Tarrasque.

Yet what he'd hoped to be a corpse quickly began to twitch and move. Shiv felt his heart stop. No, he thought to himself. Fuck's sake, no, just stay dead. But the System was determined to spite him. The Tarrasque's flesh melded back together in knitting streams of biomass. Its torso came into shape in less than a second, and it took less than two seconds for it to regenerate completely. And by the time Shiv struck it, it was already whole, and it hadn't even spent any vitae to come back to life this time.

FUCKING COME ON! The Deathless roared internally. THIS IS ABSOLUTE BULLSHIT!

Absolute hopelessness consumed Shiv, but he drove a fist against the Tarrasque regardless. He drained its vitality. He swatted at it, using his ruptured Biomancy, ignoring the pain. He activated his Strider of the Unbending Path. Time stopped. The Tarrasque didn't. It moved as well, a golden shell shrouding its body. Shiv spiked down preemptively. His dodge was pure fortune—and still not good enough. The Tarrasque's right hand missed him. The massive limb bearing a crystalline blade missed Shiv by twenty meters.

But one of its tentacles punched clean through his chest.

Dodge 15 > 17

The Deathless triggered his Outside Context Problem again and shot forward. He slammed into the Tarrasque once more and discharged against the creature, futility be damned. It immediately shredded his body with a forest of thin tentacles. Each one ran through his limbs, and they pulled him taut once more. Shiv snarled as he tried to activate Outside Context Problem for the third time, but then the Tarrasque channeled a beam of Chronomancy into him, and his temporal shell shattered.

He lost track of time, and when he returned, pain erupted across his body as the Tarrasque slammed into the magical barriers protecting Blackedge, using Shiv's comparatively ant-like form as a blunt instrument to batter its surface. Shiv crashed hard against the magical spells. Patterns faded beneath him. He sank a good meter before the remaining wards responded. The Starhawk's fire fueled the flagging spells for now, but Shiv didn't think it would last much longer. The divine mana was seeping away like embers to the wind.

"Here," Sullain's voice sounded. His tone was kindly and gentle, but there was a hidden edge of cruelty there as well. "Let me be generous."

## Chapter 155 (IV) Tarrasque

Once more, Shiv felt a surge of Biomancy pass through him. His flesh healed long enough for him to stand, long enough for him to realize what the Tarrasque was preparing to do. It brought a fist down against him, and through it all, it never stopped channeling its beam of Biomancy into his body.

The Tarrasque swung so hard that the air turned fluid with plasma around it. It would have been enough to disintegrate him entirely if it weren't constantly healing him as well. Because of that, Shiv got to learn what it felt like to burn alive from the inside, to be boiled and fried over and over again, but prevented from dying fully in an endless spiral.

Worse, he felt Blackedge dip as the wards held, but the spells and contraptions keeping it afloat did not. The air resounded with a deafening explosion, but then came the screaming wind as the entire town began to drop toward the chasm, bound for the Abyss.

"Shit..." Shiv groaned. He gritted his teeth and fought on anyway.

He lashed out using his Biomancy field. It crashed against the Tarrasque's face once more—and did nothing. It drew another fist back and showed him a contemptuous sneer. Shiv felt a special kind of hatred for the beast bloom inside him, for it stole not only his Vitae, but also his face. He spat at it. It didn't matter if the act was insolent or that he'd never reach it with his spit anyway. He spat at the Tarrasque even if it was the last thing he would ever do. "Alright then, give me a proper hit, you big—"

It obliged him.

This time, not even the constant stream of Biomancy could keep him alive. It flicked a titanic blade through his body, and the world dissolved into tides of destruction. Shiv died, and as he did, the barriers protecting Blackedge finally shattered. The wards broke apart and scattered in the wind. The spells flickered and dissolved.

The final layer of protection just barely parried away the surge of force and fire swelling down from the behemoth's fist, yet it shattered all the same.

Adamantine Adaption 195 > 199

Dodge 17 > 21

Gravitic Wrestler 160 > 164

Strider of the Unbending Path 146 > 151

Shiv found himself coiled around the Tarrasque. He broke just as fast as he drained its vitality, barely keeping himself in existence, but the Tarrasque ignored him for now. Instead, it reached out for the plunging Blackedge as gravity pulsed toward it in waves, as if the Tarrasque was a major celestial body.

All of a sudden, the town stopped falling.

The Tarrasque held up a single hand, and all of Blackedge went still and rose higher into the air. Some of the weaker buildings were ripped up by their foundations. Shiv could hear screaming, and then silence, as the Tarrasque made a fist. Dozens of buildings collapsed inward, and the belt of debris began to drift around the Tarrasque's body.

Rage exploded inside Shiv. He used it to fuel his vitality drain as he started to resurrect once more.

"Do you see now?" Sullain asked, preaching to Blackedge. "Do you see now the futility of defiance? Do you see now the inevitability of rich, righteous retribution, of death, of destruction, of hopelessness and despair?" The Tarrasque paused as Sullain's voice devolved into a sob. "If you see now, then you understand me. In this moment, we are more alike than you can imagine. Even if you do not believe me, even if you cannot believe me, we are kin. For these are the actions of Roland Arrow!"

The beast's heterochromatic eyes glinted hatefully as it turned its gaze upon Starhawk's Perch. "Come out!" Sullain bellowed.

It was still burning, still aglow with the Starhawk's might, but those fires were fading as well, and Shiv knew Roland was in no condition to respond. Shiv prayed that Adam wouldn't come down—that he would stay away for as long as he could while everything went to shit.

Shiv resurrected, using the brief lull in the Tarrasque's focus to recompose himself. As Sullain sobbed, so did the Tarrasque.

But before he could come up with an angle of attack that would achieve anything but his instantaneous and crushing demise, a shape descended from on high, a golden shape with massive wings.



Shiv looked up, and his breath caught in his throat. Uva, he realized, but rather than hope, dread filled him. Dread, because she was just going to waste her life if she came here. She didn't know what they were facing. "Stay back!" Shiv cried. "Just stay—"

But she didn't. She couldn't. She accelerated. He knew because he would do the same, even if it meant his actual end.

She slammed down upon the Tarrasque, and the dragon vanished in a flash of gold. The colossal monstrosity barely registered the—

A few missing seconds later, one of Shiv's ribs was broken, and he was flying backward. THIS CHAPTER IS  
UPDATE BY NOV e lfire.net

As he came to a lurching halt with a tug of his gravitic field, he found that he had left a trail of fissures along a concrete path. He was down Minhall Avenue right now. To his left, he saw the town bank collapse in on itself, several walls toppling over. He could hear noises on the inside. People screaming. People praying.

But his focus didn't linger on them. Instead, it settled on the massive, golden dragon struggling within the Tarrasque's grasp just above, the image like that of an ordinary lizard clasped in a person's hand.

"And what is this?" the Tarrasque asked. "What in glorious madness is this? A lone dragon attacking me? No, something else."

The Vicar sounded tired. He commanded the Tarrasque to place a single tentacle against the dragon's head, and it unleashed a pulse of Magical Resistance that echoed out in every direction.

Shiv was driven to his knees as his mana was flensed free from his body. Every bit of remaining magic across Blackedge winked out as well.

Uva was blasted free from the dragon with a scream, and the Tarrasque expertly caught her between two claws, dropping one of its knives upon a residential cluster to free its hand. Anger briefly exploded inside Shiv as he watched a few blocks of Blackedge turn to rubble and dust, but his mind lurched back to Uva in an instant. She cried out as the Tarrasque clenched its fingers.

Berserk 17 > 18

Shiv didn't think. He launched himself through the air in a blind rage. He had no plans. There were no plans. There was no hope. But he still had to try. He still had—

Something punched through his abdomen. He was just 30 meters away from Uva when he found himself halted in midair. A ragged cry of frustration and hatred escaped from his throat. He spiked himself again and again. He tried to trigger Outside Context Problem, but a half-second before he crossed over, a blow struck him in the head, before another spiked him down into the ground.

Concrete exploded around him. The world spun. And once more, something pierced his gut. He was lifted into the air once more. He tried to respond. He tried to gain control over his body. But his equilibrium was lost to him. Everything was tumbling and turning constantly. There was a ringing in his ears, and blood and teeth were spilling out from his mouth. As his hearing returned with a flash emitted by the Tarrasque, he could hear Uva screaming his name.

"Hush now," the Tarrasque said, speaking Uva. It held its claws high, observing the struggling Umbral closely. "What a curiosity you are. To encounter one of the Composer's children here, and fighting for a human town at that? Why, you should understand my plight better than any other."

Uva attempted to escape its grasp and reach for Shiv with her abstract Physicality skill. Her body flattened, bending and twisting in every direction in a frantic blur of movement, but the Tarrasque kept her pinned in place, using pulsing waves of Dynamancy and Biomancy to force her body back into shape.

Desperation ignited inside Shiv. He thrashed. He spiked himself in all directions, discharging over and over again, caring nothing for the worsening of his wounds. He needed to get to her. He needed to—

The Tarrasque made a gesture with one of its tentacles, and Shiv was pinned in place by an impossible weight. A crushing cage of force closed around him, and he felt his ribs break and his spine start to fracture. He tried to breathe, but his lungs burst. An agonized rasp escaped from him, and he heard a feral cry of anger leave Uva's lips as she channeled her gaze into the Tarrasque.

Yet, as the alien colors of the Outside flooded into existence and spilled across the great beast's body, it merely frowned in response. The Dreamtaker's New-Dreamt flowed out, unnatural creatures of impossible shapes, but even the eldritch spawn managed no more than to make the Tarrasque open its mouth and swallow the flood entirely, treating the breach in the veil like a feast. It slammed its jaws closed, and it began to crunch. A few of the New-Dreamt carved clean through its flesh, emerging in broken fractals and strange, sinuous forms. Yet, the wounds they left closed a mere second thereafter, and the Tarrasque simply tore them apart with flicks from its tentacles.

The colors stopped flowing out from Uva's eyes, and she sagged, her body deflated, and she flopped over. Shiv could see her face. Her helmet was cracked, and her expression was one of exhaustion and utter terror. He spiked his own field once more, but the cage around him tightened so much that darkness began creeping in around his vision.

"The colors of the Dreamtaker's realm," Sullain said, surprise tinting his voice. The Vicar sighed through the Tarrasque. "How interesting. I did not know there was someone corrupted to this degree. Even though I spent years learning, trying to understand their strange ways, I never could fully perform their feats of magic. They are not quite like ours. I suspect the lores they inhabit are simply far too different."

Sullain sighed again. The Tarrasque sagged with misery and exhaustion, a dissonance welling up inside Shiv at the behemoth's body language. "Misery. This did not need to be. This did not need to be at all. My goals and dreams were nothing more than to dedicate all I had to my studies, to lead those of Conjoined Faith as an example. And now, millions lie dead. Millions!" The Tarrasque's voice transformed into a rage-filled scream. It washed across Blackedge, tearing roofs from buildings and toppling half-collapsed structures.

But more clearly than anything besides, the scream contained the anguish of someone who had lost too much. "An entire city! A peaceful haven, my beautiful Submission! And now the Necrotechs who perished, who martyred themselves to take retribution, join them in their rest by the Great One's side. And you are at fault! You, Roland Arrow! All this death, all this miserable destruction! You have caused this despair. You!"

Shiv started draining vitality from the Tarrasque, and it didn't even notice.

"People of Blackedge, come out! Come out! Come, bear witness to how your Town Lord hides! How he hides after he butchered and scorched my city! How he hides as he leaves you to your fate!"

The Tarrasque made a pulling gesture, and what followed was a terrifyingly controlled feat of magic. Every last house lining the top side of the city was stripped down to its barest foundations. People were exposed within, people dressed and undressed, people of all races, be they organics or machined, be they adults or children. And the people shuddered together, huddling in fear before the titanic abomination looking down upon their town. And just then, Shiv saw a series of wretched chains flowing into the creature.

It had Shape of Monstrosity as well. Or an even more powerful skill.

"Come on," Shiv groaned as he looked up at a sky dark with debris and stained with mana. "How much harder are you going to fuck me, System?"

"And you. Nuisance. Deathless One. It is time for a lesson."

The Tarrasque released Shiv, flinging him across the ground. He slid along the broken pavement, and a bloodied smear painted the way before he finally came to a halt. Shiv shook. His body ached. Despite everything, despite how broken he was, he pulled himself up using his field. His limbs dangled. His lungs were ruined. But he still had a working eye, and he still had working jaws, and he still had a few teeth left. He dragged himself toward the Tarrasque, spike after spike. He barely managed ten meters before it struck him again. His blood sprayed across the ground. As it broke him, it healed him again, hitting him over and over.

"Vicar, stop this!" Uva screamed desperately. "Nothing good can possibly come from this! Your crusade is in breach of every treaty! You have nothing to go back to if you continue—Stop this! Stop!"

But Sullain wasn't interested in her anymore. Instead, he turned his creation's fury upon Shiv, upon its undying victim.

Adamantine Adaption 199 > 200 (Skill Evolution Imminent)

Its tentacles descended in an endless series of whips, and the Tarrasque infused each of the blows with magic as well. Shiv felt his mind crack. He felt ice spill over his body. He felt his arms shatter and then regrow. Flames detonated inside his stomach. A swarm of insects burst out from under his flesh, eating through him. A second later, a flood of electricity crashed down upon him, and Shiv clenched his teeth, desperate not to scream.

The beating barely lasted for a few seconds, but it felt like an eternity. By the end, he found himself lying halfway up a staircase of cracked stone.

Strings of mucus leaked out from his nose, and blood dripped out from his mouth as he rolled over.

Then, as he looked down upon the ground, in a surreal moment of clarity, he realized he'd lain on these very steps once before.

You are a wretched thing. A revolting creature. A spawn of wrongness and taint. The Town Lord is a good man, but his goodness has turned to a flaw with you. He should have allowed us to burn you on the altar like the demon you were while still inside your own mother's corpse. He should have... But he refused. And even now, he refuses to allow anyone else to correct his mistake.

Shiv choked out something between a pained sob and a disbelieving laugh.

Life probably thought it was being real funny right now. Shiv just thought it was kind of an asshole.

He'd looked towards Starhawk's Perch. Roland Arrow wasn't going to be able to save him. Not like that time. Shiv hoped beyond hope that Adam had fled with the others as Shiv and Uva kept the Tarrasque busy.

No one could save them. No one here, at least.

No one... Shiv thought. But we're still here. So let's see how long we can drag this out. Fucking orcs... Inquisition. Where are you shits when I need you? Hurry the hells up...

He pushed himself off the ground and glared at the Tarrasque. He spat red on the ground and scoffed. Force wasn't working, so it was time for a new strategy: Psychology.

"So I guess you're a little too good to kill me with your own hands, huh, Sullain? Now that I mention it, do you even have your own hands anymore? Do you even have a real body at all?" Shiv laughed. "Or did Roland take that from you too?"

The Tarrasque's eyes widened. The beast stared at him with utter disbelief. "Why? Why do you persist when all is obviously lost? Why?"

"Because I get to tell you to go fuck yourself," Shiv rasped as he took an agonizing step forward. "Because I don't know any other way. It doesn't matter that it's hopeless. It never mattered. I'm here right now, and so I'll do whatever it takes. I'll do whatever I can."

And the one thing Shiv didn't mention was that he was doing all that he could to stall for time. Because there might just be help on the way. The massive envelope of destruction left over from when Roland's great arrow clashed against the Tarrasque's falling form continued to block the sky. Below the cloud of devastation, Shiv saw shapes glittering in the air, coming into existence with bursts of teleportation. And to his dismay, what he saw were Necrotech Pathbearers. They appeared in the sky and above the Tarrasque in their thousands upon thousands.

As if he hadn't been fucked enough already.

The Tarrasque turned slightly but mostly ignored its allies. More Necrotechs began to blink into Blackedge. They emerged from pockets, from spilling waves of Dimensionality. They glared at Shiv as he staggered toward the Tarrasque. His fists were clenched, and he was just waiting for the great beast to strike him again.

But it didn't. It hesitated.

And Shiv continued. "Okay, so all of you..." He waved his hands at the Necrotechs. "All of you crawled out of the Abyss... just to burn this specific town down, yeah?" He looked upon the gathered army with scorn, and he spat a globule of blood in their direction. "But what the hells did this town do to you? Roland Arrow? Him? Okay, fine. I get that." He turned in the direction of Starhawk's Perch and snorted. "But I probably have more grievances with Roland Arrow than most of you do. If anyone's going to be kicking his ass, it would be me at the top of his list."

Several of the death-armored Necrotechs looked at each other, surprised by his words more than offended. A scornful laugh escaped the Tarrasque.

"Oh, and what have you lost?" the Vicar whispered.

"My life!" Shiv shouted. "My entire life! I lived here, yet I was barely a person. So what? You lost a city? You lost loved ones? Yeah, they're gone. They don't suffer anymore. I have known nothing but the heel of Roland Arrow—pressed just hard enough to hold me down, but not hard enough to end my misery. Your punishment was death. My punishment was life. I lived it, and yet here I am, standing up for it!"

Shiv knew he was being absolutely outrageous. He knew that his grievances were practically nothing compared to theirs, the Necrotechs who had likely lost families and loved ones to whatever atrocity Roland had inflicted upon their city for reasons Shiv couldn't begin to grasp. That part had always stuck



out to Shiv. Even if he hated the Town Lord, the man had never struck him as someone who would burn a city to the ground. But that didn't matter at this moment. What mattered right now was that, since he couldn't beat them through force, maybe he could capture their attention for just a while longer. And this was where his experience with the orcs finally came in handy. Not because of violence, but just because of power plays.

Psychology 34 > 42

"You... you insolent..." Sullain sputtered, and then he let out a disgusted breath. "You distract me with your dishonest taunts."

Shiv felt his bowels plummet. "No," he said, with all the conviction he could muster. "Just think about it. I'm still here for one reason and one reason alone: I'm not going to let anyone kick the shit out of Roland Arrow before I do. Me!" He slammed his fist into his chest. "I don't care what he did to the rest of you, but I know this for a fact. Blackedge..."

Shiv swallowed as he looked around, at the streets he'd known all his life, at the people hiding within the stripped-down buildings. He saw faces caked in blood and dust. Some he recognized, most he'd never bothered to remember. But they knew him, and strings of fear flowed into his flesh as well, feeding him with strength, infusing his magic with more power. It wasn't nearly enough to stop the Tarrasque, but it did make him feel a little bit better.

"I hate most of the people here," Shiv said honestly. His words were barely a whisper. "I hate almost all of you. For everything you did to me, and everything you didn't. For treating me like I was a goddamn plague, I despise you, and I think I always will."

Shiv saw several of the locals look away from him.

"But just because I hate them doesn't mean they deserve to die." He looked at Sullain. "If you weren't full of shit, if you were being honest at all, then you would let these people go. You'd teleport them somewhere else, move them to the ruins below, and deal with Roland by himself. Because he's the one who sinned."

"They are his people," Sullain hissed. There was an edge of outrage to his voice now. "They are his. His, as Submission was mine. When Roland—

"Yeah, I know,"

Shiv interrupted him audaciously. "Yeah, when Roland sacked your city, he killed countless billions of people. But just how much do you want him to rule over you?"

The Tarrasque fell silent once more. No one else spoke. The Necrotechs looked at him as if he were mad, and Shiv noticed a look of appreciation on Uva's weary face.

"Well, how much? Tell me. Because right now, it looks to me that he scarred you so deeply that you will never let it go. That you can't turn away from the fact that everything he took from you will never come back."

"Be silent," Sullain whispered.

"And here you are, in your moment of triumph. And guess what your reward is? You made yourself into a mirror of Roland Arrow. Great fucking job, dumbshit. What a prize."

"Silence!" And the Tarrasque began whipping him once more. He was launched through the air and slammed down on the ground over and over again. His flesh was torn open. His flesh was used back shut. For ten minutes, or maybe just ten seconds, he was brutalized. For ten seconds, he prayed for death. And at the end of those ten seconds, he got back up, like nothing had happened. "So, as I was saying—"

He was ripped off the ground by a tug of Dynamancy. He hovered in the air, trying not to black out as the Tarrasque choked him with its ocean of magic.

"Do you wish to die first? Is that it?" Sullain's voice was edged with hurt rather than actual hatred. "Do you think that it makes you powerful to provoke such pain in me, to drive me to the brink of madness, of misery?"

Then, two voices interrupted the vicar. The first was Valor's as the Legendary Pathbearer emerged from Shiv's cloak and raised a ghostly hand. "Sullain! You blind, ignorant fool! Stop this!"

And the other—

"OI, CUNT! LET MY FUCKING COMMIS GO!"

Shiv's head snapped toward the voice, and his jaw dropped. Standing a hundred meters away, at the end of Minhall Avenue, where the stairs rose to the upper city, was a man in chef's whites. His messy mane of dirty blonde hair was even more wild than before, and his cheeks were slimmer than Shiv

remembered. But his face was red. Raw-red and furious. And he advanced on the Tarrasque with nothing but a chef's knife.

"Valor?" Sullain hissed with surprise.

"Georges!" Shiv gasped.

And just then, all at the same time, the dark clouds above were silently parted by a shape. Shiv blinked up at the sky, and he thought that the shape loosely resembled a sword. One that was the size and width of a mountain range.

"Ohhh, shit," Shiv groaned. "Sullain. Look up!"

"You cannot fool me with these feeble tricks, boy," Sullain said. Two tentacles extended out from the Tarrasque's body, prepared to seize both Valor and Georges. "I know—"

"BY THE GREAT ONE!" a Necrotech cried, pointing up into the air. "It's—"

And his breath caught in his throat as a colossal humanoid burst through the clouds just behind the blade, clad in Inertium armor and standing upon wheels of screaming flame. "Oh, hey, guys. Thanks for getting through the wards, but you can fuck off now. That's not a suggestio—Ascendants, is that a fucking Tarrasque?!"

Hawgrave's voice lost any hint of lackadaisy as she noticed the massive beast looming over Blackedge. And Sullain snarled as he noticed her as well. "Titansbane!"

And then came a third voice.

A voice Shiv knew all too well.

A voice that came not from the sky, but from the Abyss deep below.

"SULLAINNNN! SURRENDER YOURSELF! SURRENDER AND BE SPARED THE WRATH OF SIR MAAARIKOOOS!"

The Deathless felt his jaw drop. The Tarrasque's expression was much the same.

Then, suddenly and without warning, teleportation pockets exploded all across Blackedge as a horde of gray-skinned monsters flashed into existence and immediately leaped at the Necrotech army.

"SECURE THE INSUL!" Bonk cried through the havoc. "AND KILL THAT CHALLENGER-BLESSED TARRASQUE!"

World Quest Gained: Slay the Undying Tarrasque.