

Deathless 156

Chapter 156 (I) Orichalcum

World Quests are insidious things. When they appear, it usually means an entire planet or dimension is at stake. This could be the result of an incursion, an impending ecological collapse, a cascading mana storm that has gotten out of hand, another planetary body set to impact said threatened world, or, if you are extremely unfortunate, a Tarrasque that has gotten loose and seeks to butcher and destroy everything in its path.

When the World Quest triggers, every living inhabitant in the world or dimension will receive a notification. The Quest details and rewards will be dispatched immediately, but World Quests do not usually come with varied failure conditions, for the failure condition is self-evident. You lose the place you live in.

Yet, this does not mean that the different factions of a world will band together, for a World Quest is also another means of the System to further its agenda of strife. There are a limited number of recipients that can receive the boons offered by Quest, and thus the struggle becomes twofold.

First, against the threat itself, and then against those who are trying to slay or resolve the danger first. For should you survive, you will still have to face your local adversaries thereafter, and World Quests offer very bountiful rewards. One way or another, even if your world is saved, perhaps your own survival may be in question...

-The Insidious Apocalypse: A Guide to Facing and Surviving World Quests

World Quest Gained: Slay the Undying Tarrasque.

Success: Evolve 3 [Existing Skills] to Master-Tier; Evolve 2 [Existing Skills] to Heroic-Tier (Only 100 Pathbearers may receive this reward); Gain 15 Levels for a Selected Skill; Gain a Legendary-Tier [Equipment]

Failure: Integrated Earth is destroyed and the Undying Tarrasque evolves after absorbing the vitality of the planet.

The notification flashed across Shiv's vision as chaos erupted around him. The orcs' assault was brutal, sudden, and spontaneously coordinated. They came from all sides, tearing through the Necrotechs in a blitz of violence.

Concurrently, a dark shape rose up into the air behind the Tarrasque, and it held a greataxe high into the air. A ball of radiant flame combusted into existence at the edge of the weapon, and it was like the swelling of a brand-new dawn. Hovering in the sky was Sir Marikos, the Fortress that Soars. Where flames spilled free from his right arm, a colossal shield made from dense obsidian manifested over his left. And it was he that the Tarrasque turned to greet before anyone else.

"Enough of this folly! Enough of this madness and travesty!" Marikos thrust his axe out at the Tarrasque, and a rippling wave of brightness across the body of the beast, igniting a few hundred Necrotechs and orcs like they were nothing more than candle wicks. "Surrender. Give yourself unto my custody, and I will see you granted a proper trial before the council. Stay your path, and face your destiny! Or face my wrath!"

Several orcs blasted through the Necrotech lines. They landed atop the Tarrasque before planting several objects on the massive monster's body and teleporting away. Shiv tore himself free from his stupor and spiked himself at the Tarrasque. A Necrotech Deathstalker moved to intercept him—but vanished from existence as large, gray hands pulled them into a dimensional sphere. Necromancy spells slashed through the air to claim Shiv, but wards of corrosive energy manifested around him—just as he slipped out of context once more.

As he splashed back into his Vitae, he halted time and shot up into the air. Valor and Georges had been grabbed by the Tarrasque's tentacles and now dangled from their necks. Uva was still clenched between the great beast's claws as well. Shiv knew he couldn't do any damage to the Tarrasque, but he could absolutely protect the ones he cared for.

He discharged before he got to Georges, and he immediately started prying at the Tarrasque's grip, trying to free his mentor. Shiv knew Georges was a Heroic-Tier Pathbearer, but the man was also a non-martial, so he proceeded with caution. The Deathless grunted with effort as he used his field to pull open the Tarrasque's tentacle, loosening it just enough for Georges to slip free. The action took long enough that he was forced to leave his outside context state, and he immediately tossed Georges into his cape without a word.

As he tried to go for Valor, the very tentacle he'd just pried loose snaked out and ripped an entire rib free from his body. Shiv snarled and spiked himself forward. Next was Valor, then Uva and—

He was too late.

The Tarrasque shifted its body. The air around it combusted—and it was Adam who got to Valor and Uva first. Two Veilpiercers struck the Umbral and the shattered Legend in their shoulders. Pockets of Dimensionality swallowed them a second later, and Vicar Sullain let out a frustrated cry. "DAMNATION! ARROW! I WILL HAVE YOUR SOUL FLAYED FOR THIS!"

The Tarrasque moved, only for a chain of Dynamancy bombs to explode along the top of its body. A hammer of gravitational force yanked the monster downward. It didn't slow the Tarrasque much—just long enough to save Blackedge.

The air came afire as the Undying Tarrasque accelerated toward Shiv—and the rest of Blackedge behind him. Fire, force, and utter devastation billowed over his body, but the Deathless just scowled in the face of another ugly death.

But it was a death that never came.

Something blurred into shape just before Shiv. Something monstrous. Yet, cast against the enormous backdrop that was the charging Tarrasque, even a dragon seemed an insect. However, the thing about Legendary insects was that they were more than a match for any man, and Sir Marikos Valdemar of the Descenders Union was no insect at all. And he made that known by stopping the Tarrasque dead in its tracks.

Shiv's heart skipped a beat. Every bit of force, of plasma, of fire, and impending destruction jerked to a brutal halt in midair. A rush of force flowed into Marikos's shield, while the plasma and flame were inhaled into his open jaws. The Tarrasque, capable of shattering cities on a whim, capable of obliterating Shiv with the lightest of strikes, found itself struggling to push forward.

A loud roar of effort came from Marikos as well, but the sheer feat of strength the dragon achieved brought another lull to combat. The Tarrasque was five kilometers across and twice again as long. Marikos was practically a newborn comparatively. But he stopped the juggernaut dead. He stood his ground, sliding back by mere meters as the seconds passed. It was like watching a man stand before a storm and win. It was the summit of what a Pathbearer was meant to be: to hold their ground against a cataclysmic nightmare—and prevail.

Prevail not moralistically, philosophically, or intellectually. Prevail literally. To tell the impossible to go fuck itself and stand above the world's will.

I must become a Legend. The urge blossomed in Shiv's chest and turned into a roaring inferno. It was more than a want; it was a need. I must.

"Sullain," Marikos said with a brutal growl, "I have given you more than clemency enough. Twice I have stayed my hand from violence out of understanding and clemency for what we have lost, twice—"

"YOU KNOW NOTHING OF LOSS!" Sullain screamed with primal fury. The Tarrasque reached out with a hand and pulled. The force of a singularity manifested between its fingers. Shiv cried out as he felt himself get ripped toward the collapsing pocket of darkness. Then, something smashed into him from behind, and Shiv realized he was pressed against Blackedge.

The Deathless blinked in disbelief and forced his neck up. The Tarrasque was tugging all of Blackedge toward itself, trying to use the town as a blunt weapon against Marikos. The crushed bodies of Necrotechs shot past the singularity's event horizon. A good two hundred orcs followed thereafter, roaring with glee even as they met their ends. Shiv spiked himself away from the gravitational waves over and over, but found himself with nowhere to go. People were being ripped free from Blackedge, their dot-like forms screaming through the air as helpless rage exploded inside Shiv.

"YOU WILL ALL PAY FOR—"

"Enough!" Marikos growled as he struck the back of his shield with the butt of his titanic greataxe, and a pulse of force rippled out from the obsidian shield. Time itself stuttered as a column of force smashed into the Tarrasque's face. The manifesting singularity died in an instant. For the first time, the Tarrasque was driven back as the Legendary Dragon-Knight returned every bit of force absorbed earlier directly into the world-ending scourge.

But the Tarrasque's body exploded with the power of a collapsing star, and it started pushing back against Marikos. The force Marikos unleashed left him in a cone. It spared everyone behind him—everything he was turned away from. But the clouds in the skies above were shorn clean, and the true sun revealed itself for the first time. Marikos's body was set ablaze with an ethereal fire. Shiv saw wounded Necrotechs disintegrate outright in the corner of his vision.

The Tarrasque, comparatively, was unburdened.

What was a stalemate turned in the great beast's favor as it ground across the sky toward Marikos.
"Why do you stand against me now, knight? What right do you have? What worth are your vows if you cannot defend our home?"

"Everything!" Marikos shouted back as his body trembled under the effects of the Abyssal Curse. "My vows are worth everything, for I will spare the Abyss another war against the surface!"

Shiv activated his Creeping Void, hoping it would blunt some of the sun's effects. Marikos glanced at him only briefly, but Shiv saw a glint of gratitude in the dragon's eyes—even when the skill failed to do what the Deathless had hoped. At the same time, Shiv pressed against the still-moving Blackedge, roaring with effort as he tried to slow its ascent, trying to stop it from smashing into the back of the struggling Dragon-Knight.

Gravitic Wrestler 164 > 165

The Creeping Void 114 > 115

The Tarrasque pressed harder. It shot closer by a hundred meters. "THEY ARE COMING FOR OUR LIVES! THEY CAME FOR MY HOME! AND NOW—"

A deafening, metallic impact sounded as something truly huge struck the Tarrasque from below. A shockwave spread out from the Tarrasque, splashing over Marikos, Shiv, and Blackedge as what looked to be a tower of metal rose into view.

Shiv's eyes widened as the colossal Tarrasque was suddenly blasted skyward, shooting through the clouds like a ball struck by a bat. All the while, a metal mountain continued to rise, its flat sides lined with Dimensionality.

Shiv's guts plunged.

"Well, he's a real talker, isn't he?"

Jessica Hawgrave sneered as she stomped across the ruins of Lost Angeles. Shiv could hear her feet crushing entire blocks and punting through what few skyscrapers remained with each step. Her full-plated Inertium helmet had to reach beyond the lower limits of the stratosphere. Her hand shot out—her Reflexes beyond terrifying for a twenty-kilometer-tall titan of a woman—and she caught the entire town of Blackedge in her hand like it was a bowl.

Screaming people toppled off the town. She adjusted the size of her blade in an instant, making it broad rather than long, and swiping it through the people. All of them splashed into the dimensional mana lighting its length.

Suddenly, the Tarrasque didn't seem so big anymore.

As Hawgrave righted the town, Shiv bounced against the pavement and pawed at his wounds. Most of his stomach had prolapsed out of his abdomen, but he couldn't feel much pain anymore. That usually indicated that death would be coming soon. "Marikos!" he cried. The Dragon-Knight turned his sinuous neck to regard Shiv. "Stop her! She's part of the Inquisition! She's here to start a new war, not end it!"

The Dragon-Knight glared up at the enormous surfacer Pathbearer. Ghostly fires rose from his burning soul as he spoke: “I know who she is. I suspect I know why she is here as well. Hawgrave. Still an enforcer for your Inquisition? A Legend that acts as a dog on a leash?”

“Hi, Fortress,” Hawgrave said coldly. Her hand was still as a statue, but Shiv could feel the vibrations passing from her Inertium armor into Blackedge. It manifested as a constant, small-scale earthquake. “And be nice when you’re talking to me. Call me by my preferred title: the Shortest Bitch with the Biggest Sword. Been a while, huh?”

“Since the war.” Marikos flapped his wings as he shifted into a stance. He moved his shield in front of him, and he held his greataxe high in a ready posture. The ball of fire at its tip splashed over the weapon itself, engulfing it in white-hot Pyromancy mana.

Silence followed between them, but the sounds of battle and slaughter became the ambiance. High up in the air, Shiv noticed a burning dot plunging from the sky at an angle. The Tarrasque was coming back, and there was no Roland Arrow to stop it this time—no wards to spare Blackedge for certain destruction.

“Perfect,” Shiv groaned. He pushed against the ground, trying to get up—only to be helped to his feet by a large, gray hand that wrapped around his torso. At the same time, a rush of Biomancy began to fuse his broken flesh together as well.

Shiv raised his head, meeting Helix’s eyes. Whisper, Mortar, and Tequila stood beside him, as well as another dozen orcs.

“Insul, do you have any idea about your odds of success as a Low Hero against a Tarrasque or a Legend?” Helix asked, frowning at Shiv’s vanishing wounds.

“Pretty shit?” Shiv guessed.

“Nonexistent, aside from extreme statistical anomalies,” Helix confirmed. “As such, I suggest that we depart.”

“You depart, four-eyes,” Mortar said, licking his lips as he eyed the approaching Tarrasque-meteor. It still looked a bit like a dot, but there was a lot of fire trailing behind the monster. Shiv guessed they might have a minute or so. Likely less. “Some of us got a World Quest to complete.”

“That’s not for you to finish, you idiot,” Helix said. He sneered at Mortar’s cannon. “What do you even have that can hurt that thing?”

“Mana bombs,” Mortar said. “And who said I’d be fighting it? I’m waiting for one of the Legends to pop its body open and expose its heart. Then, I’m going to bomb its nucleus.”

“Not gonna be enough,” Shiv said. “It resurrects. A bit like me. Until we make it spend all its vitality, it’s not going down.”

“Everything’s always a bit more exciting when you’re involved, isn’t it?” Whisper commented with a chuckle.

“Yeah. I guess so.” Shiv rolled his shoulder as he regarded Marikos and Hawgrave staring each other down. They didn’t even seem aware of the Tarrasque anymore.

“Oi! What bloody fuck is felling fucking happening out there?” Georges’s voice echoed out from Shiv’s cape. The orcs turned to regard him, and Shiv grunted in response.

“I’ll explain everything in a minute, Georges,” Shiv coughed. “If we’re still alive by then.”

A pause followed. “Shiv? Is that you, boy?”

Shiv recalled Georges walking down the avenue with blade in hand. He had no hope of stopping the Tarrasque or saving Shiv. But he came regardless. He always came through for Shiv. The Deathless swallowed. “Yeah. Yeah, it’s me.”

“Broken Felling Moon. I saw—I saw you die. Again.”

“Yeah,” Shiv replied. “It’s kind of my thing now.” He looked up at the approaching Tarrasque and felt his insides tighten. Valor and Uva were with Adam, and Shiv had no idea how they were doing. But the Tarrasque knew about Shiv’s cape. If he had to guess, it would target that enchantment by some point. He couldn’t keep Georges there when he got back into the fight.

So. Time to make an ugly choice. But also, maybe a fun one too...

Shiv shifted the contents inside his cape and pulled Georges out. As the chef stumbled into the light, he blinked. Vomit stains ran down the front of his clothes, and Shiv winced. Georges shook his head—and froze as he found himself getting stared down by a pack of orcs.

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“Ah. The great Georges,” Mortar breathed. He was eyeing the chef like a piece of livestock waiting to be butchered. “Band spoke highly of you. Sadly, I don’t think you’ll ever be talking with him again. Tragic how life can turn out.” The large orc grinned at Shiv.

“Shiv, what the fuc—”

Shiv interrupted Georges before a flurry of questions could follow. “Helix. Take Georges and get out of here. Yeah, I care about him. Yes, I will follow through on my threats and then some if anything happens to him. The rest of you—” Shiv sighed as he realized it was hopeless to ask the orcs to try and evacuate the residents of Blackedge. They were here to fight, and they weren’t made for emergency extractions. At the same time, Shiv didn’t know how much of Blackedge was even still alive. Part of him didn’t want to know, but he was pretty sure the town was effectively done after this.

Georges looked between Shiv and Helix. “What? You’re trusting my life to a felling orc?”

“Yeah,” Shiv grunted wearily. “Because I’m going after the Tarrasque, and so I’m going with the shit choice instead of the hopeless one.”

“You’re—you’re bloody what?” Georges sputtered. He swept the town of Blackedge with his eyes, and desperate cries of agony and despair came from everywhere. A dark look passed over his features. “No. This... this place is done, Shiv. We need to go.”

“Can’t,” Shiv replied. “Not when there are people still alive here. Not with the Perch still at risk.”

Helix squinted at Shiv. “Is my expertise but a joke to you, Insul? Did you not hear my words? Your presence in this fight is absolutely irrelevant.”

“Well, someone has to drain its vitality,” Shiv sneered. “And someone has to get a Toughness Evolution soon too.” He regarded the two Legends on the verge of violence beside them. “And maybe I can get the actual heavyweights to focus on the apocalyptic problem first...”

“Oh, this will be good,” Tequila said, giggling.

He stepped out from Whisper’s Dimensional shroud and let out a breath. “Alright. Here goes. Hey! Guys. Not to interrupt your blood feud, but the Tarrasque is coming back.”

Neither Hawgrave nor Marikos looked away from each other. They glared at each other, waiting for the other to make the first move. Even with the Dragon-Knight's soul burning, there was a sense of apprehension to Hawgrave’s posture, like she was reluctant to deliver the first blow.

There was history between them. Shiv had a feeling it didn’t go so well for Hawgrave last time.

“And when it hits us,” Shiv continued, casting a brief look at the Tarrasque and wincing, “there’s not going to be a Blackedge left. Or a Starhawk’s Perch. That’ll make things pretty pointless, won’t it?”

It was like an entire section of the sky itself was falling behind the Tarrasque. A massive plate of flame crossed over the sun’s face once more, and Marikos stopped burning as well.

“Well, Fortress,” Hawgrave said, cocking her head at the approaching Tarrasque. “Looks like your friend is back. Go stop ‘em.”

“Put the town down first,” Marikos replied, not budging. “And join me in the defense. One Legend is not enough to slay a Tarrasque with ruthless efficiency.”

Hawgrave laughed humorlessly. “Well. Good thing I’m not by myself.”

Over her shoulder, something else pushed down through the clouds a few kilometers away. It resembled a massive, flying cathedral of metal. Plumes of fire erupted from its back, and magical sails jutted out from its sides, but at its front was the vagueness of a face: two bright-blue orbs for eyes, and a closed gate that resembled a mouth. Also sticking out from it were a few hundred cannons. “I came with an army. Isn’t that right, Hero-Inquisitor Talsand?”

The cathedral ship droned in the distance, and more shapes emerged behind it. Automata evolved into forms suited for flight. Riders atop massive griffons. Hundreds of magi formations packed tight around the cathedral-shaped automaton.

The Inquisitorial army had arrived.

Shiv blinked. “Wait. I was inside that?”

His sudden admission made Hawgrave guffaw. “Oh, hells, kid, you didn’t know? Man, you just bumbled aboard and had us fooled for a while too. Without the orc in my sword, you might just’ve held out for a while longer. Eh. Maybe an hour. You weren’t a very good spy, to be honest.”

The Deathless’s eye twitched at the approaching Inquisitorial army. “I just... didn’t realize automata could get that big. Or people, for that matter.”

“Ah.” Hawgrave sighed. “Blissful small-town ignorance is the best. I was there too. And—”

And just then, a bolt blasted high up into the air, cleaving past Blackedge. It struck the sky and detonated into a massive storm cloud that began to pour down across the world with lightning and rain. Everything grew dark—but the clouds were lined with more than just stormstuff, they were also coated with a veil of Dimensionality. And then more than rain and lightning spilled out of the clouds. Dragons joined them. Dragons clad in resplendent armor and bearing weapons of awesome power.

“Oh,” Hawgrave muttered. “Shit. I guess you have an army as well.” Just then, the broken corpse of a Necrotech sailed passed her, and she looked afar to see a small army of orcs rampaging across the sky, rising from Blackedge. And over the horizon, Shiv could hear more cheering, more roars proclaiming one word. One title.

“INSUL!”

“INSUL!”

“INSUL!”

“That is... a great many orcs,” Hawgrave’s sword, Rusty, said, sounding slightly worried.

“And where the hells did they come from?” Hawgrave asked.

“They’re with me,” Shiv said.

The world around them came aglow with light as the Tarrasque drew close. The world trembled with thundering blasts of force, but even through the cacophony, Sullain’s screams could be heard in the far distance. A breath of disbelief escaped Hawgrave, still not looping up at their imminent doom. “You’re kidding? You invoked the Ritual of the Vaketh-Insul?”

“Yeah,” Shiv replied. “Didn’t really have a good choice there. Besides that, I was kind of hoping to have you and the Inquisition deal with Sullain for me while me and mine evacuated Blackedge.”

“Oh, that’s just a nasty strategy,” Hawgrave breathed.

“But quite good,” her sword grunted. “I like it. If it were not being used against us.”

The enormous Legend hesitated. “Tell you what, I’ll help you, Marikos. I could use a Quest reward. It’s been a while. But as for Blackedge. Well... Also, didn’t you purposefully piss Sullain off earlier?” She stared at Shiv.

Shiv tensed. “Hawgrave, do not felling—”

She dropped Blackedge, and the town vanished into the flat of her blade beneath his feet as she slashed through it. A splash of Dimensionality later, there was no more Blackedge, only a sword twice as large as the town itself. Only Shiv was left standing on its surface, and he turned his head just in time to see her hook her little finger behind her thumb with her free hand.

She flicked him.

Adamantine Adaption 200 > 201 (Skill Evolution Reached)

Skill Evolution: Adamantine Adaption (Master) > Pillar of Orichalcum (Heroic)

Shiv’s armor shattered into pieces, and his body folded in half as he shot up into the sky and toward the horizon in a blur. “Oh, you godsdamned—” Before Shiv could finish his cursing, Marikos blurred through the air. What felt like a mana bomb went off where Blackedge had been as the Legends clashed against each other. Shiv caught only flickering shadows and flashes of the two Legends fighting as he was launched further away. Hawgrave’s huge blade flicked and hewed—seemingly from multiple directions at the same time. It turned partially dimensional as it passed through the earth, avoiding any drag.

Every blow that landed on Marikos made the chasm to the Abyss below fracture a little wider.

Yet, not a single strike drove the Dragon-Knight back. Hawgrave was a tidal wave, but Marikos was a tower that wouldn't fall, and with every hit she inflicted, a brutal counter was unleashed right back. Lances of force punched holes through the atmosphere. What little remained of the old city below was split time and again. Explosions of radiant fire licked out and recoiled from Hawgrave's armor.

The other arriving dragons were blasted back, but they pushed forward. Shiv saw a wave of gray dots leap into the fray as well. Meanwhile, he was accelerating toward what could best be described as a rolling apocalypse crashing down from the sky. And it was then that Shiv added Jessica Hawgrave as the second member of his "bullshit powerful Pathbearers I will eventually punch in the face" list.

She couldn't even put this shit aside for a World Quest.

At the same time, Shiv felt something spread through his broken body. An immense weight flowed through his veins, danced across his sinews, flooded his bones, and started ripping through his flesh. Shiv snarled as his current body began to fracture and break. It was like a new version of him was about to hatch out from the inside. His current adamantine-hard flesh felt like a brittle shell for the evolution churning within.

But this metamorphosis felt more extreme than all the others he'd experienced. Even more so than Inertial Overdrive. This didn't feel like a human skill at all. It felt like more power than his body could sustain was bursting out from inside, making him denser because he just wasn't large enough.

Shiv gritted his teeth as he tried to get his bearings. His attempt at focus failed immediately as a ripple of gravitation force tore him across the world, accelerating him toward the above Tarrasque even faster. His limbs were flensed apart. His flesh came aglow with a gold-bronze glow and burst apart. Every fiber of his being felt like hell, but Shiv was more frustrated than angry by this point. Great. Perfect. He has me again. And I have no idea what the hells this Skill Evolution is supposed to do.

“You will know suffering like no other, Deathless!” Sullain screamed. Shiv burst through the clouds and found himself staring at the approaching Tarrasque. Folds of incandescence peeled from its body as it accelerated toward him at a terrifying speed. Death was coming in less than a second. “It was your words that delayed my justice!”

Despite the sheer rage radiating from the Tarrasque, the Deathless just sighed. He considered using Outside Context Problem to avoid this death, but decided he wanted to keep the Tarrasque’s attention for as long as he could. “Just shut the hells up and hit me,” he muttered.

His wish came true. The Tarrasque struck him so hard that he dissolved into particles. It then continued to drive against the Vitae that burst free from his dissolved corpse.

Pillar of Orichalcum 201 > 211

Gravitic Wrestler 165 > 169

Vitality Drain 61 > 70

Vitaemancy 76 > 80

Shiv's Vitae peeled away from his body in fraying strings. He felt true death creep closer to him with every passing instant. Yet, despite this, his evolution continued even in his post-death state. Once more, a flash of reddish gold pulsed out from him. This time, it did not fade thereafter. It lined the exterior of

his Vitae, coating it in shimmering power unlike anything Shiv had felt before. He felt a weight there, a density, a pressure that defied existence itself.

As the cold finger of oblivion dipped deep into Shiv's core, as the Tarrasque drove a blade against his sprawling mass of red, Shiv willed himself to harden, willed himself to be unbreakable, and as he focused, the red-gold sheen lining his being grew ever brighter. The massive crystalline dagger the Tarrasque wielded crashed into him.

Shiv prepared for nothingness to take him, or whatever followed after death. Yet, unlike every time before, the Deathless did not shatter. He did not come asunder, even though the world around him turned into a turbulent sea of plasma, even though there were several collapsing mountains' worth of force hammering down upon him.

Parts of his Vitae broke away. He lost more of himself, going from a mass to a series of cords, to a single rope, and finally a sinew. But that sinew grew brighter and brighter still. And as it grew brighter, so too did its weight reach impossible heights.

Yet, it wasn't just a tangible mass, but also a metaphysical one. It stopped moving in midair. The Tarrasque's incredible bulk crashed hard against him, and Shiv felt an overwhelming pressure grind against his very being. As he commanded himself to endure, to harden evermore, his Pillar of Orichalcum skill obeyed. It just kept getting brighter, and he simply got more durable.

The Tarrasque struck him twice more, swinging its massive blades, and slashing at him using its tentacles. Cataclysmic blastwaves spread out over Shiv. Some more of him fractured, and Shiv knew that if he broke right now, there would be nothing left of him to reconstitute.

But he didn't break. The cracks stopped. His brightness outpaced the amount of damage the Tarrasque was inflicting upon him. And through the spreading inferno, his colors of crimson and gold pierced

through like a mystical sunrise cleaving across the sky of a broken world. More than that, with every impact the Tarrasque inflicted, a pulse burst out from Shiv at the place of impact. It shared a color with the mystical sheen currently lining his body, and explosions of force were displaced against the Tarrasque, the very force it inflicted upon him.

For the first time, the Tarrasque's body suffered damage as well. True damage. And it did so by attacking Shiv. Sullain compelled the huge beast to lash at him, devoid of technique, fueled by nothing but fury.

But its physical attacks were little more than heavy thuds now. Shiv was consumed by an ocean of destruction. He was barely more than a string of Vitae, coated by the composition of what he assumed was Orichalcum, whatever that was. It certainly proved more than capable of withstanding the Tarrasque's sloppy blows.

"Break!" Sullain raged. "I command you! Break! Break! Break!"

But Shiv did not break. In fact, he didn't even budge. The radiating shroud of Orichalcum spread out from Shiv. It was like a slightly expanding barrier pulsing out from him in oscillations of brilliance. And to the Deathless's disbelief, the Tarrasque was slightly pushed back, even with it constantly accelerating, grinding against him in midair. Where it had effortlessly ripped him apart earlier, now there was a struggle occurring between his Heroic-Tier Toughness skill and its overwhelming physical power. Follow current NOVELS on NOvel.Fire.net

Now it was cracking its own shell more than it was affecting him. With some of its harder blows, he still budged slightly through the air, but that's all it was, a slight movement, and a moment later, the same blow didn't even have that effect.

A building sense of awe filled the Deathless. What the hells kind of Heroic Skill was this? It felt Legendary. But he didn't read the notification wrong. It was a Heroic-Tier Skill.

And Shiv immediately learned its drawback despite its awesome benefits.

The first issue was movement. Shiv tried to move himself and couldn't. He was frozen stiff as if a statue. Shiv paused and considered that the skill did have Pillar in its name, after all. Pillar. That's fitting.

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In that moment, as he studied the world around himself, he realized that the shroud of Orichalcumradiance was pillar-shaped as well. It was a long column that extended high up into the sky and deep down, with Shiv at its center. And with every passing second that Shiv focused on enhancing his own Toughness, the tower only grew brighter, only grew larger, only grew denser.

"Break!" Sullain cried again. The Tarrasque swung another slash at Shiv, but this time the force rebounded entirely. A deep crack opened across the Tarrasque's crystalline shell, and that finally broke Sullain from his stupor.

"What? What is this? How? How have you..." The Tarrasque's eyes widened, and through them, Sullain regarded Shiv, studying his new glow. "How? How are you manifesting the colors of Orichalcum? This is a Tarrasque skill as well. It should be fundamentally incompatible with..." The Vicar trailed off, and then his beast's eyes widened. "Udraal, what have you done? What have you infused within this misshapen parody of a child?"

Shiv continued trying to move in the meantime. Every bit of force he spent was in vain. He spiked himself over and over using his gravitic field, but despite making his inertial sheath more turbulent than ever before, he didn't move at all.

His Gravitic Wrestler was simply a Master-Tier skill. He didn't have the strength to push through and move an ever-hardening Orichalcum pillar. But Shiv's mind turned away from thoughts of escape as he noticed another thing. His inertial sheath was growing more turbulent. He immediately began spiking himself faster, quicker.

Violent ripples of force spread up and along the final string that comprised his existence. Shiv counted how many times he spiked his field.

Thirty.

Fifty.

One hundred.

Two hundred.

His Reflexes hit new heights, and for the first time, he felt the slightest hint of discomfort spread through his body. But then the discomfort faded entirely as Shiv focused more on his Toughness rather than spiking his gravitic field.

There was an internal arms race happening, a balancing act between his ever-climbing hardness and his ever-accelerating speed. At that moment, Shiv realized what the true meaning of being a Hero was. Growth. Constant growth. Every single Heroic-Tier skill he had was about amassing more of itself.

Inertial Overdrive gave him more speed, until it tore him apart. Pillar of Orichalcum gave him more resilience, but beyond his strength to move or affect.

Aegis of Assimilation, then, must have been far more powerful than how he had been using it thus far as well. He could draw more biomass into himself than ever before, and he realized something. When he released the biomass, his mana strain faded, short of his field being destroyed.

A crashing avalanche of force and fire swept through Shiv. It plunged down past him, and it impacted the land. An entire section of the landscape was scoured clean, and the devastation continued on, blasting through mountains, ruins, and carving a deep groove into the earth itself. Furthermore, it rolled in lapping tides as it crested the horizon and continued onward, spilling over the Tidewall to the side.

And through it all, Shiv remained unharmed. At the end, his Inertial Overdrive resembled a small storm building around himself. A storm that he stopped feeding for a moment to let his Toughness outpace his Reflexes.

The Tarrasque clenched its teeth. It held out a hand, and a singularity formed between its fingers. For the first time, Shiv felt a force he couldn't fully resist. Yet, that didn't mean it affected him immediately. He was dragged centimeter by centimeter through the air. And as his Toughness grew still, the centimeters became halved, even as bands of light were drawn into that swirling mass around the Tarrasque's open hand.

"It is truly Orichalcum," Sullain breathed with utter disbelief. "The alloy of unbreaking will..."

Shiv didn't give him a proper reply. Instead, he spiked himself quickly. He hit 300, then 350, before he felt the first shudders breach through his Orichalcum come aglow. And then he let his Toughness climb a bit higher before he finally discharged.

The world turned white. A shockwave like few others was birthed from Shiv. It impacted the Tarrasque, and though it didn't launch the great beast back, it forced it to respond. It held out a hand and redirected the cascading waves of gravity, holding it high in the air. Shiv's blast parted before the Tarrasque, yet he still noticed how parts of its shell were breaking away.

The Tarrasque regenerated instantly, but Shiv was doing damage. Small chips of damage, barely enough to count as scratches. But the Tarrasque was harmed, and if he could crack it, then maybe, just maybe, he could eventually beat it in a fight of pure attrition.

As the blast swept free from him, Shiv watched as the ground beneath him turned to glass, then expanded as a depression that stretched out for kilometers and kilometers still. It was by far the largest discharge he'd ever released, and a good portion of Lost Angeles was rendered into something less than rubble, merely dust to the forsaken winds. And while the Tarrasque was dealing with his discharge, Shiv realized something else.

Even if he couldn't move, that didn't mean he couldn't drain life force from reality.

He began to sup from that thin sheen of vitality, stretching across everything. He drained it fast, and his sliver of existence turned into a coiling rope and became an expanding net, and finally grew into a sprawling mass once more. At the same time, a series of anomalies burst free from the spreading rupture caused by him.

A chaotic mana storm crashed over the Tarrasque's body. Lightning cleaved down against its form. Fire detonated in a brutal downpour, hammering the Tarrasque's face and coating it in a clinging inferno. Then came a wave of water laced with Dimensionality, and as it crashed against the Tarrasque, it was briefly displaced, but it discharged its Magical Resistance once more. But as it did, the rupture before Shiv only grew, and the other anomalies only got more chaotic rather than being dispelled.

The mana storm ballooned into a burst of Dynamancy. It rebounded from place to place, becoming as if a conical structure, and it finally crashed against the Tarrasque, smashing it from the sky, pinning it to the ground, and dragging it along the glass crater.

Shiv's eyes widened. The rupture before him unzipped more of reality, rising higher and higher and higher still, until it was stretching past the atmosphere. Oh shit. Not sure if that was a great idea, he thought with a tinge of worry.

And just then, he resurrected. His body came back into existence, knitted together by sinews of vitae. Still, the glowing Pillar of Orichalcum was manifested around him. He spiked himself. His inertial overdrive growled excitedly, thundering with building inertia.

But he himself still couldn't move. He was rooted in place. And he learned the other aspect of being a Hero. To constantly grow, yet to suffer the limitations of growth. He could get faster without a hard limit, but it came at a cost to his body and the world around him. He could get ever tougher, but as he compelled himself to be unmovable, impenetrable by any force, that included his own as well as the world's.

A force splashed over him from behind, and he heard Sullain crying out with displeasure, throwing what amounted to a tantrum as that strange cone of Dynamancy was now coiled around the Tarrasque's body. Meanwhile, more glowing storm stuff was leaking out from the grand rupture.

"I should probably get the fuck out of here," Shiv muttered, but he wasn't going to be able to move until he dispelled his tower.

So Shiv did the opposite of what he had been doing so far. He focused on becoming more brittle, more pliable, and all of a sudden, the Orichalcum glow began to fade as well. Its red-golden shine diminished rapidly, but it still took time for the manifestation of the tower to vanish entirely. As it did, Shiv found

himself shaking in midair. He was finally moving, but barely, yet his Toughness began to drop precipitously.

It felt like it shot past a certain point of no return. He gritted his teeth and commanded himself to stay just as tough as he was, but something about the skill didn't work that way. He continued getting more and more brittle, more and more brittle still, until he could freely move, yet every little movement caused some damage to him.

His muscles tore, his skin, now reddish gold, cracked and bled. A feeling of overwhelming weakness swelled through Shiv, and he went from being nigh invincible to being more vulnerable than he'd ever been.

He focused on getting tougher again, begging his own skill to hurry up, and slowly the brightness of his Orichalcum was rekindled. The brittleness left him. He stopped suffering wounds with every single movement. But even so, it cost time, time he didn't have. A jet stream of water impacted him. Shiv cried out as it took a chunk out of his back, but didn't pierce all the way through. Broken bits of biomass were peeled away, both from his flesh and from the remaining chunks of his new armor. Shiv hardened himself, but the coiling sinew of Hydromancy stung him once more.

Pillar of Orichalcum 211 > 212

And just then, the Tarrasque came back into view. It hovered before him, and the hundreds of tentacles it had all came aglow, their eyes glaring at him. The magic infused within glowing bright. Burning bright.

Oh, fuck.

And then the Tarrasque ripped every droplet of water out of Shiv's body. He shriveled and died immediately, unable to do anything to save himself.

Hydromancy 6 > 12

Inertial Overdrive 122 > 125

Vitality Drain 61 > 70

Vitaemancy 76 > 84

Outside Context Problem 66 > 71

And so, a second lesson was taught to the Deathless about his new skill. He could become a bulwark of ever-ascending physical durability. But it came at a brutal cost. And that cost him any magical defense he could muster whatsoever. And I can't move my arms when I turn to Orichalcum, either. Shit. Not nearly as invincible as I thought I was.

And the Vicar echoed his sentiments, chuckling. "Not nearly so invincible as you imagined, are you, Hero?"

He drew closer to Shiv and extended a single tendril toward him. A tendril infused with a translucent torrent of mana. "I must confess, you are proving to be more of a curiosity and a splendid specimen than

a hateful wretch. For that, I think I will spare you. Before, I wanted to finish you, to punish you for all that you have done." A sigh escaped from the Tarrasque. "And I see now that you are simply a blind child. I forgive you. But I must change you first."

And Shiv's mind went blank with dread. Oh no. Oh shit.

The Tarrasque grinned, and it projected a wave of Psychomancy out from the tentacle.

Atop the battlements of Fortress-City Houston, beside an ever-roaring series of artillery emplacements, Hero-Ranger Morgan Munny watched as hundreds of thousands of orcs burst out from their underground holds as they fled back to one of their great gates.

This had been a weird summer, a summer that left him unnerved. For months leading up to this point, ranger scouts and military intelligence had warned of a grand invasion, one like never before. Rationing began nearly a year in advance. Munition productions were accelerated. Children as young as eight were drafted into the city guard.

But when the time came, what Morgan faced wasn't an overwhelming horde of greyskins, but rather a paltry trickle. It seemed like the core of their force was elsewhere, and the others, well, they were only doing things half-heartedly. They seemed distracted, and the ones that were captured—or allowed themselves to be captured—spoke of something that burdened the Ranger.

They spoke of a new Vaketh-Insul, a Nemesis-Commander. Someone on Earth had accepted the Challenger's favor, and Morgan knew what that entailed. He had rejected the Challenger when he presented him with the same offer. The source of this content is novelfire.net

"What the hell is happening?" Morgan's second said. The two-meter-tall automaton lowered their ballistae repeater as their single red eye winked at the orcs. "Why are they running away? They never run away. Not like that."

"No," Morgan agreed. "Not like that."

And just then, a notification appeared before their eyes, and they had their answer. All around them, the artillery emplacements stopped firing as well, the Artillerists within likely equally stunned at what they were seeing.

World Quest Gained: Slay the Undying Tarrasque. (At Blackedge, Lost Angeles, The Yellowstone Republic)

Success: Evolve 3 [Existing Skills] to Master-Tier; Evolve 2 [Existing Skills] to Heroic-Tier (Only 100 Pathbearers may receive this reward); Gain 15 Levels for a Selected Skill; Gain a Legendary-Tier [Equipment]

Failure: Integrated Earth is destroyed and the Undying Tarrasque evolves after absorbing the vitality of the planet.

"Tarrasque," Morgan whispered. "There's a fucking Tarrasque in the Yellowstone Republic."

In the far north of frigid Torontus, where the Jotun chiefs sit atop their frozen thrones, sneering down at a kingdom built by the frost-bitten hands of uncountable slaves, the greatest among them frowned as a notification appeared before their eyes.

The High Jotun was king, queen, and child, all at the same time, three heads stacked atop one another.

"A grave threat has come to this world," the mother, the crone, rasped.

"Oh, Tarrasque," the father, the warrior, snarled. "And in the Ascendants' lands, no less."

And the child, the prophet, laughed. "Then we should wait. Wait until the accursed Ascendants bleed themselves dry. Wait until the Republic's armies are battered."

And then the High Jotun held out a fist, and a raven as white as snow tore down from the sky, landing on their wrist. "Soon, we march once more. It is time to spread the winter eternal."

The Wolf of No Suns looked down from atop its ziggurat, where leylines fueled by blood and sacrifice formed a grand geometric shape around his throne of power. Despite the wondrous display, its mana was paltry compared to that possessed by its brothers, its sisters, its parents, and even its descendants.

The Wolf of No Moons was weak now, lost of power, lost of sacrifice, and lost of flavor; consequences of its failed patricide.

The blood glided up the steps, rushing toward the wolf's many wounds. Its moonlit fur shook as its flesh began to knit back together, and a small army of slaves was offered into its open maw, each of them giving themselves unto the wolf willingly. It bit down, but it did not chew, did not swallow the slaves. Rather, it invited them into its being.

For the wolf was not a ravenous creature, but a lonely one, and each slave walked with purpose and conviction into the maze hidden inside the wolf's throat, seeking the riddle at its heart. They would nourish its feeling of loneliness for a time, but someday, someday someone would truly solve the riddle, and it would free the suns trapped within the wolf.

When that time came, its life would finally end, and the lives of its many unborn children would begin. And then the reign of the Feathered Serpent would see its conclusion.

Yet, before that point came, there would be more tribulations. As if a reminder, a notification appeared before the wolf's eyes, and it let out a breath. "Tarrasque!"

The rivers of blood surrounding its ziggurats began to quiver. A massive shape of fire and radiant wings swept overhead. The wolf's siblings had caught the scent as well. They were bound for the Republic. It wasn't just the wolf that was bleeding and wounded, trying to recover.

Soon, a nation might find itself consumed as well.

Gods made for good sacrifices. Even false ones.

Upon a throne in a faraway land, where people surrendered their true faces and adopted masks as their truth, a false-child whose face resembled that of a reflection giggled atop her throne. It was far too large for her, comprised of shifting gears and broken fractals. From within came an ever-present note, the faintest symphony of a scream, a unified howl of the trapped, of those who came before the girl.

"Oh," the girl said, clapping her hands together. "A beast in the Yellowstone Republic. The game is afoot, then, Udraal. When will you return? I hope it will be soon. I have been waiting for your promised incursion for so very long."

All across Integrated Earth, rulers, slaves, and everything in between, Pathless to Legend, received a notification of the World Quest.

And yet, even as they laid eyes on the rewards and what was at stake, few acted.

A Tarrasque was a grave threat, but Legendary Pathbearers were nothing if not sure of themselves.

And ultimately, the prize would be far higher if a certain Republic broke itself while slaying a great beast. For everyone knew the Yellowstone Republic guarded one of the few major entrances to the realm within a realm, the realm below, the realm where a god beyond gods lay dead and dreaming.

Chapter 156 (IV) Orichalcum

Shiv felt an overwhelming wave of force tear at his mind. He cried out, and then his voice veered off into a desperate howl. He could feel his sense of self being pried free, could feel his memories crack and bend. The Tarrasque didn't seem as powerful magically as it was physically, but its Psychomancy was still far superior to his.

And with Vicar Sullain guiding its power, not even Uva would have been able to spare Shiv of mental slavery and madness if she were here.

But someone else could.

A loud roar shook the world. The Tarrasque turned and received a heavy strike across its face for its action. Sullain snarled. The Tarrasque swept out a hand. The small gray dot pressed against it vanished in a burst of Dimensionality, then reappeared atop the Tarrasque.

"Sullain!" the orc roared out once more. He slammed his club down, and it shattered into pieces. It didn't matter. The orc teleported again.

At the same time, a massive missile of translucent mana crashed against the Tarrasque. Its body flashed with Magical Resistance, and it blasted outward, sweeping the land clean. Yet it did nothing to dissuade the orcs. Another series of spells hammered against it. They were bombing it from afar. Shiv's vision cleared as he saw trails of magic curving over the horizon from all directions.

The orcs were beginning to use artillery tactics on the Tarrasque. And the mana types infused in the falling spells weren't of a single variety as well. Missiles of Dynamancy slammed into the Tarrasque's hindquarters, with bear-traps of gravity clinging to its legs. Beams of fire containing jagged outlines of Psychomancy splashed across its body, and Shiv could see the shuddering imprint of the Tarrasque's Magical Resistance emerge.

Once more, Bonk roared with laughter. He reappeared under the Tarrasque and hit it a third time. Now the Tarrasque shook. It sustained no damage, but Shiv knew how Bonk's skill worked. And with the new insight gained regarding Heroic-Tier skills, hope swelled inside Shiv. Bonk's skill was about ever-escalating damage. The Tarrasque was trembling. Part of that was from Bonk's resonant strikes, the other from Sullain's outrage.

"Damnable orc, away from me! How many times must I kill you? How many!"

It shot beams of magic from all its tentacles. It swept its body left and right. The air turned to plasma. Blasts tore across the sky, crashing through the landscape. Mountains worth of earth were flung high into the clouds. But through the mess, Shiv still caught sight of a small figure, a single dot defying the devastation, diving through the flames.

Awareness 44 > 46

"Sullain!" Bonk cried out again. He struck the Tarrasque twice this time, just as a flood of lightning speared into the grand beast's glowing eyes. A tentacle swept up. It slashed against Bonk's leg as he

stood atop the Tarrasque's head, and blood painted the air, but the orc vanished without ever losing the limb.

At the same time, as the blood landed upon the Tarrasque, a massive detonation followed. The backside of the behemoth ignited as if a firestorm had been summoned into existence. And then Bonk appeared at the base of the Tarrasque's leg. He struck again. More spells landed.

Then a clench of pressure appeared beside Shiv as he felt a flood of vitality enter him. An orc hovered there, his eyes bright red, the color of life force. He smiled at Shiv, a shard of violet matter jutting free from his forehead, making him seem like an orcish unicorn. "Looking out for you, Insul."

A second later, the orc teleported away, just as Shiv resurrected. The Deathless left context and stopped time. He glared at the Tarrasque, watching it scour the land using its tentacles, pumping out so much magic that it was deforming existence itself. But then he noticed something else. Its mouth was open. Its mouth that was wide enough to swallow a good portion of a town.

And a terrible idea took shape inside Shiv.

Well, jumping inside a giant monster and ripping it apart from within is practically tradition for me by this point. Let's give this shit another go.

And he spiked himself forward. He launched himself past the building-sized teeth of the monster and gagged as he inhaled the Tarrasque's fetid breath. As he progressed further, he found himself gliding down the creature's throat before he found what looked to be a soft pad of tissue he could land on. Shiv slammed hard down the beast's inner flesh and found it just as durable within as it was outside. "Kind of figured," Shiv muttered to himself. But he wasn't expecting the Tarrasque to be an easy kill anyway.

Nor was he potentially expecting the Tarrasque to be his kill directly.

No. This was something one did with an army.

How many Heroes does it take to kill a Legendary monster? Shiv mused. Let's find out.

Stolen from its rightful place, this narrative is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

Shiv activated Pillar of Orichalcum once more. He planted his hands against the Tarrasque, and a glowing column of red and gold shot out from him. His skin brightened with a radiant flare. He focused everything on Toughness and nothing else. He heard the Tarrasque gag, and Sullain cried out: "What are you doing? What are you doing, you vile, insolent, feckless insect of a bastard—"

And Bonk interrupted him once more. "Sullain! Eyes on me, Bakal!"

A blow struck the Tarrasque once more, and a shaking impact rattled the creature's body. Shiv heard Sullain cry out with genuine alarm. What followed thereafter was a series of heavy impacts that shook the creature further. But despite the Tarrasque twitching and shaking, it couldn't move far at all, for a pillar had been formed within its skull.

A pillar of Orichalcum.

"Sullain!" Bonk roared with laughter as he hit the Tarrasque once more.

This time, Shiv heard something break. A splash of light entered the insides of the Tarrasque's mouth, and a massive, building-sized tooth impacted him. He could feel the Tarrasque shaking now. He could feel the resonance building, becoming more and more intense.

Even though the Tarrasque's regeneration was still in full swing, and thus had barely been harmed, the Vicar himself was sounding more rattled by the beatdown with every passing moment, and Shiv decided to continue his strategy from earlier.

"Hey, Sullain," Shiv called out, not sure if the Vicar could even hear him. "You ever wonder what your people might feel? I mean the people of Submission and all the Necrotechs who died fighting for you. You think they're shaking their heads at you from within the Great One's embrace?"

Psychology 45 > 48

Another impact shook the Tarrasque. It slammed against him. Shiv felt himself move, but he only shifted about a meter. More Toughness, come on.

"Silent, be silent!" Sullain cried. And that brought a massive grin to Shiv's face.

But then the Deathless felt a crushing pressure grip him. The Tarrasque's insides came aglow with swelling mana. An ocean of static blackness spilled in from all sides, and Shiv realized it was trying to teleport.

For the first time, Shiv directly felt the Dimensionality mana, but he realized it didn't move quite like other fields. Parts of it filtered away, like debris passing through a strainer. Shiv watched as the Tarrasque started projecting its own body afar—and then it tried moving him as well.

The Deathless snarled as he tried to hold in place—only for agony to rip through him as his Portomancy mana was shredded apart in an instant.

Portomancy 1 > 5

But then the blackness broke as something struck it. A spell that dispelled Dimensionality, perhaps.

Challenger, I love your orcs, Shiv thought, delirious from pain.

The Challenger wants you to kill this thing and make the Vicar cry.

“STOP! YOU—STOP!” Sullain shrieked.

“Sullain!” Bonk shouted once again, adding a dramatically loud yawn to his words. He hit the Tarrasque once more, and Shiv felt the massive beast bounce off the ground with this hit. The Heroic orc's blows were adding up.

Bonk, I fucking love you, Shiv thought. It was something he would never tell the orc, but right then, he did feel true romantic love, and he knew that there was no other army mad enough to come to his aid against a threat so severe.

"Enough! Enough!"

Sullain screamed.

Shiv continued where he left off. "Because if there is an afterlife, and if I were from your city, if I was one of your martyred Necrotechs, I would pray for non-existence because of how badly you're failing right now." Shiv forced out a dishonest laugh. But the Vicar was too far gone to tell the difference. "You thought you were going to kill Roland Arrow. You couldn't even kill me with a Tarrasque. I was barely a Hero, and all you did was make me stronger. All you did was feed me. And now you're gonna lose. You're gonna lose because you couldn't handle someone with a Heroic-Tier Toughness Evolution and a couple of orcs."

And as Shiv's sloppy psychological attack hit a critical threshold, he heard a genuine sob come from Sullain. "You... are right."

The admission ground Shiv's mind to a halt. "What?"

"You are right," Sullain repeated, sniffing. "I... I do not have the heart for this. I am no warrior. I know this. I am but a scholar. And I should not have stayed here. I just wanted to feel his death. I wanted to feel satisfaction. It was selfish of me. And you are right. I cannot stop you. For I have no taste for violence." A pause followed, and Shiv felt a terrible foreboding once again. "Thus, I unchain the beast from my mind entirely. I let you free, my Tarrasque. Run wild. Kill Roland Arrow, and destroy all he holds dear. Break this world if you must..."

And then something went missing. Shiv felt a presence he hadn't been aware of before go absent.

The Tarrasque stopped thrashing. The rightful source is NOvel.Fire.net

And from the depths of its throat came an utterly bestial growl.

“Ah, shit,” Shiv muttered.

Even as more spells impacted it, as another blow from Bonk shook its body, the Tarrasque didn't respond. Instead, it let out a deep snarl, and then it suddenly tore its own flesh open with an explosion of Biomancy.

The titanic creature ripped itself in half and broke free from Shiv's Pillar of Orichalcum. The Deathless blinked.

The unchained Tarrasque eyed him with predatory interest for but a moment, and then it vanished from sight.

A world-shaking detonation of plasma, fire, and force washed over Shiv, and when the chaos cleared, he saw a blurry shape through the air with a belt of debris shifting around its body—headed for a flying cathedral and two warring armies.

“No,” Shiv breathed. “Fuck!” He began reducing his Toughness, and his pillar started to dissolve.

But just as he did, something flashed above him. For a moment, Shiv thought it was the sun. But then, a greenish glow splashed over the world, and the Deathless's eyes widened as a Necromantic dawn descended through the clouds, followed by a coiling serpent of shining bone. "...WHILE I FINISH THE VERMIN HERE."

Chapter 157 (I) Weakness

Legends die the same as Pathless, the same as Initiates, the same as Adepts, Masters, and Heroes.

Legends die just the same as the insects crawling at our feet, like birds caught in a storm.

Legends die. Some die quietly, some die brutally, some die with dignity, and some shatter worlds in their death throes, desperate to cling to life.

Becoming a Legend grants you incredible power. It grants you absolute power, as some might understand it. It is an elevation of your skills. It makes you greater on a level that few beneath you can understand.

When you delve into your own soul, you emerge changed. You emerge greater.

But that does not promise you life. That does not protect you from the cruelties of the System. Your power is merely a single facet, a variable to your existence.

The first Legend I killed was named Ozgen of Cimera, but his people called him the Warden of Flame. He held this title because his Legendary Skill allowed him to manifest a literal plane of fire—of heat so intense that all would simply turn to dust around him. With this Legendary Skill, he incinerated armies,

he terrorized kingdoms around him, and for a moment in time, he imagined himself the single most significant man in all the Abyss.

I found him when I was still a Hero, with my singular Heroic-Tier Skill being in Stealth, while Ozgen was a Legend with a slew of Master-Tier and Heroic-Tier Skills to supplement him.

From a purely numerical point of view, there should have been no contest between us.

But unlike Ozgen, I was prepared. I used my skills wisely. I crippled his spymasters and murdered his Investigators. And though Ozgen was a warrior with few peers, he was a man with many vices as well. And after too many drinks, too much pleasure of the flesh, he slumbered. And while he slumbered, I came for him in the dark. And what matter was his plane of fire then?

Legends die. Sometimes, they die gurgling on their own blood, same as any slave. When vice exceeds virtue, even the strongest skill will be betrayed by personal weakness.

-Valor Thann

A corrosive dawn flared; the world around Shiv withered. The air itself was stained with Necromantic mana. The Deathless anticipated both pain and destruction, for his soul to burn, and for everything around him to be destroyed.

Yet that wasn't what happened. Instead, a chain of spells wrapped around him, their interconnected shapes glowing bright with the same corrosion that powered Sullain's sun. Shiv's breath stilled as Necromantic wards formed around him, parrying the sun's glare away from his flesh and soul.

Shiv focused on weakening his Pillar of Orichalcum to start moving again, but his Heroic-Tier Toughness Skill needed time to adjust.

Sullain did not share that weakness.

As the Vicar descended, his long, sinuous body was bathed in Necromantic flares. Thousands of spells erupted from all corners of the world, from over the horizon, from bursts of Dimensionality that opened up across the flesh of existence in bursting pockets. These spells shot up to greet the Vicar, and Sullain let out a savage cry as counter-spells manifested in each of his countless hands. A hailstorm of magic descended from the sky. They tore through the parted sky above, glanced off the great rupture Shiv left in existence, and they met the magical onslaught unleashed by the orcs.

A supreme display of magical prowess lit the Yellowstone Republic, and if Shiv hadn't witnessed the brutal power of the Tarrasque firsthand, he would have believed that the world was ending then and there.

Despite the orcs being an army, the Legendary Pathbearer proved himself beyond them.

His spells shattered those that were cast by the gray-skins with barely any resistance. More, Sullain's mana could shift. His spell patterns changed from one shape to another faster than Shiv could follow, from grasping talons to spreading nets and darting missiles.

He looked around to see orcs disintegrating within columns of fire, orcs coming apart in hair-thin slices as grids of friction passed through them, orcs screaming as they tumbled out of their dimensional pockets, clawing at their skulls.

The world devolved into chaos and fire. The orcs cast a flood of spells—but somehow, Sullain was overwhelming them by himself. It wasn't just his magic that was staggering—it was the speed he could shape his spells, how he cast hundreds of spells at the same time and within scant seconds.

Sullain was a bastard and a coward, but there was nothing Shiv could say against the Vicar's quality as a mage.

How in all the hells did Roland hold you off by himself for so long?

“FIENDS! BEASTS! CREATURES OF RANK BRUTALITY AND DEBASED CRUELTY! I CAST THEE AWAY! YOU ARE UNMERITORY OF THE GREAT ONE'S GLORY! OF THE PROMISE OF ETERNITY! LET THE GREAT ENEMY TAKE YOU!”

The Necromantic dawn flashed behind Sullain. Shiv spiked himself hard—but his pillar barely budged. Godsdammit, now I get why this skill's Heroic.

“AND YOU!” Sullain pointed a metallic digit at Shiv. The air twisted and shook around the Vicar. His eyes burned with Necromantic energy. “VILE MISTAKE! ABOMINATION OF UDRAAL! BE UNMADE!”

The world turned sickly and green as the Vicar's son wept a river of Necromantic fire down at Shiv.

The orcs might have infused him with Necromantic wards, but they wouldn't be enough to help him survive this. Not nearly—

The dense stream of Necromancy tore across existence. Shiv flinched back. His pillar moved by a meter—his mind reeled.

Another layer of spellcraft manifested in the air.

It resembled a large bunker, curved and domed, yet it was partially transparent, lit with the colors of Dynamancy, Dimensionality, and Psychomancy, while its outsides were lined with Necromancy. Its edges materialized through the air, revealing a structure a kilometer wide and across. It swept just over Shiv as the Vicar's massive spell impacted, and as it slammed into the bunker, parts of the enormous warding deformed.

But it did not break. Not immediately.

And just then, several teleporting orcs materialized beside Shiv. They hovered in the air, and they formed new spells around him. The corrosive patterns fused around his body expanded, becoming a true layer of Necromantic armor. It never touched him, however. It was always separated by a distance of five centimeters.

"Don't pop just yet, Insul." One of the orcs laughed. "We can still keep this fight going for a while more, at the very least."

Shiv offered the orc a feral grin. "Let's find out what it takes to break a Legend."

A cheer went up among the orcs, and then they were gone, teleported by collapsing waves of Dimensionality. The Necromantic beam above was extinguished as Shiv found Sullain summoning his own wards, parrying tidal waves of magic crashing into him from all sides. The Deathless could barely make out what was happening between the blinding blasts, but he could see Sullain obliterating entire sections of the landscape with simple gestures. Read complete version only at nOvelFire.net

The orcs had shifted the momentum of combat for barely a moment before Sullain overpowered them once again. A wall of fireballs came at Sullain—large enough to cover an entire section of the sky. Sullain held out a hand and pulled.

The mountain-leveling blasts of fire winked out like candles as every bit of fire and force was torn away from the world, gathering thereafter between the vicar's massive claws, condensing into twin spheres of shuddering destruction.

"You seek to abuse my spirit?"

Sullain asked. "I will show you what it means to be unraveled at the soul."

The Legend stretched out his arms, but he did not simply fling the spheres down. Instead, he channeled both globes of mana outward, letting the condensed mana splash over the bunker protecting Shiv while pieces of the spell broke off, blowing chunks out of distant mountains and holes through the earth, where orcs were annihilated in their hundreds.

There were too many things happening at once, too many shapes moving around, too many spells being exchanged, and Shiv was still pinned in place.

His Orichalcum pillar wasn't something he could casually just dispel. Though it made him invulnerable to the blows of even a Legend, it took time to weaken, time he didn't have. His Reflexes could do nothing against it, and his Physicality wasn't great enough to move it.

Gravitic Wrestler 169 > 170

Time for a new strategy, Shiv thought. I'm not going to be able to push through this with raw strength. So what do I have?

He went through his active skills, and his eyes widened. Chronomancy. His solution lay within Chronomancy. He didn't need to waste time weakening himself. What he needed was a fast way to reset and then re-engage thereafter.

Shiv went outside context, and froze time in the same instant. As he did, he saw something that gave him pause. The Vicar's body was frozen, but there was an ethereal twin to the great serpent, an ethereal twin that was still casting spells, that was flinging blasts of power, hammering wounds deep into the land. A golden orc swept through the sky. Sullain's spirit manifestation made an off-handed gesture, and a blade of air lined with Chronomancy ripped clean through the orc.

The gray brute bounced off Sullain in two halves.

Despite this, the spirit twin couldn't perceive Shiv, and he cast himself a full twelve seconds back in time.

Wait, twelve? Then Shiv realized the orc's fear chains were still empowering him. Them being here made him stronger than he was before. The Deathless grinned as he cast himself across time.

When he blinked into existence in the same space, he found his Pillar of Orichalcum to be far weaker, not quite so immovable. Immediately, he stopped concentrating on his Toughness and focused on weakening it. The reddish-gold glow faded, and Shiv moved through the air. As he spiked himself, he bit back a cry of pain as fractures spread across his bones and tears lined his muscles.

It seemed that he couldn't avoid that brief period of weakness every time he left the pillar state. But it wasn't nearly as bad as the first cycle he went through.

It seemed his brief period of weakness in the aftermath corresponded to how much Toughness he cultivated before.

I should be able to skip this entirely if I plant a temporal anchor before I begin using the Pillar of Orichalcum. That'll let me avoid the whole cycle altogether.

And he did that immediately. He left a temporal echo of himself infused in the air as he rose up to meet the Vicar. A faint echo of gold lingered behind Shiv as he climbed skyward, seeking to make a victim of his great enemy.

He accelerated fast, caring nothing for his body, ignoring the coldness that was beginning to bleed into him. He wouldn't be able to maintain outside context for long, but he didn't need long; he just needed to land a hit on the Vicar and get his measure.

Sullain was focused on the orcs. He swept his hands out wide, and a wave of Hydromancy hammered down from the sky, exploding into droplets of corrosion. Shiv could see the attacks from the orcs waning

dramatically—where there were thousands of spells crashing against Sullain before, there seemed to be only a hundred left, and more yet were struck down by the Necromantic rain.

Legends were godsdamned nightmares. Even ones as emotionally compromised as Sullain.

Too bad Shiv was Unique. He passed through Sullain's Necromantic rain without any issue. It couldn't touch him, not during his self-referential state.

Outside Context Problem 71 > 72

And just then, as he got within 500 meters of the Vicar, instinct took hold of him. There was a reason why the Vicar had a spiritual twin, why he could channel magic free from his body. But something told Shiv that he could hit it, that he could deal damage to the Vicar on a level deeper than the physical.

He began coating himself in Vitae, wrapping it around his arms, even as his vitality fell to precipitously low levels. It was a great risk, but he didn't care. Not after what he'd suffered, and because he had no time. He needed to catch up to the Tarrasque to save his companions, but he wasn't going to be able to go anywhere with Sullain still here.

And besides, it would be best for him to face a Legendary enemy as a Legend himself.

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

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

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

Shiv impacted the Vicar's spiritual twin in a cataclysmic clash. To his delight, he felt part of the Vicar's body buckle inward. The substance that comprised Sullain's spiritual self felt brittle before his Vitae, and it shattered like lengths of glass impacted by a metallic projectile.

At once, all the spells Sullain was casting shattered. The rainfall of Necromancy sputtered out. The wards protecting Sullain died. The corrosive dawn fizzled out of existence.

When Sullain's spiritual manifestation broke, it didn't just break like a material; it broke like a skill.

And Shiv had gotten more than a bit of practice in breaking skills from his orcs.

White and red mana exploded out from Shiv, and it was immediately followed by a brutal discharge. The Vicar's spiritual manifestation plunged back to his physical form. It stopped being able to cast spells when time was frozen, and just then, more orc Chronomancers joined the battle. Their magics splashed against the Vicar, spearing through Sullain's immense body. Beams of fire, whips of lightning, claws shaped from wind, and jetstreams of water lashed at him all at once.

Shiv felt himself come apart in broken tatters of flesh. Death came close to claiming him. He just scoffed.

Shiv reverted himself back across time, blinking into perfect shape where his temporal echo was. His Chronomancy field began to splinter, but that didn't matter. He had wounded the Vicar. And he knew this was an enemy he could kill.

This was a fight he could win.

Strider of the Unbending Path 151 > 152

Damaging Sullain's spiritual skill had put him on the defensive, and now Shiv's enemy was vulnerable to an entire domain of magic: the Vicar no longer had a stranglehold over time.

Shiv dismissed his temporal shell as he shot through the air once more. The Vicar reeled, screaming in pain as he clutched at himself. Parts of his physical body fell away, but Shiv knew that wasn't where he was wounded.

"NO!" the Vicar shrieked. "How... how could you damage my skill?!"

The Vicar's wails brought a swell of warmth into Shiv in Shiv's heart. Sullain's head snapped toward Shiv—ignoring the deluge of magic hammering into him. Part of his body twisted and cracked, but a great deal of the magic simply flowed through Sullain. Shiv narrowed his eyes. He'd seen that effect when facing a dragon. Sullain's body was made of magically conductive materials.

Best way to finish you is brute force, then.

Sullain held up a hand, gathering the forces of Necromantically-charged gravity, and the same hand was knocked aside as Bonk suddenly appeared once more, bursting out from a rift of Dimensionality. A wave of cascading mana was unleashed, but not towards Shiv. Rather, it tumbled across the sky, ripping a path through distant clouds and reaching across the horizon.

The Vicar's body shook. He let out a screech as he ignited himself, but the flames that spilled out from him were black and lined with static. As attacks splashed against the Vicar, they faded out of existence. They were displaced entirely, emerging behind Sullain or not at all. Bonk vanished from sight.

At the same time, Sullain's other hands began to perform a series of rapid and intricate gestures, but it wasn't the motions that caught Shiv's attention. It was the swelling of power.

A chain of Biomancy formed along his skeletal hands. A chain that glistened with so much mana, Shiv felt his mouth run dry. The Vicar was outputting so much power that it somehow made even the Composer's magical workings seem pathetic.

The Biomancy rushing out from Sullain rivaled the light of his corrosive sun, and there were so many microspells lining the Biomantic construct that Shiv couldn't even begin to fathom what it was.

Then Sullain grasped the construct and twisted.

Chapter 157 (II) Weakness

A pulse of crimson mana washed over Shiv. A crack sounded in the air as the Vicar completed his motion, and then the construct shattered in his hands as a detonation of Biomancy—enough to drown the world—slammed hard against Shiv and the other orcs.

He tried to block it with his Magebreaker, but his gauntlet screamed for a moment before it cracked in half. Yet, the gauntlet served its purpose. It twisted a good portion of Sullain's Biomancy magic aside...

Frictionless Vector 76 > 80

...but the rest still hammered into Shiv. He clenched his still-wounded Biomancy field around himself, and pain flooded his spirit. Yet his field held. Even as its outer sections were pulled away and ripped asunder, it held. And Shiv realized something. The Biomancy flowing into him materialized his spells as well. Spells that weighed down on his focus, that filled him with strain. But he could move spells in and out of his field. He could project them back into existence—offset the strain.

He began to cycle Sullain's magic out from his Aegis of Assimilation. Shiv worked as fast as he could, but he was nowhere near the spellcaster that Sullain was. A trickle of microspells became a contagion, and Shiv groaned, even as he pushed more and more out from himself.

Aegis of Assimilation 109 > 111

Multi-Tasking 21 > 24

This was a losing battle, but the Deathless snarled as he realized he could still win the war. He strained his Multi-Tasking to the limit as he materialized his Chronomancy once more. He left an echo of himself

right there, and his temporal shell destabilized, reaching the precipice of destruction. And then he dismissed it.

He held against the Biomantic onslaught as long as he could. In the meantime, he materialized his Pillar of Orichalcum again, and just in time. The first of the Vicar's spells hit him. It was a mix of Pyromancy and Necromancy; a beam of searing heat that licked a piece of his flesh away and tore a gap in his Necromantic wards.

If Shiv hadn't started increasing his Toughness, it would have likely cleaved clean through him. Bolts of lightning infused with Psychomancy crashed into Shiv's mind. Pockets were blown into his consciousness. His memories came asunder. His sense of self fractured, but pure instinct made him hold to a simple fact, a simple desire to be stronger, to be more durable, to survive the worst the Vicar could give him.

But where he held on to his Toughness, he lost concentration in regard to his magic altogether. A spread of tumors exploded through his body and began to eat through him, flooding his very cells, compromising him from bone to sinew to skin. His flesh began to attack itself. Jagged teeth erupted from the biomass lining his ribs, and they bit down, chewing on his inner organs.

Shiv groaned at the betrayal inflicted upon him by his body, but the creatures hatching free from his flesh failed to inflict harm, for they couldn't pierce his flesh. As soon as they separated, they lost the radiance of Orichalcum and found themselves mere creatures of bone and enamel trying to besiege something that even a Tarrasque couldn't break. Worse, every blow they inflicted was reflected back at them.

Pillar of Orichalcum 212 > 213

They came asunder, splitting apart in puffs of red—

Then, something much larger hit Shiv. Sullain teleported next to him. A clawed hand channeling a full blast of corrosive mana splashed over his body. This was something his pillar couldn't resist, but the Necromantic shroud the orcs encased him within endured for a second longer before its spellwork began to break apart, snapping like fraying ropes. At the same time, Sullain tore Shiv's vitality out of him. The Vicar made a ripping motion, and Shiv watched as streams of vitality burst free from him. The Deathless let out a shuddering cry of weakness as he desperately matched his Vitality Drain Skill against Sullain's.

How the hells is he doing that? Why is my Vitality Drain so felling weak in comparison? Is it just the level? No. It can't be...

"There is no hope of you prevailing against me," Sullain seethed. "Your damnation is sealed. I have foreseen it."

Shiv shivered from the coldness of encroaching oblivion, but he laughed through chattering teeth. "S—sure. S—sounds like your D—divination is great. So why didn't you use that to save Submission? D—didn't feel like it?"

Psychology 48 > 50 (Skill Evolution Imminent)

Sullain stopped draining him out of sheer outrage, flinching as if struck. Shiv's grin grew wider. The orcs had tested his patience, had left him anxious and weary with paranoia—but they did teach him one thing: how to piss people off.

Sometimes, pissing people off is enough to spare your life.

"DAMN YOU!" Sullain shook and twitched like he was experiencing a seizure. More spells crashed against his body as he threw his tantrum. Only after a second of suffering his meltdown did Sullain finally compose himself and respond. He forged a colossal blade of gleaming Dynamancy, and it clashed against Shiv, but the blade shattered instead of him, and a blast enveloped the world, a blast that collapsed inward on itself, becoming a singularity. Orcs were drawn in. Cycling streams of rubble spun around the blade. A body impacted Shiv's pillar and splattered apart into a smear of fetid gore.

But the Deathless held. He shifted a centimeter toward this new singularity, but no more.

Sullain was a Legendary Pathbearer, a master of all magical skills known to Integrated Earth, but he was no Tarrasque in terms of might.

Not nearly.

"Break! DIE!" Sullain cried out. He channeled another spell of Psychomancy toward Shiv. But an orc got in the way, and his body came alight with flashing Magical Resistance. The same orc projected something from his mind: a translucent shape that snapped free from his being, crashing against Sullain like a missile. But the Vicar simply waved the spell aside like it was a gust of air.

The Vicar pointed a finger at the orc, and the gray-skinned warrior burst apart into a cloud of blood.

Anger washed through Shiv. He knew what these orcs were. He knew their cruelty, their psychopathy. But despite this, he couldn't help but care for them at that moment, because they were his psychopaths. They were his orcs. And if someone was going to kill them, break them, butcher them, and mutilate their souls, it was going to be him. He was the Insul, not Sullain.

Shiv drained vitality from everything around him. But even as he fed anger into the skill, he found it barely empowered.

The hells am I doing wrong?

Then, Sullain wrenched back the vitality Shiv had just siphoned away from him while forming a hundred-layered ward of prismatic brightness. Each section parried and shattered a spell the orcs threw at him. Sullain ignored the rest of the army for now, focusing solely on Shiv. The Deathless groaned as he felt himself veer toward nonexistence. Thinking itself became a struggle as weakness and Psychomantic damage left their toll on his body.

"You—" Sullain's words died as Bonk smashed him in the back of the head. Part of his metallic skull was dented inward, and one of his arms snapped free, crashing against the ground. Bonk laughed, hitting Sullain twice more. He drove the Vicar against Shiv, and the colossal serpent bent around the Orichalcum pillar.

Though Sullain had magical solutions aplenty, it was clear he lacked answers for both the deeply emotional and extremely physical.

The Deathless growled as he fought past his malaise. He spiked his gravitic field faster and faster. His Toughness and his Reflexes warred against each other. Cracks formed along his flesh, and then the damage slowed as his Toughness exceeded his inertial sheath once more. He kept going until he hit the point of minor injury before he shifted his attention to his Toughness instead.

The tale has been illicitly lifted; should you spot it on Amazon, report the violation.

He was at well over six hundred spikes now. When he unleashed his discharge, the world would pay for it.

And so would Sullain.

"Keep him pinned!" Shiv shouted. He didn't know if the orcs could hear him, but he suspected that it didn't matter. Orcs were warriors of experience and instinct. They knew what he could do, and they adapted faster than even he could. They would exploit his skills any way they could, and Shiv would deliver upon Sullain suffering like the Legendary Pathbearer could never comprehend.

He was going to reach into Sullain with his Vitae, and he would break his Omnimancy.

At the same time, Shiv drained from existence. A new rupture formed, clashing against Sullain instead of the Tarrasque. And as part of existence unzipped, it tore away a few of the colossal serpent's fingers. Whirls of mana rained down, splashing against the land. Dust and debris filled the air. Flames swirled. A mana storm spilled out and smashed into the Vicar.

Over a kilometer of metallic serpent was torn away from Shiv like a rag doll. Thunder sounded, and a blast of Psychomancy made the Deathless flinch as he felt something inside his mind fracture.

Sullain cried out as Bonk hit him over and over. Shiv couldn't tell if this was the fifth or sixth time the orc had landed on the Legendary Pathbearer. But the serpent's body was rattling. More pieces were breaking off. And maybe, just maybe, Bonk would have gotten his wish. He would have been able to break Sullain.

But suddenly, as Bonk prepared to hit Sullain again, something struck him. Something Shiv couldn't see. A blast of shadowy static consumed the orc, and he vanished before his broken club could fall once more. And Shiv realized that Sullain's spiritual manifestation was likely in play once more.

Shiv grimaced. No more time to wait. He discharged. But as he did, he went outside context and froze time. Sullain swiped up his hands as if praying to the sky. Along his limbs emerged a chain of Dimensionality spells, each flashing with static and coated in a pitch-black membrane. But he never quite managed to finish that spell. Not with his physical body, at least. His spiritual manifestation tried, but Shiv's concluding discharge caught it by surprise.

A chasm of destruction expanded out of the Deathless. It was like an entire stretch of existence was ripped asunder. And Sullain fared no better. The Vicar's body shuddered, and then it deformed, pieces cracking away. Metal screamed as his form ripped in half.

Sullain was a Legendary spellcaster, peerless on Integrated Earth when it came to magical versatility, but he was no warrior, and it showed.

It showed in his inexperience, in his determination to engage Shiv up close, in his pointless desire to punish him for the emotional slights Shiv had inflicted on his feelings. And now the Vicar paid for it as parts of his body crumpled inward as he was cleaved in twain.

"No!" Sullain's spiritual manifestation cried. He held out a hand, pouring Chronomancy mana into his physical vessel, trying to keep it together. But despite time shifting backward, Sullain's physical shell remained as damaged as before, even after the golden mana faded. "H-how?"

Shiv chuckled. "A little Unique Feat called Causal Scargiver, asshole."

In that instant, the battle went silent. The Vicar's hands stilled as he looked toward the Deathless encased, in a tower of Orichalcum. No orc Chronomancers remained. The spiritual manifestation must have torn through them—through so many.

But Sullain was wounded. “How...” He whimpered. Both his spiritual manifestation and his physical vessel were scarred beyond restoration by time or acausality.

“Because I got tired of dealing with eldritch bullshit,” Shiv said with a glare. Then, he sneered. He wanted Sullain to be more unbalanced—and more than that, he had a feeling another Skill Evolution was waiting. “You should have kept the Tarrasque around. It was much tougher than you were. Much better than you were in general. Frankly, if that Tarrasque had been the ruler of Submission, maybe your people would still be there. You know the funniest thing? First time I saw you, I wanted to be you. I was jealous of your magic. But now? I'd kill myself for good if I ever became you. Because you're a child, Sullain. I didn't realize that you could reach Legendary-Tier and still be nothing more than a bitch.”

This spiritual manifestation's hands began to shake. Its Chronomancy mana faded. It came at Shiv with claws outstretched, with its entire being aglow with Necromancy. There was no coherence left to the Vicar. A tormented screech of anguish and hate was all he unleashed as he flung himself against Shiv's Orichalcum pillar.

In the same instant, Shiv felt his Psychology hit its first Skill Evolution.

Silver Tongue 29 > 31

Skill Evolution: Psychology (Initiate) > Psycho-Cartography (Master)

He didn't wait to read the notification, however. He cast himself back to his temporal anchor and went out of context once more. Sullain's claws gripped nothing. Shiv felt his temporal shell fracture, but he didn't mind. He lashed out after coating himself in Vitae once more, and he impacted the midsection of Sullain's spiritual body. It shattered like crystalline glass.

The Vicar howled.

He clutched at himself, and the magics he wielded immediately got weaker. Shiv tore and ripped and broke more things in Sullain's spiritual manifestation, and before he could get to its head, it vanished in motes of glittering mana.

It returned to its physical body, and Shiv just sneered. He cast himself ten seconds back in time, just as he began spiking himself with more and more momentum. His temporal shell shattered. Sullain let out a brutal gasp. He held up a hand, and golden mana swept across his body. Pieces that were damaged remained damaged even in Sullain's desperation. "WHY... GREAT ONE! HELP ME! AID YOUR CHILD!"

What few orcs were left began to besiege the Legendary Pathbearer from all directions. Massive hands of Dimensionality pinned him in place as he tried to teleport. Fists formed from Dynamancy crashed down, crushing more of Sullain's crumbling form. Winds of Psychomancy splashed against the Vicar's mind as he tried to fight off the orcs with a single hand. Spells from all directions bombarded the Legend, and even now, even in this pathetic state, Shiv found something in Sullain to admire.

The Vicar wasn't fighting one Hero or even a few. He was fighting Shiv along with an army of a few thousand Masters at the least. And the Deathless had no doubt that if Sullain wasn't a fool, if he'd applied any true strategy, he would have won despite it all. But his heart was too broken, and though his magic was strong, his spirit was frail. And he was too short-sighted to realize that Shiv had thought ahead.

Here was a Legend who betrayed their skill because of a lingering weakness in their will.

The Deathless discharged his built-up Inertial Overdrive once more, and the blast, even stronger than before, tore through Sullain's physical body. A second chasm followed the first, and this time, Sullain's physical body began to crumple and dissolve into particles. Shiv could hear Sullain screaming even over the immense detonation.

He watched as the Vicar's kilometer-long form of alloy began to shrink. It faded, as if a shadow cast beneath a lantern. He tried to cast a spell, but it sparked and fizzled out—something was broken about his magic. Shiv's eyes narrowed. Was the spiritual manifestation an externalized projection of his Omnimancy?

In a weird way, it made sense. It was unburdened by time, and it could cast spells and affect Shiv's soul. It was effectively a second Sullain hidden within the first—only invisible and intangible when time flowed normally.

An ocean of ionized plasma chewed at Sullain, and Shiv watched as a new color burst into existence. It was the broken, fractured form of Sullain's spiritual manifestation. It only had ten arms left. Most of its body had been broken away. Only a jagged tail remained of it. Its head was fractured as well.

Most of its jaw was missing, and Sullain's spirit trembled as it tried to pour its flagging magic into its physical self, trying to maintain its existence, trying to preserve its actual body from full annihilation.

And though this moment was urgent, Shiv took a second to study Sullain. And then he noticed it: a thin strand of vitality connecting Sullain to the physical body.

Perhaps the spiritual and physical bodies were both halves of Sullain instead of being an embodied skill. But despite this Shiv would bet everything he had, would bet everything he would ever have, that Sullain had another vessel somewhere.

Shiv didn't know overmuch about the ritual of the dichotomous soul, but he knew it was called that for a reason. Some split parts of themselves into different bodies at the same time. For one as skilled in magic as Sullain, not doing so would be a strange oversight.

So why was he fighting so hard to preserve this body? Why was he fighting at all?

And that's how Shiv found something else. A strand. Just a single, thin line of Psychomancy extending far across the battlefield, through the dense plasma choking the air. And it went in the direction of the Tarrasque.

Awareness 47 > 50 (Skill Evolution Imminent)

Shiv laughed. It's not for him, at least not now. It's for his pet. Vicar Sullain was full of shit. He might have released most of his grasp on the Tarasque, but part of him held it still. He had to give the creature commands, after all.

“Hey, Sullain,” Shiv called out. He projected his words using his Psychomancy, and the Vicar's spiritual manifestation froze.

It looked at Shiv, and despite its posture radiating with anger, something else extended from Sullain and anchored itself within Shiv. It was a chain made out of that same crystalline mana that comprised the spiritual manifestation's being. It was a chain of fear, and that chain fed into Shiv's social skills as well. Sullain's great weakness wasn't his Physicality or his Toughness. His great weakness was quite simply that he was too easy to abuse. He had no self-control, and Shiv exploited that to the utmost of his capacity.

Shape of Monstrosity 108 > 112

"I think you should run," Shiv began. As soon as he started speaking, he gained a piercing insight into how the subject of his focus was going to react.

Psycho-Cartography: Mock failure; insinuate he was the one that failed Submission and that Roland Arrow could have protected his city—high chance of spiking rage to new heights.

Chapter 157 (III) Weakness

“I think you should run and save yourself,” Shiv suggested. “You got another body somewhere. I'm sure of that. So you won't be dying here, not even after this embarrassment. Gotta say, I hate Roland, but he would have never allowed things to get to this point. He would have killed me three times over by now.”

“SILLENNNNNCCCEEE” Sullain shot toward him. He clawed Shiv with a splash of Necromancy, and Shiv felt the final bits of his protection start to fray away. At the same time, he felt his vitality get ripped free from him once more—and he countered that by draining from reality. A rupture formed between him and the Vicar. That interrupted his Vitality Drain Skill. And at the same time, Shiv saw a certain orc leaping over the far horizon.

A large orc holding a broken club.

"I was going to keep you alive," Sullain said, choking on his own words. "I was going to deliver you back to Udrael. But now, but now—"

Psycho-Cartography: Sullain can probably still unleash a great deal of power against you right now, but he has a borderline psycho-sexual need to feel something of a victory against you, no matter how minor. You have broken his faith in himself. You have tapped into his despair. Hurt him more—but do not go too far; keep him hesitant and frustrated, without sending him into a blind rage. Use near-sympathy as a weapon. Hurt him, then confuse him. Delay until Bonk arrives.

"Nothing," Shiv spat at Sullain. The Vicar's body trembled as more pieces broke free from him. "You've done nothing. You failed your people, you got your army killed, and Roland Arrow is still alive. Hells, my Vitae did more to break Blackedge than you and your army. No wonder Valor didn't think anything of you."

Sullain let out a piercing wail. Shiv felt his vitality plunge dangerously. This time, however, he paid attention to what Sullain was doing—the Vicar wasn't draining Shiv's vitality into him; he was channeling Shiv's vitality into that thin membrane protecting existence.

How the hells does that work?

The Deathless blinked as he fought the darkness seeping into his vision. He needed a moment—an opening. "Why did... Why did you hurt yourself so much, Sullain? Why? I almost wish you could have won. That you could have killed Roland. Why did you have to fail?"

Shiv forced as much genuine feeling into his voice as possible.

Sullain actually stopped draining him for a moment. The Vicar choked. “I... I...”

Bonk descended—the orc was only a few hundred meters away. And Sullain seemed utterly ignorant...

Psycho-Cartography 51 > 52

Acting 15 > 16

Silver Tongue 31 > 33

Psycho-Cartography: Now, go gentle. Give him hope. Give him the validation he wants. But remind him that his self-loathing and sorrow are his failing. Give him something true to think about.

“Come on, godsdammit,” Shiv breathed. “You’re a Legend. Why did you do this to yourself?”

“I didn’t!”

Sullain cried at Shiv, trying to justify his failures. “You—”

“I’m nothing to you,” Shiv hissed. “So what if I can’t die? So what if my soul is different? You’re the one who’s a Legend. You were the one with a mission. Why do you punish yourself with bad decisions? Why do you—”

“BECAUSE I SHOULD HAVE DIED!” Sullain finally screamed. He wrapped his remaining hands around Shiv’s Pillar of Orichalcum and shuddered. “BECAUSE I FLED WHEN ARROW RAZED MY CITY AND SLAUGHTERED MY PEOPLE! I RAN! I COULDN’T BEST HIM! AND SO I LEFT THEM TO DIE! MY FAITHFUL... MY FLOCK... MY CHILDREN!”

And the rawness of Sullain’s pain gave Shiv pause. He wasn’t even faking sympathy for the Vicar anymore—he just felt bad. To some extent. He never thought a Legend could be undone like this.

Then, the Legend was undone physically as his Nemesis-Beloved smashed down on him from behind.

"SULLAIN!" Bonk roared one final time. He struck the remainder of Sullain's physical vessel, and this time, every bit of Sullain broke apart into a shower of metallic shrapnel. They opened up cuts all along Bonk’s flesh—but the orc’s blood simply combusted in the air, detonating like a chain of increasingly powerful bombs.

Shiv heard the Vicar let out an agonized cry, and he halted time again. Once more, the spiritual manifestation of Sullain came into view. It swatted Bonk from the air and went after him. Shiv couldn’t allow that.

He wrapped his gravitic field around the fear-chain connecting him with Sullain and pulled. Sullain was stronger than Shiv—but he was also terrified of the Deathless. Simultaneously, Shiv’s Pillar of

Orichalcum rooted him in place. As such, the Vicar's spiritual manifestation jerked to a violent halt in midair. The chain cracked but held. Sullain cried out. "NO!"

"Oh, yeah," Shiv growled. He cast himself eleven seconds back in time. Evelen? Shit. How many orcs died for my maximum Chronomancy time to be eleven? It was twelve before.

He remanifested with his pillar weaker but still present. He commanded it to soften as he lashed at Sullain with his Vitaemancy. His strands of Vitae—being physical—traveled through the air in awkward bursts of motion as they struggled against Shiv's overwhelming Toughness. Even so, they managed to touch the Vicar's spirit—and sink deep into him.

This time, Shiv tore at the Vicar's insides. His lack of Magical Resistance was the least surprising thing Shiv discovered about him. With Omnimancy, what other mage could threaten Sullain?

The answer was a mage unlike any other. A mage who barely knew what he was doing. Shiv poured his skill inside the Vicar and tore at all he could grasp. Sullain briefly drained his vitality—but Shiv triggered his Icon of the Paindrinker. The Vicar curled in on himself thereafter, utterly ruined by the pain he suffered.

Primal triumph exploded inside Shiv. He reached deeper into Sullain, following the ripples inside his enemy's soul as he slipped into what he assumed to be the Vicar's Omnimancy Skill.

Animated Skill Infusion Gained: Omnimancy.

And once Shiv had that, he focused entirely on ripping Sullain in half.

“PLEASE!” Sullain begged, managing to force the word out. “PLEASE, I DON’T DESERVE—”

Shiv’s Vitae shattered as brittleness spread through him. He ignored his pain and dragged his Vitae in two directions. But Sullain’s soul was like a dense canvas. Hard. Strong. A slight tear formed, but Shiv couldn’t rip through the Vicar like he could a Master-Tier orc. So, he adapted. He plunged into the Vicar’s Omnimancy Skill again and expanded inside it.

“I DON’T DESERVE—”

The Vicar’s final cry came as a desperate scream before his Legendary Skill fully shattered and his spiritual manifestation suddenly winked out of existence.

A dark feeling passed through Shiv as he wondered if Sullain was alive or dead. But something told him it didn’t matter.

Psycho-Cartography: Sullain’s Legendary Magical Skill Evolution was likely one of the few things keeping him protected. Not only from the world, but his own sense of failure. What you just broke is beyond his own ability to fix. He will need to find an Animancer. And who will help him on the surface or the Abyss after what he just did? Death is waiting for him. By another’s hands, or his own.

A shaking breath escaped Shiv. His insides felt raw and exhausted. He fell from the air and looked down. As he did, he choked. A gargantuan wound had been blasted all the way through the landscape, leading into a fathomless stretch of darkness beneath. Sullain and the orcs had traded so many spells that a new entrance to the Abyss had been formed.

And speaking of the orcs, Shiv saw that one was still falling—bound for said Abyss. Shiv launched himself through the air just as his temporal shell was about to crack. But Shiv caught Bonk just before he fell into the darkness and dragged him back up into the sky.

As he rose, he looked down and saw a large gash lining the orc's chest. Shiv brushed the wound away with his Aegis of Assimilation and winced from the torturous sensations of the soul wound pulsing through him.

Bonk blinked and looked up. He saw Shiv holding on to him with a single outstretched hand. The orc's expression was unreadable as he met Shiv's eyes. "I broke him?"

"You broke his body," Shiv corrected. "I had to break the rest."

Bonk just laughed, a wistful melancholy to the noise. "Nine."

"What?"

"Nine bloody swings." The orc let out a sigh. And then sniffled. The orc almost seemed sad. "So. Is he dead, then?"

"His soul's torn up, and his Legendary Skill is broken," Shiv said. "I suspect he won't be around for much longer. The question is just who gets to whatever other body he has first. Or if he wants to finish things himself."

“Ah. Sullain was always a bit too emotional.” Bonk shook his head, as if he were talking about an acquaintance with a drinking problem. “I expected more of him.”

Shiv squinted as he tried to locate any signs of survivors. “More? Felling shit, Bonk, I’m pretty sure he got literally everyone except you and me.”

“Yes, but that was only around fifty thousand orcs,” Bonk noted. “He could have done better.”

“Fifty thousand?” Shiv groaned. The battle had barely lasted a few minutes. “He killed fifty thousand Master-Tier orcs?”

Bonk’s face scrunched up in thought. “Well, at least fifty of the others were Heroes...”

“Broken felling Moon,” Shiv whispered. And here he was thinking he’d managed to humiliate the Vicar. Gods, Legends are horrifying. Even the pathetic ones.

Everything, as far as his eyes could see, was utterly destroyed. The parts of the landscape that hadn’t collapsed into the Abyss were nothing but smoldering craters, and reality-rending ruptures still spewed out gelatinous mana storms in the distance. Shiv sniffed, and he realized his armor was pretty much destroyed right now. Only a few strips of biomass still clung to his body.

Husk of the Adamantine Voidmantid

Condition: Dead (Regenerating)

Well. At least it's not broken like my gauntlet and mask are, Shiv thought.

Just then, Shiv noticed a faint flash of gray in his periphery. He turned, expecting to see another orc, but only saw a disembodied arm rain down.

But his attentive focus was enough to finally push another skill over the edge.

Awareness 50 > 51 (Skill Evolution Reached)

Skill Evolution: Awareness (Initiate) > Farsight (Adept)

Farsight 51 (Adept)

All of a sudden, Shiv found himself able to zoom in on distant objects with his eyes. As he focused at a single spot, he magnified his vision and immediately went from squinting from afar to signaling out particulates in the air.

Shit. This is useful. It's got nothing on Adam's Hypersense, but still useful.

“Well.” Bonk sighed, looking around. “At least it was fun. I think I will miss Sullain and his loud, over-emotional wailing whenever I mocked him. Now, I must find a new Nemesis-Beloved.” And that’s when his eyes lingered on Shiv for a while too long.

“Sorry, I already have a favorite asshole,” Shiv grumbled. “His name is Adam.”

“Ah. I thought you were referring to Stormsoil 812.”

“Stormsoil...” Shiv scoffed. “No. The moment I get the chance, I’m killing him for good. Bastard sold me out to Hawgrave.”

Bonk frowned. “Considering he has a Quest to kill you, how does that constitute a betrayal?”

Shiv considered the logic—and he decided he didn’t want to be logical.

Psycho-Cartography: Bonk is genuinely confused as to why you’re taking this so personally. It’s not like you didn’t know 812 was coming for you.

“It doesn’t,” Shiv mumbled in admission. “I’m still going to kill him for good, because I’m not putting up with fighting him for centuries—or even decades.”

“Ah. That makes more sense. Would you put up with—”

“Bonk. Do you want me to start fighting you right now? Because we still have a Tarrasque waiting for us.”

And at the mention of that, something flashed in the distance. Shiv blinked as a stratosphere-high wall of fire accelerated toward him and Bonk. More blasts rattled the world. A deafening roar shook the skies.

“Ah, yes,” Bonk breathed as he licked his lips. “The Tarrasque. Well. I’m glad to see the others haven’t killed it yet. Looks like we might get to taste the Quest rewards after all.”

And that reminded Shiv of something. He checked the original quest that set him on this path—the one pertaining to Blackedge.

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

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

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

The Deathless frowned. “Why the hells isn’t this Quest over?”

"Which one, Insul?" Bonk asked. "The Quest that has you save Blackedge? Why would it end with Sullain dead?"

Shiv read the quest requirements again. The siege was—well, Hawgrave had Blackedge now, and the Inquisition was fighting the Descenders Union and the orcs. "Shit. A war might be about to start instead of being prevented. Godsdammit. Getting the Quest reward here would have let me evolve a skill to Legendary."

Bonk hummed. "It will still be wise for you to resolve that Quest first. I suggest murdering all the Inquisitors aside from the Legend first. Do it while she's occupied with the beast, then make sure she takes the most wounds while fighting the Tarrasque, and simply steal the town back from her thereafter."

"My town's in her felling sword," Shiv said. "So are the rest of my friends."

Bonk grinned. "And that might be the safest place for them right now, wouldn't you agree?"

Shiv just frowned at the orc. "Bonk, you remember what Tarrasque did to all of us earlier, right?"

"Did to you, mostly," Bonk corrected.

Shiv closed his eyes and used his Psycho-Cartography skill to convince himself not to punch the orc in the head.

"To me, yeah. So, with my first-hand experience dying over and over again at the hands of that giant bullshit monster, I think we're going to need everyone to keep its attention and finally kill it. That," Shiv let out a sigh, "and I need to figure out how to deal with all that Vitae keeping it alive. It spends a little bit of vitality every time it resurrects, but a little bit is not going to cut it. I need to do what Sullain did to me just now."

The Deathless thought back to how the Vicar had ripped Shiv's vitality out of him by shifting it into that thin membrane, infusing the world with it.

How the hell does that work? Shiv thought to himself again.

Bonk tutted chidingly. "You must be more ambitious, Insul. Sometimes, we can have a pound of flesh and eat it too."

"What do you mean?" Shiv asked.

"I mean that it's going to be awfully hard for you to contend with the Tarrasque as barely a True Hero. That Legendary skill would matter a great deal. So..." The orc smiled as he let his words trail off. "I think that many things can happen at the same time."

Shiv thought for a second, considering their options. "A heist?"

"Yes," Bonk said. "We should recruit a Dimensionalist. If I can find a living orc Dimensionalist, great. If I can't..." He licked his lips. "Well, that's the reason why we should visit the inquisitors' flying fortress first."

That surfer Legend won't suspect them. And they are going to be a problem sooner or later. Best we spend them against the Tarrasque."

Shiv let out a grunt of agreement. "Yeah. Alright. Fine, Bonk: I'm listening."

"First, you may want to help us survive that massive wave of fire."

And just then, Shiv noticed how close the destructive tidal wave sweeping the world was getting. Shiv magnified his vision into the approaching mess and snorted with derision. "Yeah. Alright."

Then Shiv began accelerating toward certain death.

Bonk looked at him. "What are you..."

"Relax, Bonk," Shiv said, as he prepared to manifest his pillar. "Just keep talking about your plan to free everyone and get me that Legendary Skill..."

Chapter 158 (I) Grievance [I]

All Pathbearers dream of reaching Legendary-Tier. To most, it is the pinnacle of power. Yet, this power is rarely understood so well. Let us put this into perspective—did you know that sixty percent of the energy generated by the Twilight Republic comes from two Aeromancy Legends? The other forty are provided by countless Heroes, Masters, Adepts, and Initiates.

This disparity should demonstrate the sheer gulf of capability between a Legend and the cultures they hail from. And this also demonstrates the sheer importance of a Legend. It goes beyond just power and threat potential. A Legendary Pathbearer is a major portion of a nation's economy, a major source of its arts and technology. Indeed, the Yellowstone Republic is blessed not only by the thirteen Ascendants that protect and guide us, but also by the sheer wealth of Legends that makes our land the greatest place to live in on Integrated Earth.

It is because of these Legends that you live in relative comfort and security. Consider the desperate struggles assailing our cousins in Lone Star. For all their temerity and defiance, they are at a deadlock against the orcish menace. For all the sheer quantity of Heroes and Masters they possess, they desperately lack Legends. And such a deficit has cost them immensely.

But understand that Legends are rare for a reason. For to become a Legend requires something beyond determination, beyond genius, beyond experience. We have Heroes who have served for three centuries on, and they stand bottlenecked at the precipice, struggling for decades to gain singular levels in their strongest skills.

No. To become a Legend requires you to survive. Survive the impossible. To be part of Legendary clashes—moments that scar the pages of the world's history and ignite the fires fueling the System. Legends are forged through conflicts above all other conflicts, and more often than not, the rising of a new Legend has come at the price of them slaying an older one. This, statistically, is the most common way Legends cement themselves.

Yet, the numbers are against you. Against you with the ambition to reach Legendary-Tier, as you must cast yourself in the flames of desperation and bloodshed. And against those of you who simply wish to live gentler lives.

You do not have forever. Understand that the average life expectancy of a person in the Yellowstone Republic remains at 112 years for a reason as well—with only Adepts and below perishing most often from natural causes.

The System demands that we struggle and fight, and though we live in prosperous, gentle times, war is the constant—peace is the anomaly. Without power, your end will come by blade, disease, spell, or disaster. And they are coming. They are always coming.

Nothing is promised, Pathbearer. So, our suggestion is that you burn. Rage. Rise. Do not wait. The System will seek your life in one fashion or another. Force it to take it from you.

-The Paths of Ascension, Essential Reading at Phoenix Academy of The Yellowstone Republic

A sudden rush of air flooded Roland Arrow's lungs. Light splashed into his eyes. The world came into shape. First, he saw dappled blurs, but then they solidified. Colors peeled apart, and soon he began to recognize shapes hovering over him. The shapes of people—of faces he still couldn't fully see. He could hear his name chanted on desperate lips.

He tried to move. He tried to say something, but all that escaped him was a long groan. His cells were suffused with agony. Every part of him hurt, and every fiber of his being was exhausted.

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But he was alive. At least he hoped he was. If this was the afterlife, then Roland would be supremely displeased. He had already suffered immensely while he was alive, and he had no desire to continue that process in death.

"Back away, back away; his brain still needs more blood flow," a deep, rumbling voice chided. Roland followed the sound and craned his head upward. A series of cracks sounded through his neck, and the Town Lord whimpered. As he blinked, his vision cleared ever so slightly, and he found himself staring up at an ugly, gray face sporting a pair of spectacles. Roland beheld his savior: an orc of all things. An orc currently weaving a strange series of biomantic helices. Crimson mana spilled out from the orc's hand, washing over the Town Lord's body.

A bead of confusion and disbelief spread through Roland. What happened?

And then a pair of warm hands were pawing at his cheeks, and another face came into view. This one he recognized. This one he saw in a picture frame beside his bed every time he woke up, but also in the depths of his dreams. She had been dead for almost two decades now, but here she was in the flesh before him, her teardrop-shaped face feeding a building ache in his heart, her violet eyes glowing ever so faintly even in the light. Her hair flowed like rivers of silken blood, cascading along her collarbone.

Roland swallowed, and once more he contemplated whether he was truly dead. He wouldn't mind now, not even if he had to suffer this pain for the rest of eternity. He had yearned for this moment. Roland had prayed not only to the Starhawk, but to any god who would listen to grant him a reunion with the one he lost.

And here she was. Roland couldn't believe it. He almost didn't want to accept it, and ultimately, he uttered a slurred prayer, blessing whoever delivered Rose back into his life, swearing a vow of fealty and honor to his yet-unknown benefactor.

"Rose," Roland whispered. "You... Is this a dream?"

"Do I feel like a dream, you damned fool?" Rose asked as she ran her thumbs along his cheeks. Her voice was on the verge of a sob as well. She pressed her hands tighter against his face, and then she slid her arms around his neck and held him, just held him.

Roland tried to lift his own limbs, but they felt heavy, like he was trying to budge mountains. Even so, Roland Arrow managed. It didn't matter if his arms felt like they were trapped under rubble. There was no force in existence that would stop him from holding his wife once more. She shook slightly, and so did he.

For a moment, peace and joy prevailed over pain.

As he clung to her, he saw his son staring at him. Adam's eyes were wide, his face was white, and there were faint trails on his cheeks.

"Adam," Roland wheezed. There were so many questions the Town Lord wanted to ask, but he decided against voicing any of them. Instead, he held out a shaking hand, and his boy walked over and grasped it. In that moment, despite suffering from unspeakable pain, despite the unexplained orc Biomancer doing everything he could just to keep Roland alive, the Town Lord was a very happy man indeed.

But then he saw the rest of his chamber. It was utterly devastated. Glass shards rained down from above. The walls and windows were all shattered. A long piece of structural rebar jutted out from the corner of the room, and a body hung limply from its jagged tip. A body that Roland recognized. A pang of sorrow pulsed through the Town Lord. That had been one of his Biomancers, Master Kareva. He was unmoving.

Starhawk... Can I truly protect no one...

As Rose finally pulled away from him, Roland surveyed the rest of the room. Yet even moving his neck was a struggle. The destruction inflicted upon Starhawk's Perch was severe. It seemed like a colossal impact had struck the building. A faint aura of star-bright fire fizzled out from the cracks that lined the ground and the walls.

There were several people piled together, moaning in pain as Roland's remaining Biomancer did what she could. But she did so lying down as well. One of her legs was rigged in a makeshift metal splint, and she had a stump for a left arm.

Nearby, Roland's captain of the guard, along with the remainder of his personal retinue, stood watch. Their hands were on their weapons, and their postures were tense. One of them was glaring at the orc healing Roland. The others were focused on another group of orcs not far away.

There were three of them. One of the gray-skinned bruisers was dressed in midnight robes that glistened with Dimensionality mana. Another was an extremely large orc, wearing what seemed to be melted automata. That orc also lacked actual humanoid legs. Rather, he had mechanical appendages jutting out from the bottom, a sort of tetrapod-like build. And finally, there was an orc who was actively smoking and absentmindedly twirling two wands in his hands as he eyed Roland's personal guard as if they were easy prey.

And behind the orcs was another figure. No, two other figures. One Roland recognized. That was Georges. A feeling of gratitude swelled through Roland as he laid eyes on the chef. Georges had done everything he could with his Heroic-Tier cooking. He turned crumbs into feasts, and he magnified the caloric density of every bite and morsel of food held within the Perch's pantry. It had been the only place unaffected by Sullain's vile Biomancy. And without Georges' aid, many more people would have died.

Beside Georges was a tall figure Roland hadn't expected to see. He didn't know who she was, but after a brief moment of observation, Roland was certain of two things. The first was that she was an Umbral,

and the second, more chilling fact, was that she was a Seeker. He knew the colors leaking from her eyes. He knew the touch of the Outside; he had faced it more than once in his life. Yet, she didn't seem mad or malicious. Instead, she was looking beyond the broken windows, casting her gaze over the ruins of Blackedge and at something else beyond.

Suddenly, the red mana pulsating from the Biomancer orc's hand faded. He adjusted his spectacles and looked Roland up and down. "You should be able to stand under your own power now, but I would recommend against any strenuous activities if you value your life. But if you are going to kill yourself overchanneling a god's power through your soul, do make it explosive. It's always the most theatrical way to die."

Rose snarled at the orc. "Go fuck yourself. He's not going to die."

"Statistically, everyone inevitably dies," the orc Biomancer grinned. "Some of us just come back."

Orcs weren't known to save people's lives, not unless there was something to be gained from it. "Why?" Roland thus asked, curious to know what the orc desired of him.

"Why what?" the orc replied haughtily. "Why are you still alive? Well, that surprised me as well. When I got to you, your body was in a dire state. Your organs were all withered. Your skin was practically peeling off your bones. Your muscles were so over-flooded with acid that they were practically melting. And your brain was damaged from ischemia, of all things. Your oxygen and blood flow were so blunted by your prolonged combat strain that it's a miracle you didn't die weeks ago." And then the orc chuckled. "But it was magnificent learning about how you sustained that damage. Constant combat against an entire enemy army, including a rival Legend."

The Biomancer started clapping, and the other orcs joined in. Their pride and respect for him were genuine, as was the predatory gleam glistening in their eyes. "The Starhawk chooses his servants well," the midnight-robed orc commented.

Roland breathed in and out. The situation was odd. Things were bad, but he was still alive, which was better than he'd expected. He gave himself a moment to acclimate, and then he grunted as he tried to stand.

"Roland, stop. Fucking stop!" Rose shook him. Her expression was slightly frustrated. "Look at me. You are in no condition to do anything."

And despite everything Roland wanted to say, he just smirked at his love, as he had in his youth. "Well, I don't think it's up to me anymore. I'd rather lie here. But I suppose someone must save the world."

"And right now that someone isn't going to be you," Rose chided.

"Help me up," Roland said.

Rose narrowed her eyes at him, and a faint shiver of slight fear mixed with extreme pleasure danced down his spine.

"Please," he breathed.

Rose sighed, and she began to pull. But though she let out a growl of effort, she couldn't quite lift him. Roland's eyes widened slightly. Rose had achieved Adept-Tier Physicality. It wasn't her specialty, but she was quite strong for a mage, certainly more than strong enough to lift him. Her Toughness, meanwhile,

had reached Master-Tier, which made her far more durable than most mages. It had even made her more durable than Roland for a time.

Then, the Starhawk had commanded him to descend into the Abyss, and everything—

Where Rose flagged, Adam stepped forth and pulled his father up without any effort at all. Roland rose to his feet, but as he tried to bear his own weight, he nearly collapsed. He nearly did, but Adam grasped him and kept him steady. Wings extended from Adam's back, manifesting like inverted pyramids. Roland counted and realized he knew the skill.

"The Vectors of the Eternal Ascent," Roland murmured. The fires of pride combusted inside the Town Lord. "My boy is a Hero," he choked out.

Adam coughed and looked away. "Well. Yes—I—yes, it's—I—yes."

And that was when Roland noticed it: an azure sphere hovering just behind the top of Adam's head. "And what's this?"

"A Unique Skill. A lot has happened, Father." Adam coughed again, trying to keep his voice clear of emotion. "A great deal."

"I know," Roland replied. Even so, he reached out with a hand and squeezed his son's shoulder. "I know, and I am beyond proud of you. You came back. You did everything you could to come back. I saw you. I saw what you were doing. And I saw... and I saw..." Roland trailed off as he remembered the Omenborn. Shiv. Tanner Lowe. He had been with Adam. They were fighting side by side as comrades, as...

Roland didn't want to think of the Omenborn as Adam's friend. As Vera and Harlon's shadow. The thought was physically painful, and so he avoided it.

But Adam didn't. "Yes, Shiv is here too."

"Was here," The large, automata-wearing orc corrected. "The giant surfacer woman flicked him away like he was a gnat, directly at the Tarrasque. That was the last we saw of the Insul before the dimensional veil closed fully."

"He'll be fine," the cigarette-smoking orc said lazily. "It's going to take more than a world-ending beast to kill..." The orc paused. "To make him stay dead. I'm pretty sure he's getting killed right now. Probably getting killed more than he's ever been killed before."

All the orcs chuckled.

"We are getting favored after this." The automata-wearing orc laughed as he rubbed his large hands together.

Roland was speechless. He thought about all of Shiv's bodies. Thought about how he obliterated Shiv at Old Santabar, only for the Omenborn to return.

"As I said, Father," Adam repeated, "a lot has happened."

The Town Lord wanted to ask more, but for the first time he caught sight of Blackedge, or what remained of it, and the sorrow within him grew a thousand-fold. There were no buildings left intact. The few structures that were still standing had been stripped to their very foundations. There were people out in the streets, but many screams echoed from all corners of the town.

Children were crying out for their parents. Parents howled for their children. Mechanical voices joined organic ones, and Roland could hear his name on their lips as well. They were begging him, asking him where he was. Some were shrieking for him. Others could only muster whispers, for they were trapped beneath tons of rubble.

Worse yet, entire sections of the town were missing. Vast chasms carved chunks and residential clusters out of the town. If Blackedge was a plate, it was shattered and missing at least a fourth of its pieces.

Nausea flooded Roland. He didn't want to know how many of his people were dead, how many he lost, but there was no avoiding the nightmare present before his eyes. He had pledged to protect them.

He had done everything he could, and he had failed. He had failed so many of them. Beyond the borders of Blackedge, he also noticed another problem. There was no sky, no sun, no signs of battle, or even clouds sailing over a canvas of faint blue. Instead, he beheld a sea of static blackness.

A pocket dimension had caged the remains of his town.

"Where are we?" Roland asked. "What has happened to us?"

"Titansbane trapped us in her blade before she sent the Insul flying," the orc Biomancer sneered.

And that name hit Roland like a cannonball to the stomach. Jessica. A woman who had promised Roland that the next time they met, she would rip the upper half of his skull off and use it as a mug.

Roland had tried to explain things to her, had written to her numerous times over the years, but she never responded. And what was once a dear friend became a bitter enemy. She didn't know what her daughter had been involved in, what the Inquisition had dispatched her to do in the Abyss, down near the Umbral Wilderness. And when Hawgrave joined the Inquisition herself thereafter, Roland had accepted that he was going to have to kill another of his old friends in the future, if she didn't kill him first.

And Roland knew where he was now. He looked up into the air, and he drew in a weary breath.

"Rusty?" he called out. His voice was hoarse with exhaustion and injury. "Rusty, can you hear me?"

He noticed a slight quiver along a certain spot of Dimensionality. It was like something was trying to burst through the mana. But then it calmed.

"I can,"

the sword finally answered. Its voice was heavy and thick, but it made no attempt to hide its loathing for Roland. "I was hoping that you had perished, Town Lord. I was hoping that you had died blissfully in ignorance, and spared my wielder the heartache. But as with all things, you are an offense and a disappointment, Roland Arrow."

"And you're a cunt sword that can't tell the difference between an asshole and a sheath," Rose snarled on Roland's behalf. She pointed a finger up at the sky, at the Dimensionality engulfing Blackedge.

"Listen, Rusty, I don't know what in the Broken fucking Moon happened while I was gone, but you will not keep us here. We are citizens of the Republic. I am a lady of a noble line. Roland has served as the Starhawk's enforcer and as a hero to our nation. So I wish to know: by what right are we being held?"

The sword hesitated before responding. "You are dead," it said flatly, dully, but also with a faint hint of surprise. "Then you must be an illusion. How low of you, Roland Arrow, to summon a mirage of your late wife to attack my virtuous heart."

"I'm not a cock-sucking illusion!" Rose almost shrieked. "I came back to life recently because..." She made a series of frustrated hand gestures, and for an absurd moment, Roland couldn't help but smile at her warmly. He'd missed her anger. He'd missed how her desire to express herself exceeded the limits of her verbalization.

"It's complicated!" Rose finally shouted. "It's very complicated, but I was resurrected. Now, you can continue doubting me, or you can let us out and have Jessica see for herself. In fact, I want to talk to her. I want to see her eye to eye." Rose paused. "Well, she could stare at my chest while I look down at her forehead. That short, stunted wench. And she could tell me why she has participated in the destruction of my home and the wounding of my beloved."

Adam stared, slack-jawed at his mother's outburst, and Roland realized that Young Lord Arrow had not gotten to know this side of his mother very well. Rose Van Erren was a fantastic Diviner, an excellent Jump Mage, a masterful overall mage, and a crass woman with a volcanic temper.

Rusty hesitated for another moment before it finally responded. "I will inform her of what is happening. Should we survive."

"Should you survive?" Rose narrowed her eyes and looked about. Her expression was one of utter incredulity. "What do you mean, should you survive? Jessica's a Legend. You're both Legends." Rose adjusted herself. "My congratulations, aside from other matters."

"Thank you," Rusty replied. "It happened some ten years ago. Jessica wished you could have been there."

"Well," Rose said awkwardly, "I wish I could have been at the ceremony too, but the rest of this..."

"We are being attacked by a Tarrasque," Rusty explained, interrupting Rose. "And right now, we are..."

And just as Rusty was about to respond, the veil of Dimensionality surrounding them shuddered violently, and then a gap was torn into the mana. A gap that shuddered, ripped, and expanded wider and wider until a colossal shape wriggled its way in. A loud cry of pain sounded from all around them, and Rusty trembled as its internal composition was torn asunder.

But that was second to the fact that a Tarrasque, sporting a multitude of injuries, missing several limbs, and with an obsidian shield lodged in its skull, was swimming through the static mana, coming right for them.

"Holy fuck," Rose breathed. The latest_episodes are on the novelfire.net

But then, a titanic Inertium gauntlet reached in and grabbed the Tarrasque by the neck like a kitten. The giant beast let out a primal roar as it was flung out from the inside of the pocket Dimension. A moment later, the rip sealed shut.

"Rusty?" Rose called out.

A low, metallic groan shook the world. "We... must focus."

Chapter 158 (II) Grievance [I] [Book 3 End]

That wasn't something Roland wanted to hear. He was in bad condition. And a battle between him and Jessica Hawgrave would have been a desperate struggle in the best of times, even with Starhawk's Perch feeding him divine power. But a Tarrasque...

A Tarrasque was a beast on another level of danger. Worse yet, this Tarrasque could resurrect like a certain Omenborn Roland knew. It had taken him searing his very soul, over-channeling his being to destroy it before. And it simply recovered thereafter.

Roland had no idea how they were going to kill this creature. Over and over again. Tarrasques could adapt to specific attacks as well. Over time, its resistances became more like immunities. A juvenile one had been a nightmare enough.

"Starhawk," Roland rasped. His soul was damaged, but the skill connecting him to his god was still there. "Starhawk," Roland said again, louder.

Something stirred in the depths of his soul, and the divine essence leaking from the cracks of Starhawk's Perch stilled. A large shadow emerged behind Roland. It possessed four arms, and a wide expanse of wings flared behind it. But it was ultimately colorless, shapeless, aside from its eyes, searing shapes glaring from the contours of a helmet. "Roland, my champion. I had feared you fallen after the feat you just performed."

"Almost," Helix said, looking the Starhawk up and down.

The god regarded the orc for the briefest of instants, and then he turned away. The orc responded in kind, huffing at the god, as if the Starhawk was a lesser noblewoman who spurned his advances.

"I need..." Roland choked on his own pain. "I need your power. I need..."

"Roland," the Starhawk interrupted him. "No."

It was like his patron lord had slapped him across the face. Roland couldn't accept it. He just couldn't. "My god, please!"

"Roland," the Starhawk said, not as a master or divine, but more as a pleading father. "You must stop. You cannot do any more. You are wounded, inside and out. If you even channel the slightest amount of my power, of my grand Blessing, there will be nothing left of you. You will be ashes cast to the wind."

Roland heard another scream rise into the air, and the sheer magnitude of suffering in that note made the Town Lord shudder. "I need to do something. I need to!" Roland begged. "My people—I need to help them!"

"There is nothing more you can do, Roland," the Starhawk continued, trying to comfort him. "You have done all you could, more than anyone could ask of you. But sometimes... sometimes, the world is unkind. Too often, the System will simply take."

Roland's eyes misted, and he felt more wounded than ever before. Blackedge had served as more prison and place of exile for him, rather than a desired refuge or a realm to rule. But in time, Roland had come to care for the people there, had fostered communities away from the capital, and learned the value of even the weakest Pathbearer. He'd vowed to protect them, to guide them, to make their lives as good as he could.

And his vows were all meaningless now, for he couldn't even spare them from the weight of his bygone sins.

"Tell me what to do," Roland begged. He looked at the Starhawk as a student would his master. "Tell me what to do, what I have to give, and I will do it."

"There is nothing more you can give, Roland," the Starhawk said. "It is not a question of your devotion or your power. You have already given everything you possibly could, everything and more."

"Then what about me?" a resolute voice cut in.

Roland's eyes widened, and he looked at Adam. The Young Lord was standing tall. His gaze was fixed upon the Starhawk, and rather than awe, there was an expression of grim devotion upon his features. "What about me? If my father cannot carry your divine burden, then let me stand in his stead."

The Starhawk gazed upon Adam, and the shadow of the Ascendant sighed. "I do not doubt you in any capacity, Adam Arrow. You are your father's son, and you are your mother's son. But most importantly, you are a good man, despite being System-favored."

"System-favored?" Roland whispered. Dread consumed him. Now he understood why Adam was a Hero, how he'd grown so powerful in so little time.

"Then why?" Adam asked, clenching his fists. "Why? Is it because I'm not powerful enough? Is it because I lack the proper skill?"

"You found the point," the Starhawk replied. "You lack the proper skill, but more importantly, you lack the uniqueness of that skill."

And Adam's mouth fell open. "The uniqueness? Then my father's ability to channel your blessings..."

"My Blessing is not like that which swells within your friend. I am bestowing my power directly upon Roland. I am using him, in effect, as an outlet for my true might. This allows him to operate at the very limits of your world's ambient mana threshold. And it is only possible due to the years we have amassed together, due to the histories and legends we have composed. He has served me for long ages, for campaign after campaign, and the devotion he expressed toward me, and in my name, is unrivaled by any other Pathbearer in all Integration."

Recognition dawned on Adam's face, and the Starhawk sighed. "I am sorry, Adam," he said. "But for every field you might be able to surpass your father in, his devotion to me is not one of them."

"I can swear vows. I can offer years of service," Adam hissed, his expression tightening in desperation. "Centuries!"

"And the System would see that for what it is," the Starhawk replied. "Bargaining. I know the truth inside your heart. Your faith is shaken. You do not know who to trust. You do not even know if you can trust me, and I do not blame you."

Still, Adam looked ashamed. "Do not quail before my words, little hawk. This is not your fault. It is simply the inevitable outcome when we, greedy Pathbearers desperate for power, make ourselves into unworthy gods. We thought we could gain wisdom and truly forge a better tomorrow. But ultimately, we are what we do. Such is how our skills are shaped, and such is how our legends grow." But then the Starhawk paused, and a hint of melancholy entered his voice. "And our legends are not truly our own, not in their entirety."

"But there are other sacred relics here," Adam said. "Surely they can offer something!"

"Not when those linked to them remain forgotten and slumbering—when their owners are trapped within our own progenitor," the Starhawk replied. "They will only become conduits once more if they are allowed to be reborn from the Great One—the only entity that could bring them back into existence. And besides that, you will not want the power of my former comrades. They would demand more than your soul, more than you can offer in a thousand lifetimes. Some were forgotten for a reason."

"Alright, great, fine, we can't do any of that. So what in the fuck can we do?" Rose hissed.

Adam's jaw dropped at his mother's casual profanity before the divine, and Roland just sighed. Ever since Rose was exposed to truly foul language by Vera, there was no going back. Not when speaking this way made the late Lord Van Erren incomparably furious.

"Wait," the Starhawk said. "Wait for an opening. Recover. And prepare to flee thereafter. The blade is strong, but its wielder is foolish. Hawgrave and the Descender cannot overcome the Undying Tarrasque by themselves. This dimension will be sheared through, and when that happens, it will be time to disconnect the Perch from the rest of the town and take flight."

Roland closed his eyes. "Lord. You cannot ask that of me. You cannot ask me to abandon them."

"I must, Roland," the Starhawk replied with a somber breath. "Gather what survivors you can. But you must flee. There is no survival left here. And scant thousands remain. Blackedge is slain."

"But the false-god-Ascendant-bastard offers only one path." A new voice interrupted the Starhawk. All heads turned to its source, and all eyes settled upon the only Umbral in the room. Yet her mouth was unmoving. Her helmet had been removed, revealing ghostly-pale features and hair to match, and the voice was coming from her eyes. A slight hint of fear lined the Umbral's face.

Roland examined her for a moment. A series of thin scars ran vertically over her mouth, and her features were sharp and rather fierce for that measure. But ultimately, it was her eyes that were her most prevalent trait. Her eyes, containing the colors of the Outside, which were now seeping into Integration.

The Starhawk's shadow took a single step toward the Umbral. "Dreamtaker," the deity said. He sounded like a man noting a cockroach infestation in his home. "You dare sully my sacred relic with your presence?"

"Fear. Loathing. Scorn. Hate for us. Irrational right now. You need every option-choice-escape that you can have. And you yourself are out of power, servants-divine, mana-slaves."

The Starhawk fell silent for a moment, and the Dreamtaker continued. "This place is no cage for me or my light. Dimensionality is rules based on patterns, patterns that entrap you, but patterns that you can pierce-exceed-bypass. You have the skills, and you have the power. The power to open a way for a few, or potentially to save yourself, alone."

And the Umbral hesitated. Her posture shifted to one of discomfort. Suddenly, her mana strand shot out through the air and splashed into Adam's mind. Roland moved, trying to intercept her, but his body screamed with pain, and he doubled over.

"Father, no!" Adam gasped as he caught Roland before he could fall over. "She's with me! She's a friend." And Roland knew that was at least somewhat true, because as the Umbral's Psychomancy locked itself in place within Adam's mind, he wasn't laid low in any form or fashion. He didn't even seem to be compromised. In fact, Adam looked comfortable, as if he had done this many, many times before. What had happened to his son in his month of absence?

"Uva, we can talk directly," Adam said, a slight hint of exasperation lining his voice. "There's no need for telepathy."

"Isn't there?" Uva said. Her posture was tense, and her eyes jumped between the Starhawk, Roland, and even the orcs.

"I mean you no harm, Sister Uva of the Arachnae Order," the Starhawk said. "But know this: I will not allow the taint you carry within you to touch my champion or my Phylactery."

"Words are not truths," Uva replied. Her voice was cold, and her guard remained high.

“Uva—” Adam began.

“I trust you, Adam. You are a battle-brother. You. Valor. Shiv. Can Hu. My Sisters. The Mothers.” But she didn’t mention anyone else, and Roland got the message. He had the explicit feeling she didn’t much like him in particular for some reason. “But there isn’t the time. We cannot wait. Shiv struggles alone beyond this place, and we must aid him.”

“Agreed,” the midnight-robed said, nodding appreciatively at the Umbral’s aggression. “To delay is to surrender our fates to the System. And we all know how that ends.” The orc smirked at Roland. “The Starhawk seeks to preserve his Perch. And from the sounds of things, it might be capable of flight under its own power. Isn’t that true, Town-Lord?”

Roland didn’t answer, but the Starhawk did.

“It will not rise on your whims, spawn of the Challenger,” the deity said with a rough growl. “Banish whatever vile schemes you are concocting.”

“Oh, but I am not the one scheming here.” The orc turned to Uva. “Sister. What does your Outsider benefactor desire?”

Uva hesitated. But the Dreamtaker didn’t. “I wish to fill-fuse-bless the Starhawk. I wish to taste the wrongness of his ascension—and merge my offspring with his divinity-anchor-phylactery. The Gate Lord cannot sustain his power. His soul is wrong-shaped. But we are shapeless, and the Seeker’s potential can be unbound.”

“Impossible,” the Starhawk replied. His voice was calm but resolute. “I know what you desire—to infest Integration so that you can colonize the System as much as it colonizes you. But your colors will never settle within me. You will never have me. Not in this life. Not in any life.”

The Dreamtaker just hummed melodically. “But that is not up to you. Your champion is spent. No more flames can pass through his burned channel. And you are parted from the world without his presence, without his will. Too much power—and not even your own. The System will not allow you to reach through directly. And so you are vulnerable. And desperate. No lies from us: we want you. And we want to give you colors. And through you, the Great One themselves.”

And that drove a breath from Uva’s lungs. “No. I will not accept that.”

“But why?” The Dreamtaker genuinely sounded confused. “Why not—”

“I will not betray the progenitor of my Lady Arachnae to your influence. Even if you have come to my aid in my time of need. Even if you can offer me all the power in the world.”

“Beyond the world,” the Dreamtaker corrected. “And not the power to corrupt. To change. The Great One dreams. But this dream is so crude-broken-sad-ephemeral. Why can things not improve? Why do the weavers have to suffer their maladies? Why do you have to live in fear of the other Faiths? Why did your mother have to die?”

Uva flinched, and for the first time, Roland’s protective instincts extended toward her as well. He had a hard time telling her age, but with the way she stiffened in hurt, he knew she had to be young. Too young for the brutality of this world.

"Never use that against me again," Uva hissed. Her fury was cold, and the Dreamtaker's response was devoid of rancor.

"Apologies-confusion-why? I do not swear falsehoods. I want change-mutation-new colors. But that can be up to us. We have an opportunity. A bridge for proper power. The Starhawk's champion is wounded. But the source of his power remains. We can sustain the source if the Starhawk allows it. And you can carry this skill as a betweenner. Your presence is perfect. The System will smile on this arrangement. And so will we."

"I do not," the Starhawk replied again. "And I will not let you perform any action that will jeopardize what must be done. The fate of the Republic—and this world—is paramount above all." He glided across the room and came to hover before Uva. Yet, before the Starhawk reached her, Adam leaned his father against a wall and stepped between them.

"Adam," Roland choked.

But the Young Lord was unshaken by his act. The Starhawk looked upon Adam with surprise as well, but waited for him to respond.

"I have bled alongside her, and she has given nearly all for me," Adam said, staring both his father and god down. His nervousness was plain, and his doubt was deep, but his resolve shone brighter than the dawn rising within his eyes. "That is more than iron. That is more than anything I can put in words. I trust her. And I would respectfully ask that you refrain from even thinking about threatening her, my Lord Ascendant."

The Starhawk regarded Adam, and he nodded. "I will grant your request, Gate Lord Adam. Within reason."

"And I can ask no more from you, Starhawk," Adam replied.

A look of gratitude flickered on the Umbral's face. For a moment, Roland wondered if there was something more between them—feared it. And that brought another uncomfortable thought to the forefront of his mind.

I haven't even told Adam about his fiancée. She contracted one of the plagues unleashed by Sullain, and I had her placed within my personal infirmary. But I haven't checked on her in...

"Thank you, Adam," Uva said quietly.

He offered her a weak smile. "Now. Please tell me you're not even remotely thinking about the Dreamtaker's mad plan."

"Why is the plan mad-insane-incomprehensible?" the Dreamtaker asked in confusion. "It is simply efficient."

"And unwanted by the Starhawk," Uva replied on the Ascendant's behalf. "There is no path to achieve your mutual colonization if the Starhawk himself refuses to lend you his might."

“Why?” the Dreamtaker asked again.

Uva frowned. “There are times when you seem beyond divine, and others when you have the awareness of a toddler. Do you know this?”

“Perhaps it might seem so to you,” the Dreamtaker answered.

“Right. Fine. But—” Check latest chapters at Novel-Fire.net

Just then, a small mob rose into shape in the corner of Roland’s vision as the elevator connected to the top of the Perch arrived. The Town Lord turned to find a group of people huddled together. They were guardsmen, and all of them sported brutal wounds. Among them were several orcs. Most of them were armored in organic material, and they were actively healing the survivors.

At their front stood Roland’s Captain of the Guard, Master Leinen François—recently promoted after Roland’s former captain died to a plague. Within him was Chris, Roland’s personal Psychomancer, and beside her was someone entirely unexpected. A lich hovered at the center of the group, his body a faint, illusory outline of corrosive mana. Within his right hand was a half-burned skull. Roland recognized the make of the melted helmet around the skull. It was an Inquisitor’s full-plate helm.

The Town Lord’s first instinct was to call out to his own people, confused as to why they were so relaxed with the lich and orcs around them. But he was interrupted by a whisper of misery that came from the skull in the lich’s hand. “No more of us... You have slain us all, Great Valor. You have taken the only thing I have left that matters to me. Please... Release the shadow of my spirit. Please...”

“So be it,” the lich intoned. He closed his right fist, and the skull shattered. Necromancy crackled around him, and then it faded. Finally, he turned to regard the others in the room. “Ah. The Town-Lord has survived.” The lich’s burning eyes fell on Roland, and he involuntarily shuffled back. The Abyssal recognized him. But then his eyes fell on the Starhawk’s manifestation. “And you have been summoned as well, Matthew.”

“Matthew?” Roland breathed.

The lich regarded the Town Lord for a beat. “And you never bothered to tell your faithful servant your true name? How cruel. Truth be told, it eluded me until I laid eyes on you just now...”

The Starhawk turned away from Uva, and his shrouded form tightened with tension. “Legend Valor Thann. So. The town is cleansed of all remaining Necrotech holdouts?”

The name pierced Roland’s mind like a blade from the sky. “Thann. Valor Thann! Udrael Thann’s father?” he gasped.

“The very same,” Rose whispered to him. “But he hasn’t harmed me. He’s been with Adam all this time, and he hasn’t harmed him, either.”

“It is,” Valor said to the Starhawk, and he glided over to face him. “And now, finally, we get to speak. Speak about your original sin. About how you and your ilk inflicted all this madness upon us, you Light-Cursed worm. I want to know what you have done—how you became a god, and what you did thereafter. And I want to know just what you took from the Great One to pervert your nature so.”

Chapter 159 (I) Grievance [II] [Book 4 Beginning]

Most Legends don't live long enough to experience the fullness provided by their newfound power and skill. This is because the Post-Legend Mortality Phase, effectively the most dangerous period for one to become a Legend, is the point immediately after you gain a Legendary-Tier Skill.

This is due to a number of reasons. The first is internal. Most people start thinking of themselves as invincible once they become Legends. Becoming a Legend, however, often negatively affects their cognition and behavior, prompting them to be more reckless or more careless. And careless is the last thing one can be upon becoming a Legend.

Secondarily is the danger posed by the outside world. There are rival Legends, rival Heroes, and the moment immediately after your evolution is the last good window they will have to make you easy prey. A Legend of Physicality will be beyond most warrior-category Pathbearers to contend with, and so they will have to muster everything they have to slay you before you fully understand the depths of your new power. The same can be applied to Mages or even scholarly Pathbearers.

Upon reaching Legend, most people are no longer threats compared to you, at least not alone. Your adversaries will become the divine, grand disasters, monsters that shake entire regions or even worlds, and more often than not, rival Legends.

And the last reason why Legends most often die immediately after they acquire a Legendary-Tier skill is that Legends usually despise suffering another Legend. For Legends, more than any other Pathbearer, have the opportunity to truly enjoy the fruits of extended longevity, but only if they stand alone at the apex of their culture or their environment.

The plural of Legend is war.

-The Falsehood of Immortality, by Valor Thann

"Back away from him, now!"

The words escaped Roland as a growl, and he didn't even realize he'd spoken them until a second thereafter. Flaring embers danced around his hand, and the outline of a longbow appeared. However, Valor ignored him altogether, and the Starhawk turned, uttering a single word.

"Stop."

Roland's body stiffened. The Starhawk's voice was somewhere between a command and a plea, and the Town Lord stood down, but kept his gaze locked on Valor Thann. The lich, for that matter, remained utterly focused on the subject of his loathing, the Starhawk himself.

"I understand the reasons behind your ire, Legend Valor, but right now..."

"Right now is the only chance I might get to understand what you have done, to understand what you have taken from the Great One." Valor Thann's interruption was cold and immediate, and the Starhawk just sighed, sounding too exhausted for someone so powerful.

"It matters not that we are caged within this dimension or in grave danger. Before anything can be decided by anyone," Valor briefly looked at Uva, and especially the colors seeping out from her eyes, "I need to know what your relationship with the Great One is. How you and the other Ascendants became divine. I am a shattered remnant of myself, Matthew, but I still remember certain things, and being in your presence has brought other memories back to me, few of them pleasant."

A brief silence settled between them, and the tension in the room rose. Just then, the Dimensionality outside quivered. It was like something was trying to tear through the static manner lining the space around them again.

"As much as I appreciate the drama," the bespectacled orc began, "it's best that we deal with this as soon as possible. I will be very upset if this run of mine ends at the hands of the Tarrasque just as the Starhawk is about to emotionally admit his great wrongdoing."

The Ascendant hesitated. He shot Roland a brief glance, and then he began to speak. "It is true, I did transgress. Before my fellow and I exiles were Ascendants, we were rebels. Rebels from separate communities, smaller kingdoms, and meager villages. We stood against the encroachment of the Dust Lord and his empire, but it proved futile, and after we were beaten, we were exiled for our troubles."

"But why?" Uva asked. Her eyes narrowed in confusion. "Why not simply have you executed or enslaved?"

"That was not the Dust Lord's way at the time, for in those years, the Abyss was a great mystery to the surface, and expeditions descended constantly, seeking valuables and more. My fellow exiles and I were all considerable Pathbearers, champions of our community. The Dust Lord had sustained great losses defeating us, and as he did not wish to suffer an extended insurrection, we were granted our lives. But the penalty for that was exile, an exile into the Abyss, no less. This way we would technically survive, as there were caravans descending and ascending the Abyss. And through this method, we could still serve the Dust Lord's interest by destabilizing the under-kingdoms. It was also a form of retaliation, as the Five Faiths would often raid the surface at night."

Just then, a gap opened up in the Dimensionality beyond, and a deafening roar shook the world. It started as a low growl and finally died down as a screech, and something about that voice reminded Roland of the Omenborn somehow. Judging from the look on his son's face, Adam was thinking the very same thing.

"Yeah, you might want to speed this up," Georges commented, looking nervous. "And we might want to figure out our own way out of here as soon as possible right after. I'm sure as shit not looking forward to finding out what that thing's diet is."

"Anything it can fit in its mouth," the automata-clad orc helpfully provided. Latest content published on Novel(F)ire.net

"We spent many years in the Abyss," the Starhawk continued. "We established new lives there, took on new roles as mercenaries, as warriors, as artisans, and as scholars, serving the Five Faiths as they warred against one another. But we all shared a common dream, to return to the surface, to liberate our homes, and to bring down the Dust Lord. We tried striking pacts with our benefactors in the depths, gaining allies, gathering forces of our own, but the Light-Curse was our greatest impediment then. Even if we managed to build an army of our own, we couldn't wage a war on the surface. Not easily. Not like the surface could descend and assault the Abyss with impunity."

"Wait, the Light-Curse existed then?" Adam asked.

"Yes," the Starhawk said, "it existed long before even my forefathers could even recall. As to who placed the Curse on the Abyssals and why, that remains a mystery to me as well. I suspect it has something to do with the Great One."

"And the Great One," Valor said, bringing the topic back on point, "what did you do with them? How did you become an Ascendant?"

"We joined the Descenders," the Starhawk said. "All of us. We partook in their expeditions. We did so to reach the very depths of the Abyss, for we heard of a legend that there were places of immense power there. Places that would allow us to advance our skills beyond the limits of the time, were we to reach

them." TheStarhawk paused then, considering his words. "There is too much to explain concerning what truly happened. But the simple truth is that we were all reborn, but not as ourselves."

"And what does that mean?" the orc Biomancer asked, seeming genuinely curious now.

"The Great One lies dreaming. The Great One lies dead." The Starhawk drew in a shuddering influx of mana, flickering in and out of existence. "But the Great One dreams. That, above all else, is true. And so, we made the Great One dream that it was us."

"What?" Adam breathed.

"It is perhaps a crude explanation," the Starhawk noted. "We made the Great One think that we were its true form. That it was all of us at the same time. And because it dreamed of us as such, we were reborn in its body. It birthed us. It fused us as if skills locked within its soul. But we are not skills, we are Pathbearers ourselves. And so, to depart the cage that we found ourselves in, we created something. Something that we learned from you, Valor. You and your fellow Necrotechs."

"Phylacteries," the lich spat. "The ritual of the dichotomous soul. That is why you have created them; to part the Great One's power."

"More than that," the Starhawk said. "The Phylacteries are meant to be our personal anchors. For initially, the Great One remembered itself as all of us at the same time: twenty individuals and only one at once. We began to bleed into one another. Madness threatened to overtake us. And we needed something to keep our stories our own."

"So that is why you've been gathering other sacred relics. Other Sacred Phylacteries," Uva muttered. "The Forgotten Ascendants are not dead. They cannot be dead. The Great One remembers them, albeit in a confused fashion. If you return the Phylacteries, perhaps they could be fully remembered and thus resurrected once more."

"That is my theory, yes," the Starhawk finished.

"Your theory," the dark-robed mused, cocking his head. "You are not sure, great god."

"I am ultimately uncertain," the Starhawk admitted. "A great many things leave me uncertain, but it is the most likely outcome, judging by the nature of our creation."

"You, miserable, damnable fools," Valor seethed. He drifted closer to the Starhawk, and Roland took a step toward Valor. Adam froze, unsure how to respond, but Uva didn't.

She directed one of her strands at Roland. "Give them time. This must be settled."

The Town Lord regarded the Psychomancer's mana and met her eyes. She looked as resolute as he was, and the nervousness on Adam's face reached new heights. Slowly, Roland offered the Umbral the slightest of nods, and she returned it. A soft breath left Adam, and he calmed somewhat.

"Have you any idea what you have done, what you yet risk?" Valor pointed his right hand at the Starhawk, and the crystalline limb glistened briefly with Necromancy. "The Great One lay dead, having spent ages slumbering, dreaming calmly, until you managed to defile its dreams. You have interrupted and reshaped the mind of a sleeping god. And for what? Your own selfish gain, your own power."

"We did it to retake a home, to overthrow a tyrant and protect what is ours."

"And now you lead an empire masquerading as a Republic, and your protection has become expansion." Valor let out a snort of disgust. "And you struck at the very people who let you into their homes and offered you hospitality. How often this turns out to be the case."

"We have lost our way. That, I do admit," the Starhawk said. "And I have never declared my innocence. Everything I do now, I do to set things right. For that which you fear is becoming true."

Valor drifted back slightly. "You mean..."

"The Great One is beginning to notice the incongruities in its dream. I can feel this. The other Ascendants can feel this as well. Our presences were easy to hide early on. Our deception was a small one, considering the sheer amount of legends the Great One has amassed. But as we siphoned its power, as we used its being as a broader receptacle for our own, our own legends have bled over into its narrative."

The Starhawk looked down in shame. "And thus: madness. Madness is swelling through the Great One. Madness is consuming it from the inside, from the depths of its soul, and from the remnants of its mind. And I must make this right. I must return to the depths and bring back my fallen, forgotten comrades. And thereafter, we must subdue the other Descendants and properly return what we have taken. For we soon may reach a point where the Great One sleeps no more, dreams no more, and decides it wishes to be dead no more."

And as if to add weight to the Starhawk's statement, something smashed against the veil of Dimensionality again. Once more, the Tarrasque's primal bellows shook the ruined town of Blackedge.

"So you were not intending to make your champion, Roland Arrow, a god?" Uva asked with a frown on her face.

Roland did a double-take at that. "What? Why would you think that?"

"Because that is what Master Inquisitor Sijik stated as his assumed truth when I interrogated him," she answered.

Roland's surprise was doubled. "You captured Master-Inquisitor Sijik? When?"

"The Inquisitors decided to take a little detour toward the gate currently occupied by your boy," the wand-wielding said, his grin growing. "Tragically, instead of facing a mob of incompetent Vultags, they were assailed along the way by a small army of..." The orc couldn't help but giggle. "...gray-skinned Necrotechs."

Roland's mouth opened slightly. Adam let out a brief sigh. "A lot

has happened, Father. I'll explain everything later. If there is a later."

"The other Ascendants, do they know?" Valor asked, ignoring the interruptions.

"They know as well," the Starhawk confirmed. Then his body shook. "They know, and they have decided that they wish to keep their power, by any and all means."

"And what does that entail?" Valor pressed.

"The Ascendants seek to perform a ritual, one that will cost a good percentage of the Republic's citizenry."

"They can't possibly—" Adam gasped. "What do you mean by cost? Do you mean the Ascendants... They can't possibly be thinking about sacrificing our people, can they?"

"That is not how the Ascendants would phrase it," the Starhawk said, though it was clear that he disagreed. "They view it as an offering, an investiture of sorts. Many in the Republic have skills relating to faith. It allows the Ascendants to reach through them, to channel our so-called divine power through their beings. But it also lets them serve as a reinforcing mechanism for our powers. For years, we have been trying to understand how to advance the creation of Phylacteries on our own, to create a grand Ritual of the Dichotomous Soul, of a shared soul."

Valor skeletal hands tightened into fists, but the god continued without pause. "My intention was something of communal divinity. No more Ascendants. Or rather, that everyone can be an Ascendant unto themselves. That they could tap into the divine wellspring of power we all share. Power of the people, to the people. A unified skill that they could draw upon. But the other Ascendants were not interested in such a thing. They wished to make their faithful into Phylacteries. Phylacteries to reinforce them. Sacred Phylacteries that they could devote to the Great One, to further cement themselves as an unchangeable truth."

"Unchangeable truth?" Valor snapped. The Legendary Pathbearer sounded livid. "You are trying to usurp the very mind and being of a fallen god. One even its children don't understand. One that has provided the Abyss with everything!"

"I know," the Starhawk said, his voice filled with mourning. "And it is worse than you think, Legend. For my fellow exiles are turning on each other due to this very fact. Because though we are all Ascendants, we are not equals. We all have different numbers of faithful connected to us. Right now, it is most likely that Kathereine the Songbringer will be the priority personality that takes hold of the Great One. In function, this will make her the First. First among Ascendants, first above all others."

"Broken Moon," Adam whispered. His gaze swayed from face to face until he found his eyes locked with his father. And in that moment, both Arrows shared a look of sour misery.

"It's true," Roland said. "It's part of the reason why you were born at Blackedge. Why I've been here for so many years." And Roland clenched his jaw before the next words finally left his mouth. "It is the reason why I descended into the Abyss with the Eclipsebreakers, why I disobeyed a direct command from the Republic, from the other Ascendants. It's why I escalated the war and sacked Submission."

"I don't... I don't understand," Adam muttered. His hand was beginning to shake. "Sullain was not lying?"

"No," Roland said softly. "He wasn't. I didn't intend for..." The Town Lord stopped himself and closed his eyes. "It doesn't matter what I intended. A city was burned. Countless innocents were killed. All so that I could steal a few Sacred Phylacteries stored in the Vicar's vault."

Adam looked ill when Roland finished. He turned away from his father entirely, and that ripped Roland's heart wide open.

"Wow, this was quite the story," the orc Biomancer said, sounding pleased that he managed to hear the entire accounting before getting killed. "The Challenger applauds the audacity of your comrades, and he commends you for your willingness to stand against them. It must wound your soul so terribly."

"I care not what the orc god praises," the Starhawk said, derision heavy in his voice. "I care only to make things right. To make right what I should have made right years ago." He held out a hand, gesturing pleadingly at Valor. "They were my family. To stand against them takes more from me than I can offer. Many days, most days."

And for the first time, the lich's posture softened. He looked away from the Starhawk and nodded in understanding. "It is a weakness that you are not alone in. It is a weakness that I understand as well. But still, it changes nothing."

The Starhawk nodded in agreement. "The past is set in stone. The legend has been written. Only the future awaits. And it is only in the future that I can make things right. So, with this spoken, with these truths revealed, what say you, Valor Thann? Are you satisfied?"

"Satisfied? No, I will not be satisfied. Not after all I've learned. But I will aid you, Starhawk. I will aid you regardless of the wrongs you have committed. For you alone seem to be still trying to do something right."

Chapter 159 (II) Grievance [II]

A loud cry of metallic pain flooded Blackedge. Rusty was screaming once more, and the Dimensionality surrounding Blackedge began to tear once again. Everyone rushed to the edge of the chamber. And as they stared beyond the broken glass, they saw a colossal figure trying to push its way in.

The Tarrasque had returned, and a sea of fire spilled through the spatial rupture along with it. The titanic beast reached in with a humanoid hand, clutching a blade. It hewed the fraying Dimensionality

deeper, rending mana like it was solid flesh. The Tarrasque itself was wrapped in a membrane of magic, and it boiled against the Dimensionality. Spells crashed over its body through the gap it was pushing through, but they ricocheted off at odd angles.

"Well!" The largest of the orcs clapped his hands together. "With that fun story told, who wants to tell us the tale of how we're going to get out of here alive? I will be honest, I wouldn't be overly bothered if the Tarrasque ate us. Certainly an interesting way to die. But the rest of you might not like it so much."

Uva's left eye twitched. "Starhawk," she said. "Can you contain the influences of the Outside within you?"

"No!" the Town Lord cried, but the Starhawk held out a hand. "Lord—" Roland tried to continue, but the deity spoke to Uva instead.

"I potentially could. I am uncertain, however. The Dreamtaker's nature is aberrant."

"That is but a declaration of locked perspective," the Dreamtaker whispered from Uva's eyes, a melodious facsimile of the Umbral's own voice.

"Then I wish to forge a bargain with you right now," Uva said. "I offer my Dreamtaker's Gaze skill as collateral, if you allow me to serve as a bridge, a conduit for both your power and the Outside. So that we may all survive."

Silence washed over the room. Adam's eyes grew wider and wider.

"If the Outsiders attempt to do anything, anything

at all," Uva said, a hint of desperation entering her voice. "You can shatter the skill, and it should be enough to choke their influence."

"It would be," the Dreamtaker confirmed. "It is a good bargain-deal. Consider and take her word. The Seeker is trying to keep your fear-doubt-paranoia fulfilled. Calmed, Starhawk."

The shadowy visage of a god regarded Uva for a long moment, then strode toward her. "You ask me to risk much, Sister Uva of Weave."

"And you are not alone when it comes to risk," Uva replied sharply. "I dare say we have more to lose than you do. You have a higher likelihood of containing the Outside's influence and recovering from a broken skill. And the Dreamtaker does not wish to be caged, does she?"

"No," the Dreamtaker replied, voice spiking higher by a few octaves.

At the edge of the vast pocket dimension within Hawgrave's blade, the Tarrasque continued clawing its way toward Blackedge. But before it could reach the edge of the town, it was suddenly struck in the back of the head. A rage-filled roar escaped the creature before another blow slammed its jaws together.

Behind the Tarrasque, appearing diminutive in comparison but still massive in its own right, a dragon encased in a suit of stone-like armor rose into the air, swinging a colossal pillar of red-golden light like a bat. The dragon struck again and again, battering the Tarrasque across the pocket dimension.

"Rusty! Rusty!" Rose cried out, her lips bared back in a snarl. "Listen to me, you fucking sword! Let us out! Let us out! The damn Tarrasque is inside! Let us the fuck out right now!"

But Rusty could only groan in misery and ultimately offered her no reply.

"Well," Georges said, letting out a breath as he lit a cigarette. "Think all that needs to be said has been said. Starhawk. Ascendant. God." He coughed awkwardly as he regarded the divine entity. "Maybe just do what the lass says, yeah? She's already placing her head on the chopping board next to you. Takes more than courage to do that."

Just then, a flash of light washed over everyone. Roland winced as the brightness speared into his eyes. Multiple people cried out. A second thereafter, there came a deafening blast that rattled the room. As the brightness faded, Roland watched as two forms shot toward Blackedge. The first was a dragon, and it smashed through a series of buildings, tumbling tail over head until it finally impacted the base of Starhawk's Perch. The entire structure shook. The shadow of the Starhawk briefly vanished before returning.

And just then, there came another projectile. It was much smaller than the dragon, but it was heading right for them. It tore through the air like a missile, and it was Adam who reacted, and Whisper who aided him a moment after.

"Shit, Shiv!" Adam cried out. He formed over a dozen hydrokinetic arms, and they extended out from his spine in rivers. He also waved a wand, and it formed a barrier of hydrokinetic mana along the outside of their room. The projectile, now recognized as the Omenborn, crashed into the barrier of water.

He slowed significantly, but he still burst out the other side and tore through what remained of a wall and struck Adam. The Young Lord grunted and caught him with a flare of his vector wings. The robed orc

braced Adam from behind, and the Young Lord offered the orc the quickest of nods before they both took Shiv by his arms, looking him over.

A pained wheeze sounded from the Omenborn. His face was a bloodied mess. Part of his skull was caved in, and his left eye was dislodged, hanging on by the optical cord.

"Composer! Shiv!" The Umbral was by his side in an instant as well. A mana strand sank into his mind, and she cupped his face in her hands and surveyed the damage. Roland caught the flash of pain and worry playing across her features. She suppressed it quickly, but Roland recognized it for what it was. He'd seen it on Rose's face many times when she had to patch him up in the middle of battle.

Suddenly, the Town Lord's instincts were doubly unsure about the girl. Something wanted him to shoot her and also shoot the Omenborn just in case. There was too much at risk, but he hadn't the power, and the bulk of his mind was gripped by uncertainty.

They laid the Omenborn down on the ground, and it struck Roland then just how bloody large Harlon's boy had gotten. His father had stood two meters tall and could fill up a doorway. He'd looked like a wall of muscle beside Roland. Shiv, meanwhile, made his father look like a middleweight in terms of size. The damned boy was built more like a small orc than a man by this point.

A loud sigh sounded from beside the Town Lord, and the orc Biomancer that had saved Roland earlier walked over to the Deathless, forming a crimson helix between his hands. "Your armor's destroyed, I see," the orc said conversationally.

"Fuck the armor," Shiv croaked. "I'm destroyed." He coughed and made a noise somewhere between a groan and a laugh as he grinned at everyone through bloodied, broken teeth. "I came to save you guys, by the way."

20 minutes ago...

Where the Inquisition, orcs, and Dragon-Knights had been fighting each other the last time Shiv saw them, they sure as shit weren't doing it now. At present, everyone was focused on the Tarrasque, and even then, it wasn't enough. Thousands of spells bombarded the massive beast from all sides. Projectiles painted paths through the air, crashing against the Tarrasque so hard that shockwaves burst off its body, bouncing off hard enough to cleave gaps in distant clouds.

But even so, the Tarrasque was barely inconvenienced.

Shiv used his newly gained Farsight Skill to survey the battle from a distance. The skies above were painted in billowing waves of orange. The atmosphere was so hot that distortions hung in the air like quivering curtains. Massive formations of magi were actively trying to contain the blasts. Their ranks included Dragon-Knights, orcs, and even Inquisitors. They mainly cast spells from the ruins of Lost Angeles, as the sky was no longer theirs to hold.

There seemed to have been an attempt by their aerial vanguards and cavalry to intercept the Tarrasque. Only some Dragon-Knights and a smattering of orcs survived that attempt.

The magi shaped a massive cage of bright-yellow mana, extending for kilometers around the warzone. They were trying to make a quarantine to contain the Tarrasque's destructive movements. With every swing of its blades, with every burst of gravity it displaced, the air itself ionized, the world shuddered and cracked.

And near the Tarrasque, only two could contend with its might in proximity. The first was Sir Marikos, Dragon-Knight, Legend, and bearer of a Unique Skill. The other was the titanic Jessica Hawgrave, wielding a blade containing the very town that Shiv had been trying to save.

A scream rose through the air, and a barrage of arcing missiles slammed down upon the Tarrasque. Blasts of Cryomancy, Pyromancy, Dimensionality, and more enveloped the massive beast, and they did little more than briefly stagger it. Shiv followed the path of the missiles back to the flying cathedral—the colossal automaton that Shiv had briefly resided within during his semi-successful attempt to infiltrate the Inquisition.

Things were different there. The Inquisition was keeping most of its forces in reserve, hoping to have the Dragon-Knights and Orcs exhaust themselves. If Shiv had to guess, the Inquisition Cathedral ship was about forty kilometers away from the Tarrasque and struggling Legends, and there it was content to remain, dispatching singular formations of Pathbearer formations to aid in the struggle while keeping the rest of its near-hundred-thousand-strong army in reserve.

Every now and again, one of the cathedral's missiles would find its way over to strike the city, consuming small groups of orcs in balls of spreading fire. Shiv scowled at the Inquisition's game. To call the bastards underhanded was an understatement, and holding back as a Tarrasque was rampaging was something only a fool might do.

Too bad for the Inquisition, Shiv intended to force them into the fray regardless if they wanted to join in or not.

Bonk chuckled. "What a mess we find ourselves in. But I told you that the Inquisition would be trying to exploit the situation for their own gain."

"Yeah," Shiv replied, "you did say that, didn't you? Well. Let's get on with 'motivating' them. Can Hu? You really up for this?"

A loud whir sounded from within Shiv's cape. "We are dealing with mechanical opposition. My presence will allow us to optimize our use of force and contain the adversary." A beat followed. "And... I wish to discover how recovered I am in the field."

Shiv breathed. "Fine. Just don't let yourself get broken."

He was descending from high above, using clouds to mask his approach. Following him was a small army of four thousand orcs gathered from across the city—all focused on speed and stealth.

An especially loud detonation drew his attention back to the battle.

Farsight 51 > 52

Just then, the Tarrasque emerged from the explosion, moving faster than Shiv could track, and it was immediately upon Hawgrave. She was the largest of the three Legendary-Tier combatants, but by no means the slowest either. Her blade shrank, becoming the size of a short sword, and she brought it down, parrying the Tarrasque's charging bulk downward. At the same time, her arms blurred into after-images, striking the Tarrasque at the same time. Another afterimage erupted from her body and deflected a gravitational blast emanating from the Tarrasque.

A deafening explosion shook the world. The Tarrasque was spiked downward, and in the same instant, its many tentacles unleashed a flood of magic all upon Hawgrave's body—that did little to nothing, splitting around Inertium armor. Yet the Tarrasque righted itself before it was launched too far, a

detonation of force washed over its enormous shape, and it held out both its hands; a singularity formed there. And then it was Hawgrave who was ripped out of position.

But she went with the Tarrasque's overwhelming force, not even bothering to fight it. Her blade extended once more. It didn't grow as Shiv's former Skysplitter did. Instead, it elongated like a beam of light. A line of mana reached skyward, making her blade twice its former length. She slashed upward, and the blade passed through the singularity, utterly unaffected. Just then, as it descended against the Tarrasque's face, the Dimensionality faded, and the blade became a colossal hunk of rusted metal.

A flash of light washed over the world. A shockwave burst out and was held within the cage of spellwork as the magi tried to keep the devastation at bay. The Tarrasque lurched backward, its head erupting in a spray of blood. Its singularity vanished, but before it could respond, Sir Marikos was upon it, and he brought his greataxe down upon its back so hard that the crystalline shell protecting it cracked.

The Tarrasque tried to move, tried to discharge its gravitic powers once more. But as it did, Marikos simply blocked, and while Hawgrave was flung back and forced to manifest two flaming wheels beneath her feet to counteract the forces pressing against her body, Marikos remained in place. He didn't move an inch.

An awkward stalemate had formed between the two, but in the time it took for Hawgrave to recover, and for Marikos to anchor himself against the Tarrasque's gravitational powers, the behemoth regenerated. Its bifurcated face came back together, and the cracks lining its shell filled. It let out a vicious cry, and it teleported.

Chapter 159 (III) Grievance [II]

First, it materialized behind Marikos, and it seized the Dragon-Knight by the tail before he could turn. Marikos was immense. He made Shiv look like an insect. The Tarrasque, however, manhandled the dragon like a cat toying with a mouse. Caught by surprise, Marikos barely managed a cry of alarm before he was flung across the horizon like a reverse meteor. He tore through the air, ripping a bloody path through aerial Pathbearers of all factions, including his own.

Hawgrave swung on the Tarrasque again, but the massive beast raised a dagger in a parry, and her arms jolted to a brutal halt. Her entire body shuddered. She made herself grow even larger, and she managed to push slightly closer to the Tarrasque. But that was all. Where the Tarrasque was slower than Hawgrave and couldn't move Marikos when he was prepared, it was faster than the Dragon-Knight, more versatile in its magic than anyone else on the field, and it was stronger than Hawgrave in a direct contest of strength.

Strong enough to rip her off her feet and slam its immense bulk into her face. Her armor let out a metallic crash as she was launched through the sky as well. Aerial Pathbearers scattered around her, doing their best to avoid being crushed by Hawgrave's gigantic form. As she tumbled over and over, trying to right herself with her Pyromantic propulsion skill, her blade left her hand to move off its own accord, swiping and slashing blindly, scoring marks along the Tarrasque's body. But that was all they were; marks. Each cut barely left a slight chip on its flesh, and every successive blow grew less and less effective.

The Tarrasque was growing more resistant to physical force with every exchange.

"Holy shit," Shiv breathed at the sheer carnage on display. The fight here was like watching hell unfold on earth. And it was felling awesome. It also reaffirmed one thing: Sullain would have annihilated Shiv if he weren't so emotionally compromised.

Hawgrave managed to right herself using the wheels of flame beneath her feet, but then she let out a cry as the Tarrasque slammed a fist downward in the air. A massive blast of gravity struck her in the chest, and she went down, plunging into the Abyss chasm next to where Blackedge had once been at jaw-dropping speeds. The air combusted around her, and Hawgrave vanished into the darkness.

Her blade tried to go after her, but it was held in place. Crashing waves of gravity collapsed around it, and the Tarrasque teleported, channeling its massive form into a stream of dimensionality mana. Spells

bombarded it from all sides, but then it detonated its Magical Resistance once more, and the protective wards containing the devastation it wrought collapsed one and all. A collective scream followed. Every mage on the battlefield howled in misery as their mana fields were utterly shredded.

Shiv spiked himself faster. He was still just over a kilometer above the cathedral ship itself. As he made his approach, he activated Creeping Void, releasing a deluge of blackness through the air.

“Stealth Skills!” he shouted. “Patrols incoming.”

The orcs shouted confirmations to each other, and as one, they followed Shiv down, using the sound of his gravitic pulses to guide them.

Some of the Inquisitorial patrol formations rose through the cloud-beds beneath Shiv. Two wings of aerial cavalry shot forth in his direction. They were followed by a group of jet-winged automata, each bearing long lances that sported gleaming tips. Shiv looked behind himself and studied the small army of stealth-specialist orcs that followed in his wake.

"All right, guys, you know Bonk's plan. We take the ship, then we fly it into the battle. Failing that, we move it into the danger zone by whatever means possible, and we force the Inquisition to expend itself. Hopefully, we'll find the City Lord aboard the ship. In that case, we should be able to use him to force Hawgrave to release the town as soon as possible."

He wanted to say more, but his voice trailed off as he squinted with his Farsight. His vision zoomed in to find Hawgrave's sword struggling against the Tarrasque. Bursts of Dimensionality mana washed through the air. It was like a flicking tongue of black and static, tracing waves from the Abyss to the sky.

A gap formed in the sword, and a dull cry of pain sounded. The Tarrasque slipped in, but just as it did, Marikos rejoined the fray from above, roaring in anger. His body was incandescent with a blazing inferno. He impacted the side of the Tarrasque with his axe and went off like a bomb. A small sun manifested over the Tarrasque. The world grew bright enough to part the Abyssal darkness below.

But rather than shatter, the beast's crystalline shell held this time.

The Tarrasque briefly reared back from the compromised sword, and it grappled with Marikos. Its massive hands closed around the Dragon-Knight, trying to fling him aside. Marikos's greataxe licked up, and its edges were bright with an impossible amount of Pyromancy mana. As Marikos struck the Tarrasque, an ocean of fire washed over its body. Yet even through the Inferno, Shiv could see the Tarrasque's outline. Its Magical Resistance glowed brighter even than the flames consuming it.

"Stand and fight, monster!" Marikos cried. He struck, hammered, and slashed with every bit of his greataxe. Its butt cracked into one of the Tarrasque's eyes. And then the Dragon-Knight adjusted his grip, dropping the bladed end against the Tarrasque's forehead.

As he battered the beast, it let out an annoyed shriek and began to cut into him as well. The crystalline blades it had stabbed over the edges of his shield. Chunks of obsidian burst free from Marikos' armor while sparks filled the air as its dagger met the tip of Marikos' greataxe, the former weapon proportionally smaller compared to its wielder, but much larger than that which it met overall.

But while Marikos held the Tarrasque at bay for a moment, the instant it turned its full focus on him and released the blade, Marikos cried out. The air turned fluid with the plasma, and Shiv watched as the Tarrasque shuddered and then reappeared behind Marikos.

It cleaved into his back, slashing deep through his armor. The Dragon-Knight doubled over, but he refused to be launched aside. He swept out with his axe, but the Tarrasque dodged and opened its

mouth. It clamped its huge jaws down on Marikos, but recoiled as several teeth burst apart in bloodied fragments. Marikos then did what Shiv often used to face gargantuan monsters. He launched himself down the Tarrasque's throat.

But the titanic beast had learned from its earlier encounter with Shiv. It tore itself in half immediately, ripping its throat open with a burst of Biomancy mana from a tentacle. At the same time, it projected itself upward into the air, and Marikos tumbled free from inside the Tarrasque's chin in a downpour of blood.

Surprised, Marikos tried to reorient himself, only for the Tarrasque to swat him over the head with a claw. The world shook. Marikos' armor shattered. Blood erupted from the dragon's face. He blasted down toward the Abyss as well, and in the same instant, the Tarrasque teleported once more.

Hawgrave's blade had been falling while Marikos and the Tarrasque warred, but it went stiff as a stream of Dimensionality speared into it. This time, the Tarrasque managed something of a partial jump as its upper body vanished in a stream of blackened static pouring into the blade. Shiv's heart rate accelerated, and he realized the Republic patrols were within his Creeping Void.

It was time for him to start causing some chaos of his own.

He immediately began creating a Vitae Golem and started infusing it with specific skills—one among which was Omnimancy.

Thanks for the last gift, Sullain. Let's see what I can do with it.

"There, capture that ship, drive it toward the chaos, bring me the City Lord, and get out afterward," he declared, and as one, the orcs behind him pumped their fists in practiced silence.

But the Deathless was distracted. His eyes kept flicking to the Tarrasque as it slowly vanished into the blade. He needed to be faster here. The battle was going worse than he'd hoped.

Hawgrave suddenly launched up out of the Abyss, and she caught the Tarrasque by its hind legs. It kicked against her, and a few of its tentacles whipped and channeled beams of magic to drive her off. But the Tarrasque's spellcraft was raw and primal, and Hawgrave's armor was anathema to attuned mana itself.

"Come on, you fucker!" Hawgrave shouted. "Get out of my Rusty!" She reared back with all her might and struck the Tarrasque with a brutal uppercut. The wheels at her feet were spinning faster and faster, jet streams of fire erupting behind them. She reached into the dimensional gap the Tarrasque had partly disappeared into. In the same instant, a field of Dimensionality collapsed around the Tarrasque, and it began to pull as well.

Some of the mages in the battle had recovered, and together they formed spells of force to dislodge the Tarrasque. Yet they were weak after having their mana fields shredded, and their spells broke apart against the Tarrasque's Magical Resistance. However, it did surprise the Tarrasque long enough for Hawgrave to rip it out with an animalistic shout.

She flung the Tarrasque through the air, and at the same time wrapped her fingers around the hilt of her blade. She swiped it up in a reverse grip, accelerating toward the Tarrasque even as it flew. Shiv couldn't tell how many times she cut it. With every strike, she seemed to perform ten others, each one something between an after-image or a mirage, or maybe she was simply cutting so fast that she utterly exceeded Shiv's ability to perceive.

The Tarrasque went tumbling through the sky, and every time it tried to summon its gravitic powers, Hawgrave would drive the tip of her blade into its skull. The interruptions kept the Tarrasque on the back foot for now, but Shiv noticed that her cuts were merely dealing concussive damage. Its shell wasn't even getting scratched anymore.

"Eyes forward, Insul," Bonk said, knocking Shiv on the side of the head with a club. "Focus!"

It was the first time the Heroic-Tier orc properly chided him, and Shiv just nodded. He realized why a moment later, seeing his small army of stealth orcs butchering the patrols sent their way. Cuts of sound had formed around the patrols, and the orcs were upon them, ripping them asunder with bare hands, daggers, short swords, stilettos, or in one case, what looked to be piano wire.

"Go! Go now!" Shiv ordered his Vitae Golem. It shot forward through the air, and with a flash of gold, it vanished. A moment later, a massive blast detonated over the flying cathedral.

Golemancy 9 > 12

Shiv grinned and accelerated himself forward. Chaos swept through the inquisitorial ranks, and it only got worse as a blanket of Creeping Void splashed down over them, blackening the space around the colossal, cathedral-shaped ship. At the same time, the magi formations near the ship had pockets blown into them. Some were set ablaze, glittering like embers in the air, while others were annihilated outright.

The survivors were scattered and ultimately, unready to contend with a small army of Master-Tier Stealth and Reflexes orcs in their midst.

Shiv's Golem had been infused with four skills aside from Omnimancy. The first was Pillar of Orichalcum. What followed were Gravitic Wrestler, Strider of the Unbending Path, and finally, Inertial Overdrive.

He dispatched it with a single order. To have it fly as close to the ship as possible, brutalize as many magi as possible with Omnimancy, activate its Pillar of Orichalcum, and then spike itself as much as it could and as fast as it could before discharging just before it ran out of vitality.

Inertial Overdrive 125 > 126

Gravitic Wrestler 170 > 171

The resulting explosion had two effects. The first was utterly disrupting the protective formations surrounding the Inquisitorial cathedral ship-automaton thing. The second was damaging its upper section, large enough that someone might be able to lodge themselves within its hull if they couldn't get inside it.

And that was when Shiv froze time himself.

He shoved Bonk inside his cape alongside Can Hu, whom he alerted to the plan along the way, and taking advantage of the chaos, he accelerated through the air, leaving most of the formations to the mercy of the stealth orcs he managed to wrangle up with him.

As he got within 500 meters of the ship, he felt that dense field of shifting Magical Resistance that had troubled him earlier. Shiv went out of context to avoid risking his temporal shell. Coldness licked through him, but he was going to start draining from the ship, or reality itself, later, and ultimately, he wasn't going to stay out of context for long.

He slammed against the top side of the ship and found its outer hull badly mauled. Where once the upper section of the ship was lined with large towers and parapets, now it was flattened and fissured, with many sections rendered mangled furls of alloy.

However, it was a testament to the cathedral-sized automaton that its insides weren't breached at all. High Master-Tier Toughness, at least, Shiv thought to himself. He lodged himself against a particularly deep chasm in its hull, and he dismissed both his outside context and his temporal shell to avoid suffering any damage to his Chronomancy.

In the same instant, he manifested his Pillar of Orichalcum. A flash of red and gold extended skyward from Shiv's body and also staked down into the ship's damaged hull.

He clung hard to the ship's damaged exterior, and he committed every bit of focus he had to increasing his Toughness. He didn't bother with his Inertial Overdrive yet. He didn't want to be distracted. The pillar grew more solid with every passing second, and as the orcs slammed into the ranks of the Inquisition, chaos erupted in all directions.

Shiv could hear the roar of battle, of screams filling the air, but he ignored them. He ignored them because a sweeter sound greeted him. The sound of metal groaning and parting, and the feeling of the ship shuddering to a brutal halt against his pillar.

Chapter 159 (IV) Greviance [II]

Initially, even with his pillar of Orichalcum piercing the ship, it continued dragging him along. But as it grew more solid, and as Shiv refused to move, the topside of the cathedral began to rip open around it. The ship ground more of itself apart against Shiv, but soon came to an utter halt. A loud electronic cry sounded through the air, followed by klaxons and sirens.

Shiv was where one of the cathedral ship's larger arches used to be. Now it was mostly a deformed gorge, with hissing steam and leaking hydraulics spilling into the air. But staring along the back of the ship, he could see a series of ports where it fired its missiles from earlier, and each port unleashed a pulse of mana. A few Shiv could recognize: Hydromancy, Pyromancy, and, to his surprise, Biomancy, though that one was the weakest, Adept at most.

"All hands," the ship bellowed. "We have been boarded. There are enemies in the air. There are intruders on the hull. Prepare for cleansing protocols." And then came a burst of static, followed by a loud shrieking noise.

"Can Hu! Bonk! Out! Now!" Shiv called out.

The first one out was the orc, slamming his weapon against the top side of the ship. The entire structure began to rattle and shake violently, and he kept his attacks up. With every impact, the resonance built, and the ship began to tear asunder even more. Can Hu, meanwhile, emerged from inside Shiv. But to his surprise, the Penitent didn't simply emerge by itself.

Instead, a large ball with a series of extended metal flaps jutting out behind it hovered in the air, and from behind a panel of glass, the Penitent piloted a vessel of its own making. At the same time, it channeled streams of physically visible binary from its green optics, and they spilled through the cathedral ship, spreading as if a plague. Soon, the entire expanse of the cathedral ship was drowned in ones and zeros, the numerals sinking deeper, growing brighter and more frequent, until the vessel was utterly bathed.

"Un-un-unable to comply," the cathedral ship cried out.

"That's okay, let me help you," Bonk shouted in response. As the huge orc struck the ship once more, its outsides cracked, and one of its engines exploded before tearing off the rest of the structure. The

resonating vibrations were hitting new heights, and the ship wouldn't be able to take much more of this. And so Bonk stopped hitting the ship, and instead waited. He waited and watched as the hull beneath Shiv's Pillar of Orichalcum finally split apart, and just then the insides of the ship depressurized. People were sucked out in an instant, but with Shiv's Pillar of Orichalcum lodged against the ship's exterior, they were dragged out along the cracks, and they emerged as streams of spraying gore.

Pillar of Orichalcum 213 > 214

Bonk laughed as he drove his club between the gaps and started to lever violently. More of the cathedral ship's hull broke apart, and a second later Bonk jumped down, dropping inside the ship. Shiv cast himself back in time, skipping the hull weakening process, and then accelerated into the open wound as well.

He slammed down next to Bonk just as Can Hu arrived, and even with the Pillar of Orichalcum dismissed, the cathedral ship didn't move.

"Can Hu, how's it going?" Shiv asked. "You got this?"

"This machine is suppressed, but not subdued," Can Hu replied. "It is trying to fight me for control over its sensors, engines, and core."

"Can you take control of it?" Shiv asked. He looked around, and he was pretty sure they were inside crew quarters. Several bunk beds lay in shambles nearby. A mess of armor and weapons were scattered on the ground, and messy splatters of offal painted the walls. He felt somewhat sympathetic for the inquisitors here. Whatever his animosity toward them, this was an ugly way to go.

"I will be able to attain full control over its sensory mechanisms in the next minute. Full subversion will likely take time." Can Hu paused as a brief series of beeps sounded from inside his flying apparatus. "Ten minutes and thirty-four seconds."

"Hear that, Insul?" The orc chuckled. "Ten minutes and thirty-four seconds. No time at all in a day, but an eternity in a fight. Now, let's go buy the Penitent some time."

"I will remain here in this compartment," Can Hu said. "My current armor should be capable of contending with or at least delaying a High Adept-Tier adversary in combat. I will direct the other orcs through this gap once they arrive."

Shiv gave Can Hu a nod. "Alright, stay safe, don't get killed, and if things go south, get out."

"Understood, Pathbearer. May you experience many violent deaths."

Shiv grinned and gave Can Hu a thumbs up. As he strode toward the door, he found a wheel lodged to its center rather than any handle. He realized this was more like a vault door than anything else, and he rolled his arms, preparing to use his gravitic field to rip it free.

"No, no," Bonk said, stopping him with an outstretched hand. "We don't want to compromise the internal structure anymore. It's already very unstable." Just then, the Orc placed a palm on Shiv's chest. The Deathless blinked, but then the Orc started vibrating, and so did Shiv. Before he could ask Bonk what he was doing, Bonk took a step toward the door and then started phasing through it.

Shiv's eyes widened, and Bonk tightened his grip on Shiv's torso. With a pull, both of them were through, and Shiv slipped past solid matter in an instant. He couldn't breathe. Everything felt tight

around him, like the air was heavy. Shiv wasn't particularly claustrophobic, but even so, the sensation wasn't what he called pleasing.

They were inside a narrow set of corridors now, and Shiv noticed a spider-like automaton crawling along the walls. Its single, glowing eye noticed them, and it reared back, preparing to act, only for a bone drill to shoot out from Shiv's cape and punch clean through its head.

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As it crashed down, sparks flew out from its open wound, and Shiv waited for more enemies to arrive. But when none did, he let out a breath and looked at Bonk. "What the hells was that?"

"A Master-Tier skill," Bonk answered, grinning.

"And what kind?" Shiv asked.

Bonk pressed his lips together. The Deathless shook his head and snorted. "Fine, keep your secrets, I'll beat 'em out of you one day."

"One day soon," the orc replied. "We haven't gotten the chance to properly spar, have we?"

"Get to that after I reach Legendary-Tier."

"Huh, taking advantage of my kindness." But then the orc laughed. "Finally, what a very orc-like thing for you to do."

Shiv ignored him, and they continued down the halls. As they came to a splitting path, Bonk tapped Shiv on the shoulder and gestured for him to follow.

The Deathless blinked at the orc. "How do you know where to go?"

"Because the entire place is vibrating," Bonk said, "and that means I have a very clear spatial visual map of every quarter and every person within this vessel." And slowly he turned into one direction in particular. "Including the City Lord you want to talk to."

And just then, Bonk swung out his club and utterly obliterated an invisible Pathbearer right beside them that Shiv hadn't even noticed. A splash of red painted the walls, and a mangled bag of meat, clad within a compromised suit of armor, impacted the far wall.

"Let's keep going," Bonk said, ignoring the man he'd just killed.

They descended through the insides of the ship, but with every passing second, screams sounded from the bulkheads, from within rooms. Screams and orcish laughter. How the other orcs were infiltrating the ship, Shiv didn't know, but there were many skills available to a Pathbearer, and if they were like Bonk in any way, they might just be able to phase into the ship, rather than ripping it asunder, a la Shiv.

The Deathless frowned slightly to himself as he crushed the head of an opponent who suddenly shot in through a hallway to the right. Adam had compared him to the orcs several times, stating that he was brutal and rough like them, but increasingly, Shiv didn't quite think so. He was more brutal than the orcs; he was rawer than the orcs.

The orcs were only brutal because they found it to be amusing. Shiv was brutal because he had no other options.

When this is done and I have a Legendary skill, I'm going to tell the System to go fuck itself, and I'm going to spend some actual time getting all my schooling and supplementary skills improved. This is bullshit. I don't want to be sloppier than an orc.

After a few minutes of on and off fighting, they arrived before a large set of doors.

"Alright," Bonk said, beginning to vibrate again. "Time for us to..."

And then the light above the door flashed green as it suddenly came open. Just then, a crackle sounded through the halls. "Pathbearer Shiv, Bonk, I am within. I have penetrated the ship's communication network. In another minute, I will have full control. I am granting you access to the missile loading bay now."

"Damn. Good job, Can Hu," Shiv replied. The Penitent was getting stronger, and Shiv loved to see it, especially since he was one of the reasons for Can Hu's recovery.

As soon as they entered the room, Bonk held out a hand, and Shiv halted behind him. The orc leaned in close and pointed down the large chamber before them. A series of shifting belts moved in the air along the ceiling, and they carried with them large, tube-like arrows enchanted with magic.

They were being loaded into long cylinders by a mess of metallic hands. In the background, large gears spun, and steam filled the room with a misty ambiance. "Four rows of cylinders down, third run horizontal. Our friend is inside one of those alone. I think he's trying to launch himself out and flee." The orc laughed. "How delightful."

Shiv did a double-take. "The... City Lord's hiding inside one of the cylinders?"

Bonk said with a slight chuckle, "He ran inside earlier. I think he was shouting something about firing himself out. He used quite a bit of profanity."

Shiv stared at the orc. "You could hear all that?"

"More like feel the vibrations, but yes."

"Why does everyone have a better Awareness skill than I do?"

"Because you should learn to use more than your eyes."

"I did," Shiv grumbled.

"Without your enchantments."

The Deathless ground his teeth. "Alright," he said, "I'm going to go say hi to the City Lord."

The orc shouldered his club and stared at Shiv with one eye. "Alone?"

"Yeah," Shiv said as he prepared to shift out of context. "This way, he won't see me coming. And also, if shit goes wrong, hit the bastard over the back of the head."

And then he did something Bonk couldn't do. He vanished into his Vitae and stopped time.

He rushed to the cylinder Bonk indicated, and he reached up, ripping it open with a snarl. Inside, he indeed found the City Lord. The man was fully armored, and bolts of arcing electricity danced along the copper wiring lining the exterior of Stormhalt's plates. Shiv scoffed in disgust. "Running and leaving your forces to fend for themselves. Don't you feel pathetic?" He struck the City Lord in the gut once, and a detonation of white and red spread through the missile loading bay.

A loud grunt sounded from Stormhalt as time resumed, and he tumbled over, coughing violently, and Shiv caught him by the throat. He lifted the man up and ripped his helmet from his face. Lightning spilled out from the City Lord's eyes as his expression twisted in a fierce scowl. Before he could unleash any of his Aeromancy, Shiv briefly slapped him across the left ear.

The man let out a shout and stumbled. Shiv wrapped his Aegis of Assimilation around the man and began to squeeze against his Magical Resistance. His armor flared with radiant mana, but slowly, it began to crack.

"Pretty good resistances," Shiv grunted. "Hells, pretty good armor in general, I didn't even manage to dent it. What is that, Heroic?"

The City-Lord muttered something under his breath. Shiv frowned. "What was that? Couldn't quite catch that."

Stormhalt coughed a few more times, but slowly he straightened himself. Shiv kept his Biomancy tied around the City Lord's body, and he kept the man's throat in a lock as well.

"I said," the City Lord wheezed, "Lady Kathereine, the Songbringer, I invoke your power."

"Huh?" Shiv said, not fully understanding Havel's words.

An airy whisper danced across Shiv's ears, and he heard a lyrical, soft, and ultimately alluring female voice come from behind him thereafter.

"And you have my promised aid, oh Stormhalt. Mine, and my husband's as well."

And just then, Stormhalt sneered at Shiv. At the same time, his Psycho-Cartography skill screamed in terror, demanding that he cover the City Lord's mouth. But before he could so much as move a muscle, a thunderous presence settled beside Shiv. Slowly, the Deathless chanced to glance to his right, where he found a towering, glowing figure in the shape of a man looming over him.

He looked faint and ethereal, yet his presence was undeniable. His flowing mane and beard were composed of twisting storms, and his eyes flashed with bolts of rageful lightning. His powerful body was shrouded in a dense robe of stormstuff, and in his right arm was a spear, while in the left was a shield made from slabs of stone.

Draped around the giant's back was a feminine figure. Shiv could only see half her face, but her features were among the most beautiful he'd ever witnessed. Her hair was well-styled, curled at the ends, and her lips were red, while her skin was white as snow.

Just then, the City Lord clamped his hand around Shiv's wrist, and he began to pull. Shiv felt his grasp be wrenched open, and then a blast of lightning struck him in the chest. The Deathless was blasted against and through a missile cylinder just behind him, and before he hit the room's wall, the City Lord's fingers were wrapped around his throat.

A billowing cape of storms expanded from Stormhalt's back. The lightning rippling off him grew denser and darker—far more than meager Aeromancy—and Shiv felt stray bolts tear through his flesh.

"I wasn't trying to escape," the City Lord said calmly, with only a hint of an annoyed snarl behind his lips as quaking thunder underlined each of his syllables. "I was trying to fire myself into battle, and to carry my gods into the fray. I am no coward, you damned foolish child. I am an Avatar of the Ascendants, and on this day, I have come for one reason, and one reason alone: to break Roland Arrow and take back what he has stolen."

An Avatar of an Auroral Ascendant consists of three aspects. The first is a Sacred Phylactery. They must be in its vicinity to properly draw on the divine power of their patron.

The second is a skill. It is effectively a sort of conduit for the Phylactery. If the Phylactery is as if a source, or perhaps the attunement of the divine, then the skill nested within the Pathbearer serving as Avatar becomes a functional outlet.

At present, practically 90% of the Twilight Republic's citizens possess a skill corresponding to faith. Faith that allows their Ascendants to reach through them. Usually, this results in minor miracles, in their gods whispering to them, sending directives, or guiding them in battles and in life as well.

However, for those that have been vetted by the Ascendants and chosen specifically to represent their interests either on the Council or in the Inquisition, a specific set of blessings will be bestowed. Blessings that will further mold the individual Pathbearer's soul until it is a proper receptacle for a specific Ascendant, or perhaps a few specific Ascendants.

Note: The Ascendants rarely like sharing avatars, because at times their Blessings clash and their preferences cause a certain pseudo-psychotic state as they blend the avatar's mind. This has been noted in the now masqueraded "Massacre at Delphia," in which an otherwise commendable Pathbearer who had served as Avatar for ten years killed ten thousand people at City Hall after taking on five more Ascendants.

Addendum: Our current working theory is that the additional Ascendants occupying his being suffered a political disagreement that became emotionally charged, which led to volatile results.

However, the Ascendants that are closer together, or at least trust each other, usually have fewer compunctions about a shared avatar. In fact, there is a specific term for someone who bears multiple Ascendants within them: Gemini.

-Aviary Intelligence Report on the "Avatars of the Ascendants and Auroral Council"

City Lord Stormhalt's eyes glowed like dark-blue beacons. The lightning flashing within speared out as razor-sharp tendrils, and they pierced Shiv's flesh as if the Deathless were made of paper. At baseline, Shiv's body should still be as hard as adamantine, but before Stormhalt's divine-enhanced Aeromancy, he felt unnaturally fragile, impossibly weak, and it didn't take much deduction on Shiv's part to figure out why that was.

Behind the City Lord, the ethereal giant flashed with the same deep blue light empowering Stormhalt, and slung around the giant's neck were a pair of slender, pale arms. The feminine figure reappeared once more, planting the bottom of her chin atop the giant's head. Where the giant was stoic and the City Lord had the expression of a furious hound, the woman just offered a delightful smile as she laughed.

There was a melody to her laughter, like a rising series of bells that chimed so crisp and clear that it made Shiv's very bones rattle. But as the sound died down, sorrow settled into Shiv's stomach like sediment, and it took all he had to stop himself from weeping. He wanted to hear that laugh again. He would almost do anything to...

Psycho-Cartography: No! You are mentally compromised. Her very voice must be bound to Psychomancy, or perhaps some High-Tier Social Skill. Deafen yourself. Deafen yourself now. Do not listen to her.

"So," the woman began running a red tongue over redder lips. "Our little enigma returns to us. Welcome, welcome. Glad to see you again—"

And that's as far as Shiv let her get before he turned his Biomancy on himself. He burst his eardrums, and he clenched his jaw, shrugging off the pain. Blood erupted from both sides of his skull, and the City Lord blinked in surprise. The woman's lips continued moving, but soon the smile on her face turned to a frown, and the giant she clung to tilted his head slightly.

"Yeah, sorry," Shiv growled out. "Not here for conversation, just here to take a City Lord prisoner."

Instead of driving his Biomancy field against Stormhalt directly, Shiv flicked both streams of spilling blood out from his inner ear into the City Lord's eyes. They splashed over his face, crashing hard along the bridge of his nose, surging into his lightning-infused sockets. The effect was immediate. City Lord Stormhalt twisted back in surprise. Shiv couldn't hear him snarl, but that didn't matter. The Deathless went out of context and froze time.

As soon as he did, however, a blast of lightning erupted from Stormhalt. It was a bolt grander and blacker than any Shiv had seen before, and it tore a massive gap within the missile delivery chamber. The ceiling was gashed open by the spreading bolt of lightning, and Shiv watched in disbelief as it continued rising up, stabbing high into the distant sky. Soon, it grew to resemble a tower around Stormhalt, and its mana density thickened as well.

Holding onto the bolt was the ethereal giant summoned by the City Lord. The storm-made juggernaut moved with impunity, unburdened by halted time, and betraying no hint of surprise or confusion about Shiv's sudden disappearance. Power flowed from him into Stormhalt and out again, and Shiv noticed something glowing on the City Lord's chest. It looked like a set of circular rings.

Is he wearing a pendant under his armor? So, if that's the case...

A cold feeling washed through Shiv. He suspected he knew what he was dealing with: Ascendants. He had faced a Forgotten Ascendant, or such was what the Educator had claimed to be. The Forgotten God puppeteering the Educator, however, had been the size of the sky and looked down upon Shiv as a planet-engulfing giant would a feeble gnat. Right now, the storm-clad giant and the woman holding onto him were both abnormal, but ultimately human-like.

Despite this, their power was a continual surprise to him. Both of them continued moving, even as time stood still, and the woman's eyes came aglow with Divination mana, leaking brilliant streams of violet light. She whispered something in the giant's ear, and slowly, both their heads turned in his general direction. The Deathless found himself hesitating. Originally, he wanted to get behind Stormhalt, suplex him, knock him out somehow—see if that would dispel the ethereal figures that he'd summoned. No, however, with that massive pillar of lightning consuming Stormhalt's body, Shiv had a feeling that touching the City Lord meant either pain or death.

"Well, this is felling annoying," Shiv cursed to himself. He was running out of vitality fast, and now his plan to kidnap the City Lord and use him as a bargaining chip against Hograve had run into a new impediment. "Nothing can ever be easy, can it?"

He had long known the answer to that. Being System-favored, there was no easy meal. If one wanted to be a powerful Pathbearer, and when one caught the System's true interest, practically every second of one's life became a desperate struggle.

Right, fine. I can't hit him myself. But let's see here. Plenty of things I can launch into him. See what they do. And then after that...

Shiv came up with a quick plan. It was a relatively messy one, but it might just show him what the City Lord was now capable of. He went behind the missile cylinder Stormhalt had been inside of earlier and ripped it out of its foundations with a brief growl. Then he kicked it towards Stormhalt with a heavy punt. The cylinder shot forward, and it split apart clean against the massive column of lightning enveloping Stormhalt.

Okay. Weird. Not shocking, but slicing and cutting. Like there's an edge to these lightning bolts.

A swelling weakness spread through Shiv's body. He was running out of time. He spiked himself just above Stormhalt, angling his body away from the pitch-black lightning. Then Shiv began to cultivate his Toughness. The Pillar of Orichalcum formed, and it shot high up into the air at the same time as it thrust downward. Its red-gold sheen crashed against the sides of the rising arc of lightning.

That drew the giant's notice immediately. His head snapped up. He frowned. A series of other bolts tore down from the heavens above, splashing through the point where Shiv's Pillar of Orichalcum crashed against the thick cord of lightning. However, he didn't react to the bottom of Shiv's pillar, which slammed hard against Stormhalt's left shoulder.

The City Lord was driven through the ground as Shiv's new Toughness Skill smashed into him, but then the lightning around him flared again, and it grew even darker. Any hint of blueness vanished altogether. Now it was pitch-black, darker than the void itself. And more, it did not possess a current. Rather, it was cutting. Splitting. And as it caressed Shiv's Orichalcum—

It hewed through his red-gold protections.

The Deathless cried out as he felt a wound open within his very soul. He ended his Outside Context Problem before he could entirely run out of vitality, and both of the ethereal figures noticed him immediately. The woman pointed at him, and the giant waved his spear. A chain of crashing bolts

extended out from the massive fork of electricity rising from Stormhalt's body. They impacted Shiv's pillar, and despite the Deathless infusing himself with as much Toughness as he could—so much Toughness that he couldn't move whatsoever—he felt himself unravel as the lightning tore into his skill and ripped his soul open from the inside.

The attacks were intrusive—and Shiv had a guess as to why.

Animancy-infused...

"Godsdamn it," Shiv hissed. Soul wounds were another kind of pain altogether. Three bloody slashes erupted along Shiv's chest, but the giant wasn't done. Another bolt hit him, this one charged with a thundering tip of gold at the end. Shiv felt his temporal shell shatter, and he was launched downward and pinned to the ground as strings of electricity began to writhe and burrow deeper into his flesh. Shiv groaned, and he shook his head. Right, that plan didn't go so well.

He slammed his hand against the ground and tried to push himself up, but a resounding boom of thunder hit him like a falling hammer. It was injected into his body by the cords of lightning connected to him, and spots formed in his eyes as the concussion passed through his insides. Yet his organs remained unharmed, and his bones were not cracked. It was purely a stunning attack, one meant to daze him long enough for Stormhalt to seize him by the neck once more.

Before Shiv could respond this time, the City Lord held up a hand, and a stream of falling lightning tore through the top side of the ship. A massive mace was forged from the stormstuff in an instant. It was pitch black as well, and he tapped it against Shiv's head gently. The Deathless tried to respond. He flexed his gravitic field, attempting to throw the City Lord off, but even more chains of pitch-black electricity wound themselves around him, holding him in place. With every passing second, they injected more concussive blasts into his body. It was as if his insides were being rattled about, especially his brain.

And just then Shiv heard a bewitching melody; a low, trilling sound that came with the words sung within his mind. "Hush, hush, do not fight. Open your heart to me and let me show you new delights."

Shiv's Psycho-Cartography screamed while the rest of him relaxed. Hearing the music filled his body with relief and pleasure. And the singer continued on, her voice rising another two octaves.

The song ended as a large gray hand shot up and seized the City Lord by the ankle. "What in—" Stormhalt's words died with a cry as he was wrenched through the ground. Shiv's eyes widened as he saw the City Lord vibrate, sink down, and then solidify with his waist halfway through the walkway they stood on.

"What..."

was the last thing Shiv heard of the feminine voice as Stormhalt's mace tumbled away from Shiv's head.

The world spun, but the Deathless took full advantage of what he assumed to be Bonk's intervention. Shiv spiked himself at Stormhalt and drove a right hook against the man's face. Stormhalt didn't budge. The necklace he wore beneath his armor flared brighter, shining through the plates protecting him, and a crash of thunder exploded out from his head. A fist of stretching lightning struck Shiv, and he found himself launched through cylinder after cylinder, bouncing across the room. A moment later, as he used his Biomancy to fix his injuries and restore his equilibrium, he heard a deafening crash. The entire ship shook. The chamber was drowned in blinding light.

Shiv winced and looked away, and when he managed to force his eyes open once more, the massive form of a club-wielding orc was driven into him by a chain of black lightning. Both of them were smashed against the walls, and the dark electricity wrapped around them before tightening like thorny brambles. They turned with force, and Shiv cursed as he found himself bundled tight against his orc-comrade.

"Hey, Insul!" Bonk slurred. Half his face was severely swollen, and his jaw was split open. Shiv blinked. It didn't take the divinely empowered Stormhalt much to incapacitate a Heroic-Tier orc at all.

Shiv swiped his Aegis of Assimilation over Bonk. A mana hydra consumed the orc's many wounds, and it came alight with a constellation of injuries. The orc's insides were ruptured. His bones were floating about in parted shards. It was like someone had detonated a series of explosions inside him, and Shiv realized it was probably from the concussions injected by the strings of lightning. The strings of lightning were now lashing through every cylinder within the room. Metal screamed and peeled apart as shivering fingers of electricity crept along the walls, along the ceiling, along the ground.

Hovering in the air then was City Lord Havel Stormhalt. His helmet was back on, and the dark blue Aeromancy mana he possessed spilled from his dense helmet in a horizontal beam of light.

"I thought you said it was gonna be easy," Bonk grumbled. "I slammed my club into his cock three times down there. Three times. Once is usually enough to put down one of your human males."

"Yeah, well, I didn't know he had two Ascendants hiding up his ass," Shiv replied with a grimace.

The City Lord held out his mace. "You made a mistake coming here. I take you now into Inquisitorial custody, showing you the leniency you failed to offer my Pathbearers. But thereafter, I will put you to the question, and I will drive every confession from your lips. Until there is nothing but truth left inside you. Until there are no lies left for me to discover."

Stormhalt's voice shook the chamber, but Shiv knew that wasn't the City Lord's own power. Havel had ripped his knuckles open, hitting Shiv. Now, he was on a whole other level of power.

Shiv looked around the room. The ethereal figures were nowhere to be seen, yet there was still a pressure in the atmosphere, and that massive pillar of black lightning continued to stream upward from Stormhalt's body, binding him to the skies above.

"Yeah, I don't really think so," Shiv said. "Tell you what, if you throw that mace down and you come with me as a hostage so I can blackmail Hawgrave into releasing Blackedge, we'll call it even."

The City Lord leaned back. "So she already has the town in her blade, then?"

Shiv winced. Maybe he should have thought about what he was going to say before he said it. Bonk lightly flicked Shiv over the back of the head with his free hand. "Operational security, Insul. Come now. This isn't your first fight."

Shiv tried to project his Psychomancy to Bonk, hoping to establish a telepathic link, but it only made him wince in pain. His Biomancy and Chronomancy had recovered thanks to their high skill levels, but his other magical skills remained shredded from his earlier encounter with the Tarrasque. Shiv sighed. "Alright, Bonk, new plan."

"Which is?" Bonk asked.

"I make shit up and improvise. Can Hu," Shiv whispered. "If you can hear me, fly the ship toward the Tarrasque and get us into the fight. The City Lord wants a fight, so drag him into it. Bail before you get close."

A vicious scoff escaped Stormhalt as he twirled the mace in his hands. He drifted through the air as branching lengths of lightning pulled him through the devastated chamber. As he moved, the column of

lightning connecting him to the sky continued cleaving a large gap into the ceiling above. "And while we are here, I wish to know exactly why you possess the capacity to return from death. The orc has told us such interesting things about you..."

Shiv reminded himself to kill 812 as painfully and debilitatingly as he possibly could when he next ran into the orc. Which was hopefully soon, because that was where Blackedge was found as well, within Hawgrave's greatsword. Cords of lightning connected to Stormhalt reared back as if they were serpents, but Shiv's Psycho-Cartography skill triggered within him, and he realized he had more options than just brute force.

Psycho-Cartography: He has engaged you repeatedly because his pride is wounded, and he wants to gain a feeling of retribution from you. It can be exploited—as can his hatred of Roland Arrow. Use that to focus his attention.

"Well, let me tell you something first, Stormhalt," Shiv said, pointing a finger at the City Lord. "Roland Arrow isn't yours to kill. He's mine. In fact, I wouldn't be here trying to take you prisoner if I weren't going for Roland Arrow. Truth be told, I don't care about your whole Ascendant civil war bullshit, Sacred Phylacteries, whatever." The Deathless caught a slight curl of Bonk's lip. The orc intuitively knew what he was doing. In fact, Shiv would probably guess that the orc also had something of a Master-Tier psychology skill. "I'm here for one thing and one thing alone: Roland Arrow's head, and I'll be godsdamned if you or any Ascendants are going to stop me from getting to him."

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Rather than shooting forward, the bolts of lightning connected to Havel slackened as they lost tension. The City Lord lowered his black mace slightly. "Then that wasn't a ruse? What you told us earlier, when you infiltrated this ship, that was true?"

Shiv wanted to struggle against the lightning holding him, but they cut into his flesh and soul with every movement. But he didn't need to be the one that broke this deadlock. He just needed to delay long enough to... Well, come up with some other bullshit as Can Hu drove them closer to the battlefield.

Shiv wasn't sure that the City Lord could contend with the Tarrasque, but considering how he'd managed to survive both Bonk and Shiv's attacks with contemptuous ease, the Deathless decided that he wanted to find out just how powerful an Avatar of the Ascendants truly was—but secondhand this time.

Because learning first-hand sucked all the ass in the world.

Chapter 160 (II) Avatar

And Shiv's attempt worked. His provocation drew Stormhalt closer. "Why?" Stormhalt asked, his voice a low growl. "Why do you despise Roland Arrow? And why should I surrender his life to you?"

"Because he owes me my entire life," Shiv spat. "He owes me for everything he's taken from me."

"Taken from you?" Stormhalt replied. He regarded Shiv for a long moment, and then he gave a snort of disgust. "Why am I not surprised? Roland takes, takes, takes. All he does is take."

The City Lord hung in the air as he shook in quiet rage, and in an instant, he glided across the badly damaged chamber, looming over both Shiv and Bonk. The ceiling behind him was torn wide open, and Shiv could see the Tower of Lightning rising from his body expand. It was now more than a tower. It was becoming like a tree, branches unfurled, striking in all directions. Shiv caught sight of dozens of orcs being split in twain as those black threads ripped through them. Blood began to rain down, followed by pieces of gray-skinned bodies.

"Tell me, then," Stormhalt said through clenched teeth. "What exactly has he taken from you? A wife? A brother? A daughter? Your dignity?"

Psycho-Cartography: He has lost all these things. He strongly doubts you have lost more than him. Do not escalate and make it a competition. Despite everything, he cares—and cares too deeply. Exploit his sympathy. Be someone he can see himself in.

"Everyone I could have been," Shiv replied. "Dignity? You're someone, City Lord. It's in your title. He wanted to make sure I would never be anyone. He wouldn't even let me take a Path. How in the Broken Moon would you know what that's like?"

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Stormhalt froze in midair. "But I do," he hissed. "I do. I have a Path. I am someone—but I was always someone beneath him."

Shiv let out a scoff. "You too? What? Did he stop you from being a Vanguard or something?"

"He stopped me from being all I could be," Stormhalt whispered. "He stopped me from being the best I could be. From leading. From sparing the Republic his hubris."

The Deathless put on a show as he sighed. "No shit. He was always like this?"

Acting 15 > 16

“Always,” Stormhalt snarled. “He—”

Before Shiv could exploit the City Lord's hate, a loud sigh filled the room. It rustled through the world, making the air tumble and turn, but with it came a fragrance as well; the smell of pinecones and lilac, gradually fading into an earthy scent.

“Oh, Havel...”

The melodic voice from earlier returned, and then so did the ethereal woman. She materialized two meters away from Shiv, and he beheld her away from the giant for the first time.

What struck him first was the dress she wore. It was composed of pitch-black chainmail that was lined in flaps of gold. A large gem hung from her neck, and it glistened a blood-red. Merely staring at it awoke a feeling of ardor within Shiv. And every movement performed by the unknown Ascendant made the Deathless shiver and twitch. But the feeling she invoked in him wasn't one of lust, but adoration. He wanted her to acknowledge him, to tell him that he was a good boy, to accept him at her feet, and let him serve her—and once more his Psycho-Cartography broke her influence.

Psycho-Cartography: We are psychologically compromised to the extreme: even this pale projection of her is affecting us on a high level. Look away! Blind yourself, and then deafen yourself again!

But I can't, Shiv cried back internally. He couldn't, because the moment he did that, he would be at Stormhalt's mercy as well. And with the brambles of lightning holding him stiff, slowly burrowing into his

open wounds, all Shiv had left was his Psycho-Cartography skill, and that wasn't helping him with the ethereal woman either.

"My Lady Kathereine," Stormholt breathed. He took a knee in the air, and the chain of lightning extending from him kept him aloft. It looked awkward, and she wasn't the only one to think so.

"Havel, Havel, stop that," the woman began. "You're swinging like a marionette, it's very gaudy."

Stormholt coughed. "I apologize." Before he could say anything else, she held up a placating finger.

"It's all right, I forgive you, but I do have to warn you," she said as she turned, swinging that finger to point it at Shiv, "that you are being fooled by a boy. You're being led along by a boy, a clever boy perhaps, a desperate boy, but a boy nonetheless."

She smiled at Shiv, and he turned away just in time. He'd thought Angelo had a powerful Charm Skill. "Oh, look at him, he's shy," Kathereine said with a giggle. "But his friend isn't."

Shiv's eyes fell on Bonk. And for the first time, he saw what it looked like when an orc was utterly transfixed with another person. Bonk's beady yellow eyes were locked on Kathereine, and she took steps towards him, skipping with every movement. She was at once a mature beauty, but also a carefree girl, dancing through the whims and miseries of the world untouched. "And what is your name, my gray-skinned friend?"

"Bonk," he breathed. "That is how I refer to myself with humans."

"Oh, but that's not how you think of yourself, is it?" she asked, placing her hands upon her knees. Her smile grew sweeter. "You've died many times, haven't you, Bonk? Which reincarnation cycle of yours is this?"

But before Bonk could reply, a louder grumble sounded from inside him. "Turn away from my orc, Ascendant. He is not yours to compromise. You may kill him. You may torture him. You may even wound his pride. But your charm will not seep into his perfect memory skill." And the Challenger chuckled darkly. "Just as it won't be able to twist the mind of my Vaketh-Insul."

"Challenger," Katherine said, tilting her head and adopting a relaxed posture. "It's been too long. Tell me, did you like the song I sang for you those ten years back?"

Shiv's jaw fell open slightly as the Challenger fell silent for a beat. "It was a good tune, I suppose. Bewitching, but ultimately, just that; a song."

"Oh..." Katherine pouted, but her frustration didn't quite meet her eyes. In fact, her eyes reminded Shiv of a fish's, somewhat. There was an incongruity of emotion between the rest of her face and her gaze. "Don't you worry, then, Challenger, I'll endeavor to make my next melody properly piercing. Now, though, I wish to talk with your..." She licked her lips again. "What was that? The Insul? Oh, no, boy, you've accepted a bargain with the Challenger? You were that desperate to try and seize Blackedge before we got there?"

Shiv reached for his Psycho-Cartography, but rather than receiving anything useful about his skill, it shuddered inside him.

Psycho-Cartography: Everything you know about psychology, every natural instinct you have, is nothing before her. She knows more about the human psyche than you do by far, and your words will not be able to lead her on or provoke her. Say nothing, stay silent, cripple your own mind with Psychomancy if

you have to. We are not facing a monster of force and destruction; we are facing a god atop the social hierarchy.

Shiv clenched his jaw and turned away from the Ascendant. She folded her arms and leaned in close, and when he didn't say anything, she didn't either, but he did inhale her flavors, and the taste of lilac was growing stronger and sweeter. Shiv choked as something inside him started to succumb.

"Hello," she sang, "let's begin again. Instead of Havel using my gifts as a blunt weapon, let's do this the way it was meant to be done, properly, politely, and joyfully. I am Kathereine the Songbringer, Ascendant, but also once a child and a Pathbearer like you. And what is your name?"

She wasn't ripping into his mind. He couldn't feel her crawling through his memories. And his Psycho-Cartography realized she wanted something else. She wanted him to offer himself to her, to surrender willingly, and to stop fighting her influence. He drew upon his Psychomancy, but his field was still broken. And as soon as he did, she gave him a whistle of appreciation.

"Oh, you were going to mutilate yourself mentally. You're quite resolved and relatively clever. You know what I am, don't you? You know what I'm capable of, or perhaps you have a guess."

Her voice dropped low and husky, and for a moment, he heard Uva echoing under her words. "This flatters me. I like it when someone understands how dangerous I am. So many people are worried about the sword, the spell, but far too few fear the tongue, the words, the bodies, the heart. You want to know why I think this is?"

She didn't wait for Shiv to struggle to resist her; she just kept going. It was like she was whispering right beside his ears, and with every word she spoke, something inside him threatened to snap and break. She knew that if he offered himself to her utterly, completely, the misery building inside of him would end, but he didn't go over the edge. Instead, his Psycho-Cartography constantly screamed at him, frantically trying to come up with a way to guard his own mind and distract him.

"Hmm, I can feel you wriggling in there, twisting back and forth. Psycho-Cartography? You spent far too long with the orcs, boy. That's a skill for psychopaths. Psychopaths or investigators hunting them. It takes a particular kind of detachment to get that skill evolution."

She hissed, and suddenly he felt bolts of lightning dig through his eyelids, pulling his head back violently. Kathereine was standing over him, placing a hand on his face. Warmth swelled through his body. His skin felt like it was afire. Over Kathereine's shoulder, the storm-made giant that he assumed to be her husband loomed. A faint smirk lined his expression. "But all good things have to come to an end so that greater things may continue. You came here to take a prisoner, but I'm afraid you're going to stay as a slave. That's the danger of life sometimes. But don't worry. You'll learn to love it."

Despite the whirlwind of sensations tearing through Shiv, he managed to bare his teeth. "No," he growled out, and Kathereine lifted an eyebrow.

"Wow. That's some mental fortitude you have." She giggled, and she looked over her shoulder at Stormhalt for a moment. "We're keeping this one. In fact, he's coming with us. You hear that, boy? You're going to get your wish of killing Roland Arrow after all."

And then she plunged a fist into his chest.

Shiv gasped. He tried to push away, but lightning hooked through his flesh, forcing his chest open. Blood poured forth from his wounds, and the Deathless let out a ragged cry of mental, spiritual, and emotional misery.

"Now," Kathereine said as she pressed her presence against his very soul. "Where is your... Wait, why is... Your vitality... Blended... Huh... How... odd."

Psycho-Cartography: I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do. I don't know what to do. There's nothing I can—

Then, the insides of the cathedral ship rattled violently, as brutal turbulence set in. The ethereal giant was the first to turn, frowning as he gazed through the walls at something unseen.

"What?" Stormhalt asked, worry evident in his tone. "What is it, Mike?"

"It comes," the Ethereal Giant said. His voice was deep as thunder, with a resonating bass that put Stormhalt to shame. "Ready yourself, champion."

And Stormhalt turned. A loud gasp escaped him. The tree of black lightning extending upward from his body began to rumble violently. Branches of lightning erupted from above, spearing at an enemy Shiv couldn't see. But then, there came a roar, a roar that rattled Shiv's bones, one he knew well by now. Kathereine took a step away from him, and as her influence subsided slightly, the Deathless let out a chuckle.

"Thanks, Can Hu," he breathed out.

Something slammed into the cathedral ship and tore through it in a devastating instant. The air grew impossibly hot. Shiv felt his body burn, but he kept his eyes open even as the pain became overwhelming. A colossal shape flattened the already damaged insides of the cathedral ship.

Then came what looked to be enormous blades falling from the sky. It crashed down against the storm tree emerging from the City Lord's body, and black blood rained down thereafter. Black blood and large chunks. Shiv's mind skipped a beat as one of the chunks brushed his Biomancy field. That was enamel. Enamel mixed in with a great many other compounds. And through his addled mind, he realized what was happening. The Tarrasque was trying to eat the cathedral ship.

Stormhalt shouted something, but then the Tarrasque bit down again. It looked like a mountain range was punching through the outer hull. And this time, the Tarrasque managed to close its mouth entirely, ignoring the fact that the lightning tree was ripping and slicing through the roof of its skull. An immense force impacted Shiv from below.

He was sent flying upward through the air. And in the havoc, he saw shrapnel and bouncing cylinders sailing around him. Walls and walkways crashed and broke against his body. He briefly caught sight of Bonk, and then the orc vanished between two building-sized teeth slamming together.

The Deathless shook off his Ascendant-induced haze and spiked his field. But he was still drained of vitality, and he felt more deflated than ever as he pushed on. It was like he was flying within a hurricane choked with shrapnel. Dense pieces of hull hammered into him with every moment. Jagged veins of chaotic lightning peeled pieces of his flesh free from his body.

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Shiv cried out in frustration as he began draining vitality from the world itself. Ruptures formed, and membrane-lined mana storms began to pour out from those existential wounds like magical jelly. But if that affected the Tarrasque, the beast didn't show it. Instead, it just made things worse for Shiv, as normal bolts of Aeromancy joined the black lightning possessed by the Ascendant.

Something clipped Shiv's leg and sent him tumbling head over ass. He tried to activate his Pillar of Orichalcum, but a heavy object impacted the back of his head before he could get his bearings. The world briefly went white, but Shiv recovered, only to find his surroundings seemed familiar.

The Tarrasque had snatched him up in its mouth. Everything was quivering, things turning into twos and threes in his vision as things continued slamming into him over and over.

Snarled curses escaped the Deathless. He stopped time, and the Tarrasque responded by detonating its Magical Resistance. Shiv wasn't sure if it was trying to ward off someone else's spell, or just torture him in particular, but as his temporal shell shattered and pain from his mana fields being flensed anew flooded his being, Shiv cursed the great beast all the same. "Give me a godsdamn tucking second to—"

And then something caught Shiv. He found himself clutched tight—but not crushed—between massive, clawed digits. Shiv blinked as he lay against cracked lengths of obsidian, and as he turned his head, he realized the shrapnel wasn't impacting him anymore. Through the chaotic haze, despite the mana storm building in the backdrop, Shiv let out a cough of disbelief.

"M—marikos?" he stammered.

"Shiv! My little friend!" The Dragon-Knight guffawed. He sounded absolutely jubilant despite being inside the Tarrasque's body. Lightning flashed, and brief glimpses of the sky could be seen as the tree of black lightning continued carving its way upward out of the monster's skull. The tree flowed down to a central point, and Shiv could see Stormhalt hammering his mace against the insides of the Tarrasque's mouth with thunderous impacts. Pieces of massive teeth broke free, and the Tarrasque tore at itself with Biomancy once more, ripping its body asunder to eject the inedible things hiding within it.

Just then, an entire section of cathedral ship came swinging through the air, coming right for Shiv and Marikos.

"Marikos!" Shiv cried out, pointing at the incoming danger.

The dragon barely offered the five-hundred-meter-long piece of wreckage a second look. He swung his shield high, and he knocked the debris aside as if it weighed nothing. The ringing of bells could be heard as the ruined cathedral impacted the top of the Tarrasque's mouth, and a shockwave followed, one that Marikos promptly parried as well.

Shiv's eyes widened as he realized no force could pass through Marikos's shield, and more importantly, the shield also seemed to displace energy back toward the direction it was facing. As such, Marikos was rebounding burst after burst of kinetic energy inside the Tarrasque, and the wounds lining the creature's insides got worse with each passing second.

"I'm glad to encounter you here, my friend!" Marikos shouted. For a creature almost half a kilometer tall from head to tail-tip, he moved impossibly quickly. He was only slow compared to Hawgrave and the Tarrasque, but to Shiv, he might as well have been lightning itself. Nothing came close to touching them, not with Marikos's skill in wielding a shield. "I grew weary of being ambushed from behind by this oversized curr," Marikos explained. "And so, when Legend Hawgrave left a gap between the beast's teeth, I dove in along with a lance of my bravest knights."

A screaming automaton came at them at that moment. Marikos parried it as well, and the poor mechanical Pathbearer burst into sparking pieces. "I will remember my fallen brethren. They were most heroic, and their dying screams as they were melted in the Tarrasque's stomach acid were most noble."

Shiv was momentarily speechless, and then an uncomfortable thought wriggled upward inside of him. Is this what it feels like for other people when they talk to me sometimes? Did Marikos just Adam me?

"Alas, the insides of the beast's stomach are as hard as its outside, and I broke my axe-head off against its skin. A pity, a shame. I will have to dig it out of the Tarrasque's corpse after our victory to see it reforged. It was such a good axe. The story of how I acquired it is a grand one, friend Shiv. You see, when my—"

And as Shiv instinctively tried to come up with something to prevent Marikos from going on a tirade, he got an idea. And with that idea, he reaffirmed that he could never be an Adam in his own mind. "Oh, Marikos, you lost the axe?" Shiv called out as loud as he could. The red-black-scaled dragon trailed off, and Shiv didn't waste his moment. "Well, how good are you at using an unbreaking stick?"

"An unbreaking stick?" Marikos repeated, sounding confused. "But where would I find such a thing?"

And just then, Shiv grinned. "You already did." And in the Dragon-Knight's hand, a Pillar of Orichalcum manifested, resembling a stick between the massive dragon's claws.

Marikos let out a gasp of joy and surprise. "Oh!"

For the second time, a Pillar of Orichalcum rose, pushing through the Tarrasque's skull and dropping through the underside of its jaw. A loud cry of glee came from the dragon. "It is fate we found each other, friend Shiv. Fate!"

And then Marikos wrapped both hands around Shiv's pillar of Orichalcum as a wide grin lined his lizard-like features. "And it is fate that we deliver this creature unto its death."

He swung, and even with Shiv's Toughness climbing fast, in Marikos's hands, he was lighter than a feather.

