

Deathless 161

Chapter 161 (I) Overwhelmed

Poor, poor Sullain.

Every time I look upon the fool, I am reaffirmed in my belief that his life is destined for eternal tragedy. It's not that he never got the affirmation he needed as a child from that pathetic degenerate he has for a father or the literal monster that became his mother. No. He could have almost survived that. He did muster his extraordinary understanding of magic and become a near-unmatched scholar, after all.

But then he found himself performing too well. Advancing too fast. And after the first war of the Five Faiths, the System sneered upon him as he found himself the sole survivor of cohort after cohort before they could fully fill that hole inside him. And so, Sullain, deprived of the loving family he always desired, set about making one for himself. And because he was broken and childish about what "love" is to begin with, his mistakes simply compounded from there on.

Make no mistake—it is an easy thing to learn the wrong lessons from lived experiences. Especially when you have been mistreated so. After all, just because you are capable of great intelligence does not mean you are a creature ruled by and suited for logic. So often, people mistake one's capacity for something to mean the certainty that they will actually achieve it.

And most often, people do not achieve. They do not rise to the heights of their potential; rather, they plunge to the depths of their inner sorrows.

Hence, when Sullain obtained Submission, he used the city to fill that gap inside himself, and the people became as if his children. He welcomed people from all Faiths to his city. But while it pleased him to be so popular, Submission suffered as a comingling of incompatible and untempered cultures cracked it from within.

As such, the city was most unprepared for the System's cruel hand and the arrival of the illustrious Roland Arrow. Ah. Arrow. Another tragedy in the making—but one that will be sculpted by my hand...

But this entry will be on Sullain. For he has called out to me recently, casting his missives across dimensions and worlds, telling me of developments I find ever-so-enticing.

It seems my investment in the fetuses carried by "Vera Lowe" and Rose Van Erren has borne fruit after all.

It is time to revisit my notes regarding "Project Deathless," and perhaps even return home for a jaunt...

-Excerpt from Udraal Thann's Journal

Is it weird that I kind of enjoy being used as a club?

Shiv wondered to himself as Marikos used him to brutalize the insides of the Tarrasque. The Pillar of Orichalcum was more than just a blunt weapon, however. Lodged within the Tarrasque's skull, it functioned as an anchor, and as the behemoth struggled to move, Marikos swept Shiv's pillar from side to side, twisting the inner flesh of the Tarrasque apart.

Glistening tissue fissured and released waterfalls of black blood as the bulk of the Tarrasque's body jerked back and forth. Deafening shrieks of animalistic fury come from the depths of the titanic monster's throat. Yet, Marikos continued twirling Shiv about, turning the insides of the Tarrasque into a blender of gore and viscera.

It was a testament to Marikos's impossible strength that he could wield Shiv this way. Where even the Tarrasque was pinned still by the Pillar of Orichalcum, Shiv felt light as a feather in Marikos's hands. To the Deathless's fascination, he never got any harder for Marikos to wield, either, remaining weightless throughout. If that was because of Marikos's immense might or a more esoteric factor allowed by his skill, Shiv didn't know, but it sure as hell felt like it was turning the entire fight around.

The Tarrasque had gone from a near-unstoppable foe to one that was getting shredded apart from within. So long as Shiv continued to focus on his Toughness that was. A few hits left his body bruised and bloodied, cracking his limbs and caving in part of his skull. Marikos had nearly stopped in concern, but Shiv shouted for him to continue on; that he could outlast the Tarrasque.

And Shiv really, really believed that.

Up until the point he recoiled off the roof of the Tarrasque's mouth.

Cracks formed along the outside of Shiv's pillar. A rattle of pain passed through his body as he jerked to a violent halt. Twin snaps sounded from his shoulders as they were dislocated, but the Deathless dealt with the pain in stride. Despite this, his veins filled with the cold waters of disbelief as he noticed the mended inner flesh of the Tarrasque had been replaced by a layer of hardened crystal—the same kind fused over its external shell.

"Damnably beast!" Marikos shouted as he adapted. He started jabbing Shiv at a single spot over and over, cracking the shell and using Shiv's manifested pillar to spear through the Tarrasque's parting flesh. Shiv felt his pillar strike something dense. It burst against his Orichalcum projection as the Tarrasque shuddered.

For a moment, he thought they had struck something fatal. Then, the Vitae suffusing the beast flared, and it let out a bellow of fury as it resurrected immediately.

“G-g-godsdammit,” Shiv snarled as he tried not to vomit from sheer dizziness. “M-m-marikos! I n-n-need to drain its v-vitality. It’ll just keep resurrecting if—” His last words came out as a cry of discomfort as he felt himself get lodged tight within the wound Marikos was making. The Tarrasque’s crystalline protection had fused around Shiv’s Pillar of Orichalcum, and now, not even the Dragon-Knight could wrench him free.

Two thoughts passed through Shiv just then. The first was about Marikos’s Physicality Skill. The Deathless suspected that Marikos might be able to wield any weapon with contemptuous ease. But that didn’t mean he had infinite strength. That might be why Marikos could swing Shiv’s ever-implacable pillar-form about like it was a twig while still struggling to dislodge the Deathless from within the Tarrasque.

The second was a sobering suspicion that the Tarrasque’s Toughness was outpacing his own by far. Soon, they weren’t going to be able to kill it with brute force.

We’re going to need a new plan.

Pathbearers and debris still swirling about the Tarrasque’s insides crashed, splattered, and broke against Shiv’s pillar. Marikos flapped his wings hard—even channeled fire through them—trying to dislodge the Deathless. As he wrestled with the pillar, Shiv felt a surge of Biomancy pass through the insides of the titanic monster, and tensed for what was to come.

Massive tentacles burst out from the creature’s crystallized insides, unleashing torrents of mana at Shiv from all directions. The Tarrasque’s flesh ignited in a plethora of colors as a flood of spells accelerated to

crash against the Orichalcum column lodged in its depths. Shiv's eyes widened as he saw beams of Psychomancy and Dimensionality rush toward him. His pillar might protect him from some of the more direct damage spells, but even then, he wouldn't survive having all the water ripped out from inside him or having his synapses fried.

"Marikos!" Shiv cried out.

But his terror was unnecessary, for the Fortress that Soars released Shiv and shot into the air. He circled the space around Shiv with his obsidian shield held high, and the flood of raw magic unleashed by the Tarrasque shattered against the blurring dragon. Shiv felt his breath catch in his throat as he watched the dragon crash through the dense concentrations of mana. It was like watching someone break a series of flowing rivers in half. Curving furls of mana folded over the Dragon-Knight's shield, but Marikos emerged unscratched.

As he performed another revolution around Shiv, his shield began to shudder as a variety of colors erupted out from it. A wave of mixed mana hammered the insides of the Tarrasque and boiled through the crystal shell. The Tarrasque's Magical Resistance flashed and cracked, overwhelmed by its own power.

Shiv saw muted daylight seep through the Tarrasque's parting flesh for a flash. For a beat, he thought the beast was going to come apart.

But then its Magical Resistance hardened as well. Veins of mana thickened beneath the regenerating crystalline shell lining the creature's insides. Streams of mana crashed against its body, and streams of mana were reabsorbed. The crystalline structure layered over the Tarrasque's flesh brightened, but Marikos was finished with channeling the magic back at the world-ending monster.

When he returned to Shiv and started pulling at the Orichalcum tower again, the Deathless noticed he wasn't even breathing heavily, despite the chaos that had just unfolded.

"Just a moment, dear friend!" Marikos shouted aloud, drowning out the surrounding carnage with his voice. "I will see you liberated in—" The Dragon-Knight's voice broke off with a shout of pain as something burst through his upper chest. Thin tendrils of black lightning wriggled through Marikos's armor like it wasn't there, and Shiv responded instinctively. He tried to freeze time—considered going out of context. It didn't work. His temporal shell was broken, and his body was still near empty of vitality. If he tried to sink into his Vitae right now, he might fizzle out of existence.

Shiv found himself weakening his Toughness, trying to get free, desperate to aid the Dragon-Knight—

Something impacted his Pillar of Orichalcum so hard that it shattered altogether. Shiv groaned as the column of reddish-gold protecting him burst into dissolving motes. His sternum broke and folded inward. A few of his ribs were driven through his flank. A searing line of pain opened along Shiv's insides. The many brutal beatings he'd taken over the past month or so told him that he had a ruptured liver. More spikes of pain passed through his flesh as what felt like vibrating hooks burrowed into him.

Fury exploded inside Shiv. He poured it into his Inertial Overdrive as he tried to get his bearings, increasing his Reflexes to figure out where that bastard Stormhalt was. The Deathless's focus promptly shattered as a savage yank tore all the vibrating hooks out of his body thereafter. A howl of suffering escaped him as he felt wounds open across his flesh and within his soul.

"Godsdamned Ascendants' Animancy bull—" Shiv's rage-infused gibberish died on his lips as Stormhalt passed over him, screaming at the top of his lungs. Instead of being some kind of scheming backstabber, the City Lord sounded utterly terrified. The Deathless began to fall from the air, and he noticed that the Tarrasque's crystal-flesh had fused shut around Stormhalt's tree of midnight-black lightning.

Where Master-Avatar Havel Stormhalt had hovered high in the Tarrasque's jaws and was actively shredding the inner flesh of the beast apart moments prior, now he dangled like a marionette from the tree of lightning, swinging from place to place as the Tarrasque battered him with its tentacles.

Forking bolts of dark energy lashed out from Stormhalt as he pulled at everything around him, trying to avoid the Tarrasque's whipping tentacles. "Ascendantssss! Aid me! AIIID MEEEEEE!"

But Shiv could see the Ascendants were doing their best. The ethereal form of the large, storm-made man hovered over Stormhalt's shoulders, warding off the Tarrasque's brutal onslaught with a shield that pulsed with blasts of thunder. Without him, Stormhalt would have been diced down to mincemeat. Meanwhile, the City Lord was trying to pull himself away using cords of lightning spilling forth from his fingers. Lightning that was unfortunately connected to Marikos.

Shiv fought through his feeling of weakness and flung himself at Marikos. He slammed against the backside of the dragon. This caused his legs and hips to fracture as his post-pillar fragility came into effect.

"Motherfuc—" Shiv tried to reach out and grab a crack in Marikos's armor, but remembered his arms were dislocated. So, with little choice, he bit down around the crack and held on with his jaws instead.

It was around this point that Shiv also realized he had no felling idea how he was going to deal with the Tarrasque. He didn't even know how he was going to help Marikos right now. Without the Pillar of Orichalcum stilling the Tarrasque, it was starting to thrash about again, and the mouth-walls slammed against the Dragon-Knight, Shiv, and Stormhalt over and over.

Stars exploded behind Shiv's eyes with each blow. His teeth broke apart, forcing him to bite down with his gums. He tried focusing his Biomancy to assimilate his wounds, but the many wounds marring his soul nearly made him vomit from the sheer pain radiating through him.

Gods, everything has gone to shit.

Pillar of Orichalcum 216 > 217

The Challenger is watching with undivided attention.

The Deathless rolled his eyes. Yeah. Great. That's just what I need. A giant orc asshole's emotional support.

Just then, Stormhalt slammed down beside Shiv. The City Lord's armor was battered and dented. His nose was broken, his helmet was missing, and his gaze was unfocused—like he had a concussion. Drifting close behind him in the air were the frowning storm-giant and Kathereine, who slightly winced every time everyone inside the Tarrasque impacted one of the walls.

“So,” Kathereine said, smacking her lips together as she stared at Shiv. “Was getting battered to death inside the Tarrasque part of your plan while you distracted us? Because as far as plans go, this was kind of suicidal.”

“It was you or it, lady,” Shiv tried to say, with his broken mouth still wrapped around Marikos's armor. The sounds he made were far less intelligible.

Despite this, Kathereine understood him. She frowned slightly. “Really? You picked the Tarrasque over me.”

“It’s just trying to kill me. You were talking about slavery. Of course I picked the felling Tarrasque.” Shiv slammed back-first against a crystalline wall, and Marikos slammed against him. Pieces of the Deathless’s ribs were launched out from his body. He ignored the pain and continued making angry mouth noises at Kathereine. “I don’t regret picking this thing, even if it felling kills me.”

Kathereine pressed her lips together, clearly amused. “But you don’t even know what it’s like to serve me. How do you know you won’t like it?”

“I’m already seeing someone,” Shiv hissed.

“Oh. Already? Isn’t young love delicious. Don’t worry, your sweetheart can come with you. But I fear after a conversation...” Kathereine licked her lips, and her gaze took on a predatory quality. “...they’ll be my sweetheart instead.”

Shiv’s jaw nearly fell open, which would have been very bad, considering his current predicament. There was something surreal about an enemy Ascendant threatening to cuck him while he was getting battered to death inside a Tarrasque, but here he was.

System, for fuck’s sake, just let me suffer strife. Not whatever the hells this is.

As if to grant his wish, the Tarrasque’s insides rumbled, and a hissing sound followed. Shiv looked past Marikos’s body—and saw a tidal wave of corrosive bile coming for them. A corrosive tidal wave that still had the half-melted bodies of Marikos’s fellow Dragon-Knights poking out from its surface.

Godsdammit System, I hate you so felling much.

Chapter 161 (II) Overwhelmed

“Brace!” Marikos cried out, holding his shield down. By this point, Stormhalt twirled around, and his body went stiff. An unfortunate Pathbearer fell past them and splashed into the tsunami of oncoming stomach acid. Her scream was cut off as she dissolved in an instant. Various other humans and orcs followed suit. “Brace!” Marikos repeated.

The City Lord began loudly praying to the Ascendants. The male Ascendant slammed his shield over Stormhalt. Kathereine just shook her head at the City Lord and chuckled. “Not quite so easy as you expected, eh, Havel?”

Shiv just sighed. He had a feeling this was probably going to kill him one way or another. As far as deaths went, he wasn’t looking forward to this one. But he decided to perform a final struggle for the hell of it.

Once more, his Pillar of Orichalcum formed, and Shiv dedicated everything to his Toughness. The wall of acid impacted Marikos and broke around him. It then crashed against Stormhalt and rebounded from his body in a blast of concussive force.

A waterfall of bile impacted Shiv next. It wasn't just the acid that assailed his barrier of Orichalcum; it was also the sheer surging force of the fetid fluid. Shiv gritted his teeth and willed himself to become even tougher. The red-gold aura around him solidified, and the pillar fully formed once more. Just then, he heard Stormhalt cry out as the sickening sound of breaking flesh sounded from all around.

Then there was light, the light of day, the canvas of a war-battered sky, devoid of clouds and choked with rising columns of smoke. A dense, jelly-like substance poured out from various wounds lining the atmosphere. The beginnings of mana-storms were spilling out, condensing high above. Pathbearers, debris, and the partially dissolved corpses of fallen Dragon-Knights left the Tarrasque in a cataclysmic blast of vomit.

Shiv took all this in as he spun through the air for a few seconds, before he finally impacted something hard below. He groaned as he rolled over, only to find himself still a few hundred meters above the ground, at the edge of some dark shape.

A sprawl of rubble stretched from horizon to horizon. He realized belatedly that he was looking down on what used to be Lost Angeles. The ancient ruins from humanity's pre-Integration days were no more. Now, all was dust, detritus, and corpses.

It was then that a much, much louder groan than his own sounded from his side. As he flopped his broken form over again, he found himself looking at the underside of Jessica Hawgrave's chin in the far distance.

The Legend lay sprawled out across the newly-formed wasteland on her back, with Shiv lying somewhere on her midriff.

Rivers of blood seeped out from the many rents lining her Inertium armor, and she wasn't the only one wounded. Her sword, Rusty, spilled Dimensionality mana out from the chips lining its edges, where it was embedded in the earth next to her. They both looked like they had been put through the ringer on the outside while Shiv and the others were getting smashed apart within.

And right then, a crash of thunder drew Shiv's attention upward. He saw City Lord Stormhalt rise higher into the air a few hundred meters away from him, the black tree of lightning sprouting from his body larger and more expansive than ever.

"Contemptible creature!" the City Lord choked out, trying not to gag as he wiped at his body. The insides of the Tarrasque reeked of something worse than death. "I will make you, make you..."

He couldn't quite finish his words as the Tarrasque standing in the distance began to chuckle. It had already fully regenerated, and once more, Shiv grimaced as he realized just how uncannily much it sounded like him. Godsdamn it, Sullain, why did you have to give it my face too?

Rather than attacking, the Tarrasque simply opened and closed its empty fists, looking at the survivors, what few of them there were left. There came a flap of wings above Shiv, and he suddenly felt himself get snatched up into the air by massive, clawed digits.

"Legend Hawgrave, Legend Hawgrave, get up!" Marikos shouted toward her head. "Now is no time for slumber, the enemy still stands!"

Hawgrave let out a girlish squeak of pain as she craned her neck to look at him. "I'm not sleeping!" she shot back with a groan. "I'm just trying to put all the broken pieces of my ass back together." A loud click sounded from her pelvic region, telling Shiv she might not be lying at all. Hawgrave moaned as she muttered something to her sword.

Rusty gave a low droning sound, and she reached up to pull out a massive bottle filled with fluid fire from within the weapon—the same potion she'd used on Shiv earlier.

A loud crackle echoed nearby. A few stray spells impacted the Tarrasque, but rather than breaking against its crystalline shell, they slid off entirely. It was like the Tarrasque now had a Frictionless Vector-type skill that worked specifically against mana.

"You gotta be fucking kidding me," Shiv breathed. Not only was this thing getting resistant to physical attacks, but it was getting immune to magical attacks as well. What did they have left? Shiv reached for his Psycho-Cartography in desperation, but the skill responded with almost conscious levels of exasperation.

Psycho-Cartography: What do you want from me? That isn't a person, that's a misplaced force of nature, given four legs, two hands, and your face by an emotionally broken Legend. This thing is an ontological asshole, and it desires to shit on you. Trying to talk at it will just end with your mouth metaphorically filled with shit.

As Shiv took in the skill's narration, another sigh escaped him. "What the hell's my life?" he muttered to himself. But then there came a flicker of excitement, and almost unwillingly, a smile pulled his lips apart. This was his life, the life of a Pathbearer. It was unreasonable, sometimes it was downright stupid, but he was here, and he was living it, right down to the bone.

Slowly, Hawgrave rose once again with a stifled whimper, and Marikos took flight. She wrenched her sword from the ground and angled it high, but Shiv caught sight of her face as cracked pieces of her helmet fell away. Strands of strawberry-blonde hair were matted to her forehead with sweat. Her features were ashen and grim, and her green eyes were bloodshot. She was no longer the relaxed, carefree woman who had been casually beating Shiv with flicks of her hand. Here was a Legend in a fight for her life, a fight against an overwhelming foe.

An overwhelming force that, for some reason, seemed content to let them gather themselves and get up.

The Tarrasque, strangely, was chivalrous enough to let everyone recover, or maybe it was simply driven by cruelty. Yes, that was it, cruelty. Shiv read the savage emotion in the creature's eyes, eyes like his own. It licked its lips, and its broken teeth fell away as new hulking wedges of jagged enamel replaced them.

A few more stray spells skipped off the Tarrasque's hide. Tentacles burst out from its body, and they began firing in different directions. Plumes of flame erupted in the distance, pounding spherical pockets into the already devastated landscape. After a second or two, no more magi—be they human, orc, or otherwise—casting feeble spells at the Tarrasque remained.

There was no one but Shiv, Marikos, Hawgrave, and Stormhalt left. Whether parts of the armies had fled or if they'd all perished entirely, Shiv couldn't say, but the battlefield was dead-silent now, aside from the brewing mana storms above, blotting out the sun.

The Deathless looked around in Marikos's grasp as the dragon rose further into the air, but he couldn't even find the chasm leading to the Abyss. He couldn't make heads or tails of where he was exactly, but he did know one thing: His objective was close at hand.

"Hawgrave," he hissed, "Hawgrave."

She looked at him, somehow making out his words despite the massive distance between them. Shiv decided to press his luck. "Look, I have a Quest, and it will let me pick a Legendary Skill Evolution if you release Blackedge."

Hawgrave immediately snorted as a disbelieving laugh escaped from her. "Yeah. Cute. But piss off, kid."

"I'm serious," Shiv said.

"Really?" she said through a faint tremor of pained giggles. "Really, you're going to try this with me now?"

"For fuck's sake, Hawgrave," Shiv snapped, his anger and frustration reaching a boiling point. "I'm trying to make myself more useful here. Just release the town. Move it somewhere safe. Or something."

"Somewhere safe?" she shot back, gesturing at the lifeless wasteland extending in every direction.

A low rumble of delight escaped the Tarrasque. It seemed more than happy to watch them argue, at least for a while. Its white and red orbs flicked between everyone present, eventually settling on Stormhalt, who was drifting in the air at about the level of its eyes. The City Lord flinched back, but Shiv saw with his Farsight how his hands clenched tighter around the pitch-black mace he wielded.

The Tarrasque took a step forward. Havel swung. Strings of lightning impacted the Tarrasque's body. Yet, unlike earlier, the attack cracked through its shell but got stuck there. A thundering blast detonated along the Tarrasque's exterior, but it lazily stomped forth, utterly indifferent to the Ascendant's powers.

"By the power of the Endbreaker, I will strike you down!" Hawgrave bellowed. The ethereal silhouette of the large, storm-made figure thrust his spear high behind Stormhalt, and the lightning surging out from the City Lord's fingers grew ever darker.

Yet, even as the forks of lightning carved bloody grooves through the Tarrasque, it gave a very Shiv-like scoff and rolled its eyes. Then, it opened its mouth. "One... out of ten."

"Oh, shit,"

Shiv said. It didn't just look like him; it was starting to act like him too, and without Sullain puppeteering it, Shiv's voice was coming through after all.

Slowly, Marikos leaned toward Shiv. "Friend Shiv, I mean no offense when I ask this, but have you, perchance, had relations with a Tarrasque any time in your past?"

Shiv opened his mouth, but only a choked sound came out. Of all the things he'd expected Marikos to ask him, that was not one of them. "No," he managed. He saw that Jessica was looking at him from the corner of her eye too. "No, I don't even think that would work. I mean, I don't know anything about Tarrasques, but—No, Sulain grew that thing. Apparently so that it could fight you specifically, by the way."

Marikos paused and considered that. Then he nodded like it was the most natural thing in the world. "Yes, that makes sense. I, too, would prepare a Tarrasque to ward off someone as capable as I. It is simply the wisest strategy." For anyone else, that statement might have been arrogant. For Sir-Legend Marikos Valdemar, the Fortress that Soars, it was kind of like saying the sky was vast.

"Hawgrave," Shiv tried, calling out again. "I'm not bullshitting you. If you let the town go..."

"And where am I supposed to put it?" Hawgrave snapped back, her own patience fraying. "Look, even if I do believe you, what am I supposed to do right now, kid? There is no safe place. That's a motherfucking Tarrasque, and it refuses to die. I could drop the town anywhere, and the Tarrasque would rip it apart in a second. We need to put it down. That's our only option."

"Death—is nutrition," the Tarrasque said with a slightly stilted tone, expertly picking what looked to be a still-living orc stuck between its teeth out with the tips of two titanic claws. The small, gray body launched a final bolt of Dynamancy into the Tarrasque's left eye, and the monster grumbled as it crushed him between its fingers.

"Hey, Marikos," Hawgrave managed, eyes swiveling between the dragon and the Tarrasque as it very leisurely stomped toward Havel, who was still zapping it with his lightning. "By the way, are, uh, any of the other Faiths following you guys?"

"Following us?" Marikos asked, slightly confused.

"You know, coming up through the chasm, preparing to ambush the Inquisition? Legends from other Faiths? Ones that could maybe help us out a bit?"

"Ah, yes, that." The Dragon-Knight gave a venomous snort. "The feeble milk sops representing us at the assembly failed to reach a conclusion regarding how severe our response should be, or whether there should be a response at all."

"What?" Shiv gawked. "Sullain's out here trying to drag the entire Abyss into a war, and you guys couldn't come to a conclusion?"

"That was my response too,"

Marikos barked with dismay. "Now you understand my disgust for the bureaucrats, lawyers, and..." The Dragon-Knight gave a growl. "... politicians that plague the Abyss. A pox upon them, for they are a pox upon us."

"But Sullain was about to start a massive war," Shiv repeated, incredulous.

"Indeed," Marikos replied with a weary sigh. "But the First Blood was intent on demanding restitutions from the Composer and her representatives for their recent raid and several others before the Elders would ever intervene. Likewise, the Necrotech curs refused to recognize our holdings at Vivenyard. And Compact was serving everyone these long papers we collectively refused to read. Sir Alyssea nearly got into a fight with one of the Lords of Law, which caused further delays for us as well. In the end, I grew so disgusted that I gathered a few worthy Lances and left of my own accord."

Shiv blinked, but Hawgrave just nodded off by the side. Her colossal head bobbed as a tired expression was etched on her face. "Yeah, sounds like politics are just about the same just about anywhere they happen." She hesitated for a moment, then let out a quiet breath. "So yeah, there's probably no one coming for us, either. We're, uh, on our own." She shot the Dragon-Knight a look. "Well, we were on our own. Now... I guess we can face this bastard down together."

"Oh, now we're together," Shiv growled. "I'm sorry, but why weren't we together when you flicked me at the Tarrasque earlier?"

Hawgrave winced with shame. "Yeah, look, kid, sometimes, as a Legend, when you live long enough, you miscalculate."

"Miscalculate," Shiv seethed. "That wasn't a miscalculation. That was you being a—being a bastard woman. You're a bastard woman, Hawgrave. An utter bastard woman who does bastard things."

"Bastard woman," the Tarrasque echoed, running a long, barbed tongue across its teeth.

"Look, we can't really change any of that, so I say we stick together and—"

"Face me, vermin!" Stormhalt snarled. He shot through the air, and the lightning connecting him to the sky boomed with power.

"City Lord!" Hawgrave choked out. "Godsdamn it, shit, he just went right in!"

A sphere of lightning erupted from Stormhalt's hand, and it lashed across the sky. The Tarrasque responded by placing its two human hands against the ground, and it wiggled slightly with its hind section, resembling a large dog for a moment.

Then it vanished. Shiv couldn't even keep track of its movements.

His gut plunged as the Tarrasque rematerialized right next to Stormhalt.

"Flick," it said, remembering what Shiv had said a minute ago. And then it did just that.

Chapter 161 (III) Overwhelmed

The world shook and shuddered. The surface of reality resembled a pool struck by a falling boulder.

A screen of displaced force swept over Shiv, Hawgrave, and Marikos. Shiv remanifested his Pillar of Orichalcum as the Dragon-Knight held up his shield, and Hawgrave was driven back, only to twirl on her

feet and angle her torso behind the dragon. She suddenly shrank, becoming the size of an insect as she vanished between the cracks lining Marikos's armor.

Just then, Shiv also noticed how Marikos wasn't bleeding anymore. There was a large hole in his armor where Stormholt's lightning had run him through, but there was not even a trace of blood left over. The Deathless blinked. What kind of Toughness skill is that?

His momentary distraction broke as Stormhalt was launched across the horizon like a projectile. A burst of force cracked the ground, and the City Lord revealed he was still alive, as a pulsing wave of thunder kept him from the worst of the harm. Even so, he couldn't countermand the Tarrasque's overwhelming might. The lightning tree he was connected to snapped as well, breaking at the base.

As it shattered, the ethereal form of one of the Ascendants vanished altogether. Kathereine lingered for a moment longer, glaring down at the Tarrasque. It turned its red and white eyes on Marikos and Shiv. But just then, the Songbringer let out a pitched shriek. It was a piercing shriek, a melodic shriek. It was a shriek Shiv would give anything to hear. And it was a shriek that briefly left the Tarrasque stunned. Its eyes rolled, and its tongue lolled out. It resembled a large hound now more than ever, then. And slowly, Kathereine began to fade.

She turned and gave Shiv a final wink. "See you soon, precious."

And as she vanished, a shudder of cold terror passed through him. I must never, never let that woman get her hands on me, Shiv resolved mentally.

"Have at you!" Marikos cried out, not wasting his chance. His wings came ablaze with Pyromancy, and he tore across the air, dragging Shiv's pillar of Orichalcum across the ground. And the already devastated landscape parted in twain. Two streams of rubble exploded in opposite directions as Shiv found himself swung upward.

The top of the pillar connected with the Tarrasque's chin. A resounding crash echoed from the huge beast's head. It reared back slightly, but its crystalline shell suffered no damage at all. Marikos pivoted. He twisted his body the other way, using the recoil to his advantage. He didn't lose any momentum at all as he brought Shiv down on the Tarrasque's head. The beast tilted and still failed to respond. Whatever Kathereine did to it, it left it stunned for an extended duration.

Holy hells, Shiv thought to himself. I really do need to increase my social skills. What did she do to this poor, broken thing?

And suddenly, Hawgrave reappeared, her body swelling to the size of a small mountain, and then even larger as she dropped down from the skies above. Shiv didn't even know when she'd left them. The last time he saw her, she was hiding in a crack along Marikos's armor. Now, she went into a crouch as she brought Rusty down against the back of the Tarrasque in a downward thrust.

Her blade glittered, but not with Dimensionality. Instead, it simply shone with a pale light that became a perfect reflection of the world around it. Shiv caught sight of himself, of his body encased in the red-gold amber of his pillar. He also saw Marikos, his face bared back in a snarl, his wings ablaze, his armor flaking away from his draconic form. Hawgrave thrust down. Marikos swung Shiv upward.

The resulting collision had four parts. Marikos and Shiv were the hammer. The Tarrasque was the victim, and Hawgrave and Rusty became the nail. The top side of the Tarrasque's body burst asunder. Black blood erupted from its back, raining down upon the wasteland like a volcanic eruption. Only then did the Tarrasque react, its eyes blinking. It drew in a long, shuddering gasp, but went still as Hawgrave slammed her elbow down upon the hilt of her blade.

Rusty gave a bellow of its own as it surged and, with a final flash, punched clean through the Tarrasque, ripping it almost in half. It dropped lifelessly from the air, and Shiv let out a laugh of wonderment.

They'd managed to disable it! Now all he needed to do was get close to the Tarrasque and—

The monster let out a loud laugh as its eyes swiveled back in place. It opened its mouth, and it showed Shiv something: a large, pulsating organ fused to its tongue. The Deathless was flabbergasted. Did the Tarrasque just pull the vampire heart-moving trick on them?

“Bastard—woman!”

It reached up and seized Hawgrave by the leg. She let out a yelp, and the flaming wheels manifested beneath her feet. But as she tried to fly upward, the Tarrasque held her tight. Beams of magic impacted her armor and bounced off, but they still managed to stun her briefly. Briefly enough for the Tarrasque to get another hand around her other leg, and it swung her at the same time Sir Marikos swept Shiv forth.

The Deathless cried out, trying to get Marikos to pull away, but the Tarrasque was faster than they, and it used Hawgrave as a club of its own. She collided with Shiv's pillar, and it was then that Shiv discovered he wasn't quite tough enough to contend with both a Tarrasque's overwhelming might and the body of a True Legend.

Shiv's pillar snapped. His spine followed suit.

A chortle of pain came from the Deathless as the back of his head slammed against the top of his asscrack. To the merit of Shiv's Heroic-Tier Toughness Skill, however, Hawgrave let out a cry as well, and he was pretty sure her collarbone broke from the impact. "Shiv!" Marikos called out, but he was promptly interrupted as the Tarrasque swung again and swatted the dragon out of the sky using Hawgrave's enormous body.

But that blow woke the surfer Legend from her stupor, and she gave a vicious scream. She shrank, becoming impossibly small. In an instant, both she and her blade vanished, and the Tarrasque stumbled forward—off balance. A moment later, Hawgrave reappeared right behind it, and she hooked her hands along its hind legs as she threw herself over her head in a devastating suplex. The Tarrasque was wrenched off its feet and slammed down on its back. An earthquake shook the world, and Hawgrave crashed hard atop its body, maintaining side control as Shiv caught sight of a flashing piece of metal in her hands. Rusty had shrunk to the size of a knife, and she was currently using it to gouge the Tarrasque's body apart.

"It's in its mouth!" Shiv choked out as he spun through the air. A tentacle extended out from the side of the Tarrasque, and a beam struck Shiv dead on the head. Death came to him instantly, but more pain soon followed. A lance of spearing Psychomancy carved a screaming absence into his mind, and it only paused when Marikos returned, bringing his shield to bear. The Dragon-Knight's voice droned on, sounding like a muffled cry underwater to Shiv's addled mind as he called for his friend to get up.

Godsdamned magical bullshit—

Pillar of Orichalcum 218 > 220

Gravitic Wrestler 171 > 172

Vitaemancy 84 > 86

Vitality Drain 70 > 74

Outside Context Problem 71 > 76

Then there came a crushing pressure. Shiv found himself pried free from where he existed. There was but a sliver of him left, a single string of vitae, and a few hundred meters above them, the Tarrasque re-materialized from a pocket of spilling static-black. It descended with its fists reared back and clasped together, and it brought them down to deliver a final blow upon both the Dragon-Knight and Shiv.

Marikos swept his shield up, and though the Tarrasque was overwhelmingly powerful, though it was many times the Dragon Knight's size, when its hands met Marikos's shield, the latter barely even budged. Every bit of force Marikos suffered was absorbed into the shield and was promptly unleashed back at the Tarrasque in an explosive cone. The titanic beast let out a desperate cry as it was flung through the air.

Shiv failed to keep track of it, but it jerked to a violent halt as Hawgrave swung her blade sideways like a bat, trying to split it in half. She managed to embed the edge of Rusty in the back of the Tarrasque, but a fourth of the way through its body, her titanic blade got stuck, and the Tarrasque slammed both its hands together.

Waves of cascading gravitational force ripped everyone away from where they stood. Hawgrave shrank once more, but the Tarrasque ripped itself free from her blade with a little bit of help from one of its Biomancy-infused tentacles and swung its hand out wide

A blinding detonation of force and mana followed, and when Shiv triggered his Farsight skill, he saw Hawgrave sail further and further toward the horizon. Much like Stormhalt earlier, she was back in her human form, over half a meter shorter than Shiv at baseline. And considering how limp she was, Shiv suspected she was unconscious.

Less than a few hours ago, she'd utterly demolished Shiv using only her fingers. But before the Tarrasque, even a Legend was helpless.

"Fuck," Shiv whispered to himself.

The Tarrasque eyed Marikos briefly, but then it turned, and it growled something that made Shiv's heart stop. "Destroy... Blackedge. Kill... Roland Arrow."

The final orders delivered to the Tarrasque by Sullain were still in play, and its body became drenched in Dimensionality mana as it tore across distance and began pouring itself into Hawgrave's blade as it flew after its wielder.

Rusty gave out a metallic cry, and Shiv began draining vitality from the world, lest he perish from the cold. Just then, he thought back to what he'd seen Sullain do earlier. How was he doing that? How did he draw so much vitality away from me? He was using the world somehow. So how does it work? Godsdammit, System, you never give me enough time to—

The Tarrasque's form shrank as it cast itself into the blade in an injection of mana. Shiv halted time, only for his temporal shell to shatter as a wave of golden mana tore through him. A radiating gasp of disbelief escaped Shiv. Through the chaos, he failed to notice Marikos's temporal wardings, and what incredible wardings they were.

Of course, he had to find out the worst way possible at the worst time possible. He didn't have time to blindly emulate whatever the world's greatest Mage had been doing earlier. They needed to rip the Tarrasque out of that sword before it got to Blackedge. Without any better options, Shiv wrapped his formless body around the Dragon-Knight's arm.

"Marikos!" Shiv cried out with a burst of Psychomancy. Using the badly frayed Magical Skill proved to be a mistake. The projection of mind mana barely left him before it burst apart into a spray of nothingness. Shiv's Vitae form curled in on itself as he doubled over in pain.

"Where now?" Marikos cried, briefly eyeing Shiv with a look of surprise. "I will hunt and seek our... Uh, Hero Shiv? Or... string-things that resided inside you? Are—are you the actual Hero Shiv? Never mind that. Our quarry is away, and we must follow!"

And then Marikos questioned no more as he dove through the air, reaching for the Tarrasque's hind legs. But the behemoth was impossibly fast, and with a final burst of static, it vanished. Marikos clawed nothing but open air, and a feeling of near despair spread through Shiv. Then Hawgrave's blade flared with its own Dimensionality mana, and it cast out a stream of magic, swallowing both Shiv and the Legendary Knight.

A moment later, they were falling, dragged through a tight tunnel that pulled them into a vast pocket dimension.

As they re-emerged, Shiv resurrected, having sapped a bit of vitality from Marikos. He intended to apologize as soon as he came back from the dead, but if the Legend noticed, he didn't show it. A new dimension came into form around them, but it was ultimately little more than empty space comprised of black static.

Shiv immediately activated his Pillar of Orichalcum, and Marikos let out a cough of surprise as he noticed Shiv's restored form clinging to his shoulder. He reached up and grabbed Shiv as they sped through the black expanse. Shiv tried to look around, but soon, his Toughness exceeded his strength, and he found himself only capable of staring forward. He didn't know where the Tarrasque was—

“Above!” came a deafening bellow. Rusty's warning barely saved him and Marikos. The Dragon-Knight swung his shield upward, stopping the Tarrasque dead. The world-ending monster reached over Marikos's shield, but he struck at the Tarrasque's wrist using Shiv. The pillar rattled the Tarrasque's joints, and though it didn't sustain any visible damage, the force of the blow still knocked its grasping hand aside.

Just then, the pressure vanished, and Shiv realized they'd still been in transit a few moments ago, not fully in the dimension itself.

Marikos swung Shiv left to right, slamming him into the Tarrasque's head, face, body, and legs. "By my honor as a Pathbearer," Marikos cried out, "and by my deeds as a knight, I will send you back to the pit that spawned you! I will break you here with fire in heart and friend-club in hand!"

A surge of Pyromancy flowed over Shiv, and Marikos began to wail on the Tarrasque, using both might and magic at once. This proved to be a winning combination. As Shiv impacted the Tarrasque now, he started cracking its body. Something about Marikos's flames, impossibly hot as they were, weakened the Tarrasque's external shell, shattered its Magical Resistance, and did something to its crystalline flesh.

It did something bad enough that Shiv cracked the Tarrasque more with every subsequent hit. Marikos was swinging harder now, getting only faster. Shiv closed his eyes and swallowed back mouthfuls of vomit. It took a lot to make him nauseous, but the Dragon-Knight achieved it with little effort. Shiv activated the Song of the Vigilant, maintaining his focus not for spellcasting, but to keep getting tougher.

Even so, the arms race between the Tarrasque's body and Shiv's Heroic-Tier skill was a hopeless one. As the Tarrasque cracked, it healed, and as Marikos swung Shiv harder and harder, the Pillar of Orichalcum began to sustain damage, and Shiv himself thereafter. The soul-wounds inflicted by Stormhalt's lightning earlier still wept with free-flowing blood.

Part of Shiv's shoulder cracked, and then he felt one of his lungs deflate after a particularly heavy impact. Marikos let out a deafening bellow as he brought Shiv down, intending to drive the Deathless through the Tarrasque's eye. But massive hands clamped around Shiv, hands infused with the power of gravity. Shiv stopped dead. Marikos gave a cry of exertion, but he couldn't move Shiv at all.

Marikos adapted, blasting a beam of concentrated fire into the Tarrasque's eye. But when the haze cleared and the smoke parted, the Tarrasque was glaring at them with a large, toothy smile on its face. It let out a chuckle, and it twisted its hands in opposite directions. Shiv's skill cracked, and part of Shiv's skull shattered as a wave of gravitational force flowed through his Orichalcum, slamming into his body. He let out an agonized shout, and he heard Marikos call his name.

The Dragon-Knight released Shiv then. He held up both hands, and an orb of pulsating fire materialized between them. It was an overwhelmingly powerful sphere of Pyromancy, bright enough that its very presence consumed this static world in light, and hot enough that Shiv felt his flesh char even within the pillar.

In that moment, he remembered something that Valor had told him, all the way back in the Umbral Wilderness.

"Pyre of the what?" Shiv had asked.

"It's something that evolves from Pyromancy," Valor had replied. "His flames are a bit more potent than most—closer to the fire of the sun than anything found on this world, if Marikos is to be believed."

The Tarrasque prepared to unleash its explosive Magical Resistance once more, but Marikos still had one more trick up his sleeve. He slammed his foot against Shiv's pillar, and he drove Shiv into the Tarrasque's eye as soon as it released the Deathless. The behemoth let out a cry of surprised pain, and Marikos flung his arms downward, channeling the sun-bright incandescence of his Pyre of the Wounded Dawn directly into the Tarrasque's body.

"Burn now, creature of day!" Marikos cried, his voice resounding with power. "Burn, and learn to fear the light as we do!"

Chapter 161 (IV) Overwhelmed

The Tarrasque's magical resistance detonated, but it failed to get through Marikos's stream of power. The Dragon-Knight let out a cry of pain, and Shiv realized he was shredding his own magical field to sustain this effort.

Then, as the last trickles of flame left Marikos's hand, he clasped his claws together and he wrenched his arms apart.

Shiv caught sight of the Tarrasque. It was burning. Its outer shell was melting away. And then there came a detonation of fire. A blast so bright it seared spots into Shiv's vision.

But the detonation didn't simply scatter in every direction; it centered on the Tarrasque, collapsing inward around the massive creature, consuming it entirely. Large sections of its body dissolved, becoming faint particulates in the dark. Yet, even through that blinding carnage, Shiv could still see the Tarrasque's eyes, one red, one white, both affixed on him. No, not on him. They were looking past him for some reason.

The Tarrasque unleashed a pulse of gravity, trying to move forward. Marikos shuddered in disbelief. He tried to cast another spell, but he gasped and curled in on himself in pain as the full tax of mana strain finally hit him. The magical fire burst away from the Tarrasque, along with chunks of its body. Shiv felt his Pillar of Orichalcum hold, but only briefly.

Finally, it was too much for him as well. He shattered, and the only reason he survived was because of his escalating Toughness. He was launched like a pebble across the static horizon now—he and Marikos both. Shiv twisted through the air several times, and things whirled around him.

Pillar of Orichalcum 220 > 221

All was black and static, the color of Dimensionality mana, and he couldn't differentiate up from down until he finally caught sight of something. A brief flash of color. Shiv tumbled several more times, and there came an expansion of blue in his vision. Was he accelerating toward a lake of some kind?

His question was answered a moment later as he impacted a dense shroud of water. He plunged through, his speed going fast enough that the surrounding liquid turned to steam. As he shot out the other side, he struck a second layer of water, but then he inhaled, finding himself breathing in oxygen.

Shiv was confused. For a moment, he thought he was concussed and suffering from brain damage right now. But just then, he noticed a few hovering wings curl around him. Vector wings. Shiv wanted to speak, but only a pained wheeze escaped from him. Something was wrong with his left eye, and his right was nearly swollen shut as well. He struggled to hold himself up, but ended up collapsing backward.

More hands caught him. Uva's pale face came into his field of view. Shiv tried to grin, but his face refused to comply. He let out another slight wheeze as she took stock of his injuries. A brief expression of horror escaped her, and Shiv knew he must have broken something bad. She didn't usually give things away like that in the heat of battle.

As Shiv lay on the ground, he grew faintly aware of several other people around him. One of whom was a particular orc with a pair of spectacles on his nose.

"Your armor's destroyed, I see," Helix noted.

"Fuck the armor," Shiv croaked out. "I'm destroyed." He took in everyone's faces, read their concern, and strangely, he felt like a very lucky man. "I came to save you guys, by the way."

Adam offered him a look of utter astonishment. And then came a roar. The roar of a creature that just wouldn't felling die. Shiv gagged as a flood of Biomancy flowed through his flesh. His bones began to reconnect. His torn sinews reknit. Shiv's ripped skin came back together, and his organs felt reinflated. Slowly, Shiv felt his left eye get dragged into place, and a blurred splotch occupied part of his vision for a time.

"Help me up," Shiv managed. "Felling thing just won't stay dead."

Shiv extended a hand, and Adam let out a grunt, pulling Shiv up. Uva hooked her arm under Shiv's body, and she heaved upward as well, her form turning into the shape of a lever to help him stand up quicker.

"What in the bloody hells?" another voice commented off to the side. Shiv blinked. He slowly turned and noticed Georges was here too.

"Georges?" Shiv gasped. The chef stared at him and offered him a tired expression as he drew in another lungful of his cigarette. "So, how's it looking out there?"

Shiv knew Georges well enough to know when the man was nervous, and right now Georges was as terrified as Shiv had ever seen him. Even so, that didn't stop the head chef of the Swan-eating Toad from making light of things.

"Not too good, Chef," Shiv replied, clutching his ribs. "It's a bit worse than the seafood night with the allergic town guard from four years back."

Georges did a double-take at that. He shook his head and violently coughed. "Good felling fuck. We're probably buggered then."

"Maybe," Shiv replied. Another bit of his skull snapped back into place. "But I intend to make a bloody fight of it." Shiv and the closest thing he ever had to a father shared a look. Terror, pride, hope, and more were exchanged between them. No words needed to be spoken.

"Well, off you go, then," Georges said, trying to sound nonchalant. "Just try not to fuck it up."

"Yes, Chef," Shiv said with a grin.

Another roar came from the distance, and just then, Starhawk's perch began to shiver and groan. Shiv felt faint waves of gravity pry at the structure, and he activated his Farsight just as both of his eyes were fully healed.

In the vast distance, the Tarrasque clawed its way toward them, and... was it slightly dimmer than before? Had it died earlier? Had Marikos's magic killed it? Shiv hadn't noticed if it did. At present, it only had one arm, a fourth of its torso, and its head, but it was regenerating quickly, and it was tearing through Dimensionality to fling itself at Blackedge, though Rusty was trying to hold it back to the best of its ability.

Waves of force crashed out from behind the Tarrasque's body, as if folds of water grinding over the surface of the beach. A cone of flame was beginning to curve around the top of its form, and Shiv realized what it was trying to do. It never did get to finish its meteor bombardment earlier.

This time, Blackedge had no remaining wards. It had practically nothing left, and Shiv was out of ideas. He couldn't get close enough to siphon vitality from the Tarrasque at all. And before its overwhelming and ever-growing power, he had no idea how he was going to last.

"I accept."

A loud, reverberating voice suddenly sounded from behind Shiv, and the Deathless turned, only to see that there were even more people in the room. Valor was there, along with a small group of humans Shiv didn't recognize.

They all wore the Arrow family armor, however, so it didn't take much for him to deduce that they were friendlies. Whisper, Mortar, and Tequila were there as well, and there were a few other orcs Shiv couldn't recall the names of. Nearby was Rose, trying to support an extremely sickly-looking Roland.

The Town Lord met Shiv's gaze, and Shiv glared right back at him. But not far away from the Town Lord was a massive, ethereal silhouette. An ethereal silhouette that looked fainter than the previous two Ascendants that Shiv encountered, but its presence was unmistakable.

This was the Starhawk himself, and he was the one that just spoke.

"I accept your offering, Sister Uva."

"You do?" Uva replied. She sounded surprised.

"He does!"

the Dreamtaker cheered uncharacteristically to Uva's voice. "JOYOUS UNION!"

Shiv looked between her and the Starhawk, utterly lost as to what they were talking about.

"My lord!" Roland choked out. He looked like he was on the verge of doing something drastic. His eyes were wild, desperate. Shiv had a feeling that he was missing a great deal of context.

"Peace, my champion," the Starhawk said to Roland. "This is no slight against you. You have served better than I have any right to demand. But right now, in this moment, we face dire circumstances. And I have asked enough of you. It is time for me to offer something of myself. Trust and faith."

"Legend Valor," the Starhawk said, reaching out for the ancient Pathbearer. "You know the requirements for the ritual."

"And I will see it performed," Valor intoned. And immediately, spell patterns began to flash out from him. Spell patterns that circled around Uva.

"Wait," Shiv said. "What the hells is happening here? What are you guys doing?"

But before he could get any answers, a loud voice came from outside. "Friend Shiv, are you well? Are you alive?"

Everyone turned to see Marikos rise back up into the air. And where Shiv had been near death after the explosion, Marikos looked utterly unblemished of the flesh, despite his armor being absolutely shredded. Glistening, red and black scales glowed across his sleek form where obsidian plates had once been.

As he ascended, the Dragon-Knight stared through the shattered window of Starhawk's Perch, and he flinched back in surprise at the people within. Shiv took a step to his right, blocking Marikos's view of Valor so that they wouldn't have any issues.

The Deathless's reaction was instinctive, and he quickly pointed at the oncoming Tarrasque. "I think the bastard wants another taste of my stick and your flame, Marikos."

The Dragon-Knight gave a jubilant laugh as he shot the enemy a look, and then he groaned slightly. Though he sported no physical wounds, his spirit must have been raw. "I feel we will have to make do with your stick," Marikos mumbled. "My flames will take a while to recuperate."

But there came a flash of light beside Shiv, and Adam spoke thereafter. "That's fine. I have plenty of light to provide." Shiv looked down and saw that Adam's azure sun was infusing his newest Veilpiercer with a glow of gleaming blue and incandescent dawn.

"When did you get enough deaths for another angry arrow?" Shiv asked, pleased but curious.

"When you were off getting your head kicked in by the Tarrasque," Adam replied. "Someone had to cleanse the town of Necrotechs." Adam paused. "Well, I helped. Valor did most of the cleansing. But I still got my hundred." And he drew his arrow back. "And if you can give me an opening, I might be able to kill it again. At least for a few seconds. Maybe. After that..." Adam frowned. "We need to find a way out of this place."

Shiv looked past Adam's arrow, and he saw Roland's face. His eyes were wide with surprise. "Adam, what is that?" he asked.

"A lot has happened, father," Adam said with a wry smile. "Far too much to explain right now." He briefly offered the Town Lord a worried glance. "You should find someplace safe. You are in no condition for this fight. Mother, you should go with him."

And both Roland and Rose snorted. But their reactions weren't mocking. They simply found Adam very dear, judging from their expressions.

"There's nowhere to go, Adam," Rose said. "It's here or nowhere. When that thing comes for us—"

And just as the Tarrasque fully tore through the layers of twisting Dimensionality doing their best to delay it, a massive arm plunged into the pocket dimension. A massive arm that was encased in shuddering Inertium. It seized the half-regrown Tarrasque and ripped it out from the insides of the blade.

Everyone went silent. Shiv blinked. And then he flinched as Rose screamed next to him.

"Jessica! Jessica! You size-challenged, left-tit-smaller-than-the-right harlot, let us out of your fucking sword already!" she bellowed.

Shiv's mouth fell open at the stream of profanity leaving Rose's lips. And Adam shook with every syllable she spat. But the Deathless chuckled. He leaned in close to Adam. "Yeah. Don't they grow up fast?"

"Shut up," Adam breathed.

"What?" Roland muttered, utterly lost.

"Just feeling like a proud father," Shiv said wistfully.

Roland blinked harder. Rose groaned as she rubbed at her face, but didn't elaborate.

A pained noise escaped from the Gate Lord. "Why couldn't the Tarrasque have killed you?"

And before Shiv could respond with outrage, the pocket dimension began to shift as a crushing pressure passed over Blackedge.

"Yes!" Rose pumped her fist high. "Finally, she fucking responded. Jessica, I didn't mean the stuff about your tits!" As a tide of blackness crashed over Blackedge, everyone braced for the dimensional transition as they were ejected from the insides of the sword.

A moment later, there was light. Light and screaming wind as Blackedge briefly fell before striking the ground. A resounding boom shook the world as Rose and Roland struggled to keep standing, and a deafening roar came thereafter.

Shiv's eyes widened as he stared outside the shattered windows of Starhawk's Perch. "Oh... oh, shit."

In the far distance was Stormhalt again, pouring an ocean of crawling lightning over a struggling Tarrasque as Hawgrave—back in her gigantic form—dropped elbow after elbow on its partially healed shell.

But Stormhalt wasn't alone. Behind him hovered twelve more figures in the air, and beyond them loomed twelve illusory shapes that covered the horizon from end to end.

Twelve shapes.

Twelve Avatars.

Twelve Ascendants.

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

Chapter 162 (I) Descend [I]

Old.

You think I'm on the Auroral Council because I'm old? Let me tell you something about being old, girl.

The System doesn't want you to grow old. The System doesn't want you to extend your life beyond any point where you cannot provide a good fight or a good struggle. Age is correlated with two things in our existence. The first is competence. The second is power. Political power, social power, physical power, magical power, power of any kind.

You think I am corrupt? Yes. I am corrupt! I spit this openly. But that's not why I'm here. There were people who were so corrupt that it made me look like a saint. And they're all dead. Because corruption doesn't spare your life when a Heroic-Tier Fire Dimensional is summoned into your office before detonating itself.

So your assertion to me sitting on my seat in the council and being an Avatar to one of the Ascendants is true. I'm old, however, because I survived every attempt the System has made at finishing me. I survived the Plagues of 500. I survived the desperate battle to shut the Great Midwestern Gate. I survived the Pacific and Atlantic pincers pushing in to claim the land for the sea. I survived all these things while most of my generation did not.

The people I can remember from my childhood that still remain number only two, and one of them is no longer in this dimension. Yet we all hold positions of power because, yes, we are old. We are ancient. Centuries have passed, and in those centuries, I have spent longer at war than you have been alive.

That's not to say I don't sympathize with you. I've been there where you are, and I've stood there where you've stood. I've spat my loathing at an old fool that wouldn't lose his seat—and more often than not, I see his face in the mirror these days. It's disgusting. It's amusing. It's just another way for the System to mock us.

It is the sin of the old to think they are wiser than the young, but it is also the sin of the young to imagine they live in unprecedented times, that they are facing something which their ancestors have never encountered before. I proposed your idea of a total democracy before. I tried it. And I failed.

But it doesn't matter that you're telling me this. You do not care what I have to say. You are stubborn, and you believe you will succeed where many could not. So. You will have to learn the hard way. Fine. I'll teach you. I'll even implement some of your suggestions. But when you've learned, come back to me. And we'll see what you think then.

I tell you this now because I think you will be like me someday. An old, spent thing, sneering at the young, wondering why we never learn. And then I will have my sympathy. And you will have your understanding.

-Councilman Anthony de Diego, Legendary Pathbearer of the Twilight Republic and Avatar to Harlock the Midnight

Shiv's eyes widened as the Quest notification suddenly flickered before him. At the same time, he found himself triggering his Farsight skill, zeroing in on the Avatars and their Ascendants hovering in the distance. The so-called gods of his Republic loomed over the writhing Tarrasque. They were varied in shape and posture, though all of them glowed slightly, with that same incandescent mana currently leaking out from the cracks of Starhawk's Perch.

A kilometer away from Blackedge, City Lord Stormhalt unleashed a flood of pitch-black lightning. It spilled over the Tarrasque like a bladed spider's web. The edges of those forking bolts glistened and gleamed like blades kissed by sunlight, and every few moments they would thunder with explosive force as well.

But that did little to harm the crystalline-shelled behemoth, nor was it particularly bothered by Legend Hawgrave's slashes, knees, or punches. The Tarrasque gave a deafening bellow as it grasped the net of lightning coiling around it and began to pry, pieces of electricity shattering like chunks of rusted metal.

And it was then that the other Avatars sprang into action. The Ascendants they were bonded to flashed with incandescent mana, infusing themselves within their champions before Shiv could get a good look at their bodies. Then, about five hundred meters above the Tarrasque, a massive cage appeared—a cage formed from that same incandescence seeping from the Ascendants, large enough to encompass Blackedge and then some.

It fell from the sky just as the Tarrasque broke free from the electric net, shooting upward with a tidal wave of gravitational pulses trailing in its wake. However, the cube-shaped prison slammed down upon it as if a falling guillotine, and the Tarrasque's roar was cut off in an instant, as were the swelling tides of gravity.

The cage impacted the ground but didn't cause any damage. Instead, it seemed to absorb all force within itself. The Tarrasque struck and slammed against the insides of the cage. Shiv realized it was partially translucent when he could still see its massive shadow. Despite this, it didn't crack. It barely even shuddered. Every blow the Tarrasque inflicted upon the cage came with a muffled thump.

Then, it stopped.

All that could be heard for a moment thereafter was the whistling of the wind, but Shiv refused to let hope bloom in his chest.

His cynicism was rewarded a moment later as the Tarrasque exploded free from the incandescent cage with a flare of its discharging Magical Resistance.

Stormhalt was flung back. Hawgrave's blade, once lined with Dimensionality, was flayed clean of attuned mana and rendered but a colossal chunk of alloy. Even the Avatars hovering in the air flinched. But they recovered quickly, and before the Tarrasque could fully break free from the collapsing cage, one among the twelve tore across the air and delivered a brutal blow.

The Tarrasque's body was a fourth out from the ruptured cage, incandescent flames spilling free from the wound, while its head and right arm clawed outward, seeking easy prey.

The Avatar hit the titanic beast dead on the head, and for a brief moment, Shiv saw an imprint of an Ascendant manifest once more. They loomed over the horizon, loomed over existence itself, as their Avatar channeled their divine might. Seconds earlier, the Ascendants were faint, like the shapes of enormous statues seen through dense mist. Now, however, the Ascendant was ablaze with divine radiance, and Shiv saw their contours in detail.

They resembled a hammer-headed automaton, but rather than being a god, shaped from glory and triumph, theirs was a scarred, mutilated, and crippled visage. They were missing an arm, with wires sparking free from the mangled socket, jutting out where their left shoulder should have been.

The Ascendant's chassis was further riven with damage, and entire armories' worth of weapons were lodged through the Ascendant's form. Blades, spears, lances, arrows, and more. Flaming oil leaked out from the Ascendant's many wounds, yet it seemed to barely regard its injuries.

However, it was its remaining right arm that caught Shiv's true attention. Its right arm, a dense column of metal, was practically the size of its entire body. And as its Avatar struck the Tarrasque, the Ascendant drove said dense column down upon the ground. Shiv expected devastation. He expected the world to come ablaze with force and fire. Instead, the Ascendant's arm extended forward with a hydraulic whine as it slammed down upon the apocalyptic monster.

The Tarrasque's body was wiped from existence entirely as a perfectly spherical hole was punched deep into the earth below.

Only the monster's four legs remained, and they spilled down, crashing against the earth as a unified thud. Shiv's eyes widened in disbelief as he took a step back. At the same time, he saw a series of shapes approaching in the far distance. A new formation of Dragon-Knights was on approach, from what he guessed to be the direction of the Abyss chasm. It seemed that they had some support left after all.

"Cripple the Strongest," Valor said, interrupting Shiv's thoughts. The Legendary Pathbearer's eyes burned in recognition. "I remember it as well." He paused and looked at the Starhawk, who was also enchanted by the unfolding scene. "Its presence is a good thing, is it not? I recall that you were close with Cripple."

"I was,"

the Starhawk confirmed, though Shiv sensed an undercurrent of sorrow pass through the Ascendant's voice. "But closeness is often eroded with time and changing hearts. The arrival of my erstwhile companions is not a moment of deliverance, but a new danger. Legend Valor, I beg of you, finish the ritual. We must be away as soon as possible. We must descend the Abyss while my fellow Ascendants keep the Tarrasque at bay."

Shiv also noticed Marikos glaring at Valor's from just outside the shattered walls. He was about to snarl something at his old friend turned hated enemy, but Shiv's Psycho-Cartography Skill triggered.

Psycho-Cartography: Marikos is easily distracted and also clings to glory and martial virtue. He shouldn't be hard to manipulate, considering you two have bled together. Use your battle-tested bond to make him focus on something else.

"Marikos," Shiv quickly said as he shook his head. "I get it." The Dragon-Knight looked at Shiv, but the Deathless just cocked his head in Roland's direction. Marikos's eyes widened. "I get it. But later. Our victory and honor depend on it. Catch your breath and let your field recover. Eyes on the Tarrasque."

The Dragon-Knight shot a final glare at Valor, but he let out a chuffing breath in acknowledgment. "Only as a favor to you, Friend Shiv."

Psycho-Cartography 52 > 53

"Ritual complete," Valor declared as a final spell pattern snapped into place. He briefly offered Shiv an appreciative look, but before the Deathless could ask what the lich was doing with Uva, four interlocking

spell circles began to spin around her feet. Moreover, a stream of incandescence began to flow from the Starhawk into the Umbral Psychomancer, and she briefly gasped.

"Uva? Valor? What are you all doing?" Shiv demanded, eyes jumping between the spell and the Starhawk.

"The Ascendant and I have come to a temporary arrangement," Uva said tersely. "Town Lord Arrow is currently unable to bear the burden of being the Starhawk's Avatar. I shall assume that mantle for the time being. Until we are finally spared this danger."

For a few seconds, Shiv's mind was absolutely blank. "Huh? But why you? Why not Adam?" His head swiveled over to Adam, and the Gate Lord somehow seemed more uncomfortable than even his father.

"He is unable," Uva answered on Adam's behalf, "and not because he does not wish to serve. It is a matter of skill and power. A skill he does not have and a power he cannot bear."

"But you can?" Shiv asked, incredulous. He was about to ask why, but he realized the answer as he saw the shifting colors in her eyes burn ever-brighter. "The Dreamtaker. Is that why you can sustain the Ascendant's power?"

"A hound of intuition you are, Undying One," the Dreamtaker purred from within Uva.

"Sister Uva of Weave," the Starhawk began. A heat swelled up within the room as a rush of radiant mana cycled between him and the Umbral. In the distance, another impact shook the world as the Ascendants continued unleashing their power upon the Tarrasque. "Do you swear on your skill and soul to abide by the terms of our arrangement and to serve with nobility and truthfulness to deliver my people from harm?"

"I do," Uva replied without any hesitation. "May my Unique Skill chip and shatter should my oath become a lie."

A beat followed. The Starhawk's posture sagged.

Psycho-Cartography: He is as worried about this arrangement as Roland is. But the Starhawk is truly desperate, and he wants to use this opportunity to escape the Tarrasque while his fellows keep the monster pinned.

"So our bargain is struck," the Starhawk replied gravely. "We have no time for greater ceremonies or grander promises. So you have heard my oath, and I have heard yours. By my power and your word vows, our spirits are to be bound. Accept my divinity into your Eldritch Skill and become the channel through which I can touch the world."

The spell patterns beneath Uva's feet spun faster and faster. She came aglow with fire, and the Starhawk's form dimmed. The divine mana seeping from the cracks lining Blackedge flowed into her as well. A thrumming pressure filled the badly damaged town. A tremor of power rushed along beneath Shiv's feet, surging toward Uva.

As he beheld her, she grew brighter than ever before, and a new color mingled with the hues of the Outside. The color of the Ascendants. The color of stolen divinity.

But then came a flash of blinding color from the direction of the battle, followed by a piercing shriek from the Tarrasque. First came red, then there was white. And soon the Tarrasque returned, reforged and renewed. It roared up into the sky with fury and defiance as it resurrected once more.

And falling from the air before it was the smoking husk of a broken automaton. Cripple the Strongest's presence was altogether absent from the horizon now. A patch of sky was vacant, and through ashen clouds of war spilled the first dappled rays of sunlight in minutes.

"Cripple's Avatars rarely live long," the Starhawk said quietly. "Another will come to replace the fallen." The traitor Ascendant briefly glanced at Uva once before continuing. "You think you understand the magnitude of your sacrifice. But I fear you do not. There are consequences for letting the divine inhabit you. For you. And for me as well."

Shiv watched the dead automaton fall just as Hawgrave drove her blade down upon the Tarrasque's back. It was sent to its stomach, but its crystal shell flashed, and the gigantic Legend found herself flung backward through the air. The Tarrasque was evolving and adapting at an impossibly fast rate.

Kind of like me, Shiv thought. Godsdamn you, Sullain.

The Tarrasque proceeded to make him feel worse as it bellowed another declaration against the remaining Ascendants. "I am the chef! You are the food!"

Georges did a double-take. His eyes snapped to Shiv. "The felling fuck did that thing just say?"

But the Tarrasque wasn't done. It twisted around as massive spells crashed down against its body. The world shook. Swelling blasts of light and devastating skills bathed the apocalyptic monster in destruction. A claw woven from the blackest lightning closed around the Tarrasque while Hawgrave descended to drive her blade against the side of its head.

It barely registered most of the hits. And now it was glaring at Blackedge, its eyes of red and white glistening like stars even through the chaotic canvas of charge wrought by the Ascendants.

“Shit,” Shiv hissed. He stomped a foot down on the ground and cracked the floor some more. In the same instant, he branded a temporal echo of himself upon the flesh of reality so he could easily return to the Perch later. When he finished, he shot out from the room with a pulse of force and triggered his Pillar once again. “Marikos, you feel recovered enough to get bloody?”

The Dragon-Knight reached up and seized Shiv. A large, predatory grin lined his draconic features. “I was waiting on you, my little comrade.” Once more, he wielded Shiv as if he was nothing more than a large rod rather than an unmovable tower of ever-escalating Toughness. “But our enemy has grown most durable. I fear we will need a clever strategy.”

“If you can pin it in place, I can kill it at least once,” Adam said, looking down at his smiting arrow. Then, he grimaced. “But Shiv. We can’t trust the Ascendants.” That admission left Adam with no small amount of discomfort. “Even if we join the fray, they will come for the Perch. At least some of them will.”

“Yeah, Kathereine and... Halsur,” Shiv said, managing to remember the name of the storm-forged giant. “I know. I had a run-in with those two assholes earlier. The point isn’t to treat them like allies. The point is putting the Tarrasque down and making sure they know the Dragon-Knights are on their side. Maybe that’s what it will take to finally end the damn Legendary skill reward.”

“Legendary?” Roland whispered. The Town Lord’s voice was raw, but he looked at Shiv with overwhelming suspicion.

The Deathless grinned sweetly at his former captor and overlord. “Yeah. I got a certain Quest down in the Abyss that offers me a pretty nice reward. Turns out, if I break the siege at Blackedge by dealing with

Sullain and prevent a war between the surface and the Abyssal nations, I'll be able to choose a Legendary Skill evolution. Pretty nice, huh?"

Roland's right eye twitched slightly. A low wheeze of pain and misery escaped from him.

"Father? Father, are you alright?" Adam asked with genuine concern.

The noise continued, and Shiv's smile kept growing. "And don't worry about Sullain. I got his ass already. So. I think all I need is to make sure the Ascendants don't get into it with the Dragon-Knights. And this is my best idea—to help them put the Tarrasque down while you guys take this chance to escape. I already got a temporal echo planted, so I should be able to blink back later. Marikos—"

"Worry not for me," the Legendary knight declared. He held his Shiv-stick out at the Tarrasque that was currently being pinned by a massive, fiery hand. "I will see the Tarrasque slain, or our lifeblood shed fully in the attempt."

"Sounds good," Shiv replied without complaint.

Uva's mana strands snaked through everyone else present within the Perch as well. Incandescent flames danced along the hair-thin tendrils of mana. What's more, what used to be a skill for telepathy now possessed a weight—a tangible power. Shiv could feel her mana pressing against his flesh, digging its way through the walls and breaking more pieces of glass. As the incandescent mana flowed downward, the ground shuddered, and a sudden force sent Blackedge jerking upward.

"I can feel Blackedge," Uva said, with a gasp of effort. "This Perch... It doubles as a mana core as well."

"It is more than that," the Starhawk said. "Far more. Do not overchannel. My divinity will pass through you at a trickle until your Eldritch Skill acclimates fully."

"Understood," Uva replied. Something escaped her and struck Shiv—a feeling of immense strain. She shot a look at him and gave the slightest of shrugs. "I must confess that I am not sure how I'm going to explain this to the Composer. The presence of another god connecting to me on top of the Dreamtaker is... going to make things troublesome when I inevitably have to write a report of our experiences."

Slowly, Blackedge began to ascend once more. Below the Perch, people on the street stopped what they were doing as their heads turned to regard the peak of Roland's spire. Several people cheered the Town Lord's name, ignorant of the fact that he was too wounded to be of service, and that it was an Abyssal that was currently serving in his stead.

"Well, I can tell her that we were shit out of good and bad choices," Shiv said telepathically. "And that all we could do was select from different flavors of shit." A beat passed between them. "Get everyone left in Blackedge to safety, but don't let the Starhawk fry you."

"Go deal with Sullain's abomination, but don't let it kill you for good," she replied. "Same to you, Legend Marikos."

The dragon let out a rumbling laugh as he held his Shiv-stick high. A flame lit at the end of the Orichalcum pillar. A small ember that was gradually growing brighter and hotter. "Your concern is heard, Daughter of the Composer. But I do not intend to be the victim in this tale."

“Hold. A final matter.” Valor’s interruption drew a snarl from Marikos, but he refrained from doing anything. “Shiv. Should you gain access to the Legendary Skill reward, do not select a skill immediately. It will draw you out of the fight and pull you into the depths of your soul. When you Delve, there is no guarantee when you might return—or if you will return at all.”

“What? So even if I get the Legendary Skill, I can’t just pick it and evolve?” Shiv grunted in annoyance but let it go. “Right. Fine. Don’t even know what skill I want to evolve yet. I’ll just need to figure out how to kick the Tarrasque’s ass as a Hero. Marikos. Let’s get the bastard.”

“Away, and unto the fray once more!” Marikos roared. The air around him shook. Adam winced, and Rose’s eardrums erupted in sprays of blood. The Gate Lord called out to his mother—but Helix simply cast a spell at her without even looking. The orcs were moving too. Whisper was already missing, and Mortar was stomping toward the edge of the Perch’s spire. And then Shiv was moving, the town vanishing behind him in a blur. “Dragon-Knights! If you draw breath, come forth to battle! Let fire reign! Burn yourselves down to cold ashes, for our lives are but passing, but our vows stand eternal. Semper Fidelis! Semper Fidelis! Semper Fidelis!”

And as the Legend chanted a phrase Shiv didn’t quite understand, his voice was echoed from the skies above.

Besides the new group that had almost reached the battlefield, surviving Dragon-Knights descended from a sky darkened by the haze of battle. Many of them were wounded and maimed, missing limbs or even trailing entrails. Few had intact weapons, and their magical fields expanded from them like tattered veils.

But still they came, heeding Marikos’s call.

“Semper Fidelis!”

“Semper Fidelis!”

“Semper Fidelis!”

Including the new arrivals, there were maybe three dozen full Lances left. But on their backs, Shiv noticed other figures hanging off of them. Burly figures of gray skin and murderous glee. They chanted along with the dragons while waving their own arms and spells in the air.

And that was enough to get a laugh out of Shiv.

Despite everything, Shiv found himself proud to be their Insul.

“Remember: I just need a moment,” Adam said to Shiv. “Just stun it for an instant if you can. Or get one of the Ascendants to do it. It’s still thrashing and moving too fast for me right now, but I think they can do it. But after that death, I fear my effectiveness will—”

“Shoot a hundred orcs,” Shiv replied casually. Just because he was proud to be an Insul didn’t mean he forgot what they were. “That should fill you back up.”

A pulse of surprise leaked over from Adam, but it flattened to immediate acceptance. “Well, nothing they wouldn’t do to us, is it?”

“Nope,” Shiv said. “So have fun and feel free. Hey. Marikos. See if you can pin me against the Tarrasque for a few seconds.” He directed his attention to his Drain Vitality Skill once more and narrowed his eyes at the faint film of vitality lining existence. “There’s something I want to try again...”

Chapter 162 (II) Descend [I]

Legend-Councilwoman Veronica Chandler's right eye twitched as she watched a Dragon-Knight fly by just a few hundred meters below her. Atop the head of the Descender was an orc—one who was loudly laughing and swinging what looked like two fetuses still attached to their umbilicals. The orc jumped off the back of the dragon just as the Tarrasque lashed out with a whipping tendril. A crack of force followed, and the Dragon-Knight's maimed form blurred toward Veronica.

She teleported it into her personal Plane of Healing. She was probably going to be talking with the Abyssal nations after this mess, and she wanted that dialogue to be as clean and cordial as possible, because she really didn't want to fight another bullshit war because of Roland Arrow, his Ascendant, or anyone else, for that matter.

But if one of the Five Faiths was responsible for dropping a world-ending monster into her territory and ripping one of her towns out of the sky, the Yellowstone Republic was probably going to have to take a trip downstairs and massacre an unreasonable amount of people for a certain number of years once more.

For someone like Veronica, there were few things less sexy than watching her nation's economy plunge deep into the red because of some bullshit. Bullshit that Veronica suspected her own Ascendant was involved in.

And that was what annoyed Chandler the most: the possibility that her own god might be the cause of all this madness.

Approximately half an hour ago, Veronica was dealing with matters of supreme importance, trying to settle the feud between two noble houses. It was a particularly ugly feud with the whole "some fool's son killing another poor fool's daughter" thing going on, but she really couldn't afford to lose either of them or to have them fight a civil war under her nose. The Republic was already besieged on all sides, and the last thing she needed was the City Lords of Delphia and Old Salem to come to blows, especially with the Jotun getting real cute up north with their border raids.

And right as she was about to bully both sides into giving each other concessions, a Quest notification appeared before all their eyes. A World Quest notification.

Somehow, someway, a Tarrasque had spawned within the Yellowstone Republic's territory. An Undying Tarrasque at that. That was when Veronica called out to her Ascendant, but found her own insides strangely cold and empty. Veronica knew that feeling. That was a feeling of her goddess being absent. And by absent, Veronica meant that she was probably with that poor idiot, Stormhalt.

Katherine the Songbringer had a great many Avatars. Practically all the Ascendants did, though most of them were intended to be expendable. All of Cripple's avatars were expendable, for that matter. But then there were the hidden Avatars used to perform acts of questionable fuckery they didn't want the Auroral Council or their fellow Ascendants to know about. One such hidden avatar was City Lord Stormhalt.

This made Veronica a mite-bit more furious, as she was supposed to be Katherine's true Avatar. But being Katherine's true Avatar was less an honor and more like being married to someone that was a chronic cheater who never bothered with protection. Thus, the relationship between Veronica and Katherine was less "faithful and master" and more "bug-chaser and chief STD receptacle."

Which made things even messier for Veronica, considering Katherine was her grandmother.

Seconds passed. The Tarrasque made a run at Blackedge again, but Stormhalt crashed down upon its head with his mace. The skies above flashed with a stratospheric tree of black lightning, and Halsur, the Endbreaker, stood at the tree's apex. He held his great shield high. With a brutal blur of motion, he spiked it down, and the lightning tree thundered like never before.

A rush of electricity slammed into the Tarrasque and exploded in forking branches, driving it through the air. Its crystalline shell cracked, blood spilling free from its colossal form. But even so, the Tarrasque grasped the lightning and launched itself free from the tips of the branching bolts. It healed a near-instant later and teleported in a burst of Dimensionality.

And it would have gotten to Blackedge immediately if Veronica hadn't made a swiping gesture with her hand. Dimensional mana flooded freely from Veronica's body, flowing as easily as a breath due to it practically comprising her body by this point. Rather than ending up at Blackedge, the Tarrasque was diverted through a hellish series of inner planes hidden within Veronica before she cast it back into existence, where it had just been.

The Tarrasque crashed down on the ground with melted eyes and severed legs. Its scales were pooling off its flesh in oozing dollops, but then a second later, it shook itself like a wet dog and recovered once more.

"I forgot how much I hate fighting these freaking things," Veronica muttered to herself. Then, she frowned as she looked to her left and right. Ten other Avatars and fellow Councilmembers looked on with flat expressions of annoyance or frustration. "You know what would make it easier for us to kill it? Working together."

"Call her, Veronica," Legend-Councilman Anthony de Diego replied with a sigh. The man was still dressed in his purple bathrobe and reeked of whiskey and sandalwood. His aged face was covered in stubble and lined with exhaustion, and his eyes were currently only faintly ablaze with the power of the divine. He hovered in the air beside Veronica, and past him, she caught the other Avatars nodding in agreement to

his words as well. "If I let mine inhabit me right now, a new fight might occur—and I'm not talking about a fight between me and the Tarrasque."

A groan of frustration escaped Veronica, and she reached out for Kathereine once again. "Songbringer? Songbringer?" Veronica's lip twisted in a near-snarl, and she invoked her Legendary Rhetoric. "Ahem! Songbringer! I, your Avatar, need your aid!"

Her words reverberated across Integrated Earth as if reality were a long tunnel. At the same time, the Tarrasque managed to break out and backhand Stormhalt once more—only for Halsur to intervene and turn aside a blow that should have rendered the City Lord to something less than paste.

The massive beast shredded through the forest of black lightning—only to have its head struck from one side by Hawgrave and the other by some Dragon-knight swinging a giant Orichalcum pillar like a baseball bat.

Veronica did a double-take. Is that a guy encased in that pillar?

Still no reply from Kathereine. Veronica rolled her eyes. "Hey? Grandbitch? You there?"

And that immediately did the trick. A rush of divine flame combusted within Veronica, and the ethereal form of a frowning woman blinked into existence beside the Councilwoman. "Veronica. Dearest. What seems to be the matter?"

A blossom of happy feelings ignited inside Veronica's chest, but she immediately suppressed them, refusing to let the Ascendant get away with this mess. "Grandmother. What, and I do mean this, but what the thorough hells did you do?"

Katherine placed a hand on her chest, a hand lined with so many rings and exquisite pieces of jewelry that she seemed ready to go to an ostentatious gala instead of an active war zone. "What did I do? Why, Veronica, how can you blame this on me? I am just as surprised by this brazen attack as you are."

Veronica glared at her Ascendant. Just then, she felt a tingle of heat dance across the nape of her neck. She twisted her head sideways, and a jet of flame missed her by the barest margins. Even so, a few strands of her long, ebony hair were fried. Veronica glared at the small flames dancing at the ends of her hair while Katherine reached out and extinguished the fire between two fingers. Then, she ruffled Veronica's hair until it was as good as new; unburned, uncharred, and with a healthy gleam.

The Ascendant smiled at her Avatar, but the latter refused to do anything other than glare.

Veronica pointed a single finger, not at the Tarrasque, but at a badly damaged town over a kilometer away. A badly damaged town that was slowly shivering its way through the air, trailing both divine mana and the colors of what seemed to be the Outside as magical emissions in its wake. As the war raged on nearby, it was clear that the people of Blackedge were making a getaway—and for the Abyss, no less. "Explain to me how things got to this point. And also, why can I see a bunch of dead inquisitors scattered across a wasteland that wasn't here a day ago if I just squint my eyes a little?"

Katherine put her hand over her mouth as her eyes widened in concern. "Oh no, is that Blackedge? How—"

"Grandma," Veronica interrupted, spitting the word through clenched teeth. "Fuck me with a burning sword, but I know you had a hand in this. I felt you missing earlier. I know you were inside Stormhalt."

The Ascendant opened her mouth for a moment, but she didn't say anything as Veronica simply glared harder. It wasn't a lack of power that stopped Kathereine from continuing her lies. No, she was an Ascendant, and they were far beyond even Legends. But Veronica had a special edge over Kathereine that few other people did. For one thing, Kathereine actually cared about Veronica's feelings and their relationship.

So. Where Stormhalt was a useful idiot and some people were sacrificial pawns, Kathereine had to deal with her granddaughter using honesty.

Or something almost approximating that.

"Alright, fine," Kathereine said, rolling her eyes. She held her open hands up as if in mock surrender. "First, I didn't destroy the town."

"Wow, dove right over the lowest bar possible," Veronica sneered. "Good job. Did granddad do it?"

"No," Kathereine replied. "That is mostly the doing of the Tarrasque. A terrible beast summoned by rogue Necrotechs."

"Rogue Necrotechs," Veronica echoed flatly.

"Yes. I can hear your doubt, girl, but I'm being entirely honest. Just use your skills if you don't believe me. But perhaps the better thing to do would be to secure Blackedge. We wouldn't want the noble

Starhawk's Sacred Phylactery to be lost to us, would we? That would be a crippling blow to the Republic. Especially with the Town Lord's current status in doubt!"

"Explain," Veronica said.

"Blackedge was invaded and captured by Necrotechs earlier! Though Master Arrow fought hard and well... Why, I shudder to imagine the potential fate of the survivors if we don't intervene on his behalf and secure the town ourselves."

Some part of Veronica's bullshit senses were still tingling, but they needed to find out about Blackedge's actual situation anyway. That meant getting to the Perch and finding Arrow so they could speak to the Starhawk.

If Arrow was still alive, that was. There weren't that many ways to stop an Ascendant from possessing their Avatar in desperate times.

Veronica held her right hand high, and a swirl of mana manifested along her arm. It flashed with Dimensionality, and she clenched her hand into a fist. Rings of spiraling mana twisted and coiled above Blackedge. The spell patterns grew impossibly complex, and the Dimensionality infusing the innermost ring pulsed to life. A massive gate tore open, a gate that blotted everything above Blackedge.

"Prismatic Guard," Veronica called out. Her voice echoed across the battlefield, but it was not a shout. It was not a bellow. It was simply a declaration that all could hear, that was carried across the winds, as if the world itself served as her messenger. Legendary-Tier Rhetoric was a useful skill in more ways than one. "March forth and secure Blackedge! Cleanse the town of all non-citizens and deliver aid to those who require it!"

And through that grand gate came a flood of Pathbearers. Aerial Calvary came first, then dense wedges of vanguards, followed by the Republic's vaunted Poly-Magi Corps. And before the Prismatic Guard entered the fray, drawn over from the capital well over a thousand kilometers away, Veronica made a final declaration. "Also, mind the Dragon-Knights, and..." She glared at the laughing, fetus-wielding orc as he shot past her again.

Yeah, she wasn't putting up with that kind of stupidity.

"...you can cut the orcs down if you find any present."

And the orc learned the sting of Veronica's Rhetoric as he was cleaved in twain along his midriff.

Reward: Select a Skill to Evolve to Legendary-Tier

Chapter 163 (I) Descend [II]

The main goal of Project Deathless is multifaceted.

The first and most obvious one is creating an entity that can make the System choke on its own eternal urge to constantly engender war and strife.

An entity that simply won't die, no matter what world they find themselves in, no matter how high that world's ambient mana threshold.

An entity that constantly grows, death after death, until it exceeds the limits of its world and eventually forces an incursion to occur.

I theorize the eventual and inevitable outcome here to be a World Quest targeting my Deathless. After all, what is a world supposed to do against a threat that is rapidly growing beyond its means to contain?

Should such a thing happen, I will be able to use my Deathless to further my goal of discovering the absolute ceiling of power within the confines of our Integrated existence. In my travels, I have witnessed worlds so utterly choked with mana that even our Legends would be regarded as common Pathbearers there.

But I do not think they are the ceiling, either.

No. I think that we can go far higher, assuming we can drive the System to the very brink. Perhaps we will be able to match the System's constant escalation and see if it can be over-strained or taxed to a breaking point.

Even if this does not occur, I will still be able to use my Deathless to further cultivate my own skills and power while gathering useful data for other associated projects.

The second purpose of Project Deathless, however, is something born of my personal desires.

I lost my mother some years ago. The System took—the Great One took her during one of their terrible dreams. But what the Great One takes, they also remember, and so how dead is she, truly?

How dead is anyone truly within the eyes of the System once their life ends? The System that records all, that uses our stories as the fuel of its miracles and infuses us with these evolving powers shaped from the struggles we face and the trials we overcome?

And so, if a skill is a fragment of a soul, and the skill resides in the person, could you perhaps distill enough of a person to see them reborn through incubation within a skill?

Perhaps so. And perhaps Rose Van Erren will be among the first to return from this—

-Incomplete notes recovered from Udraal Thann's abandoned laboratory

Success: Select a Skill to Evolve to Legendary-Tier.

Shiv didn't notice the reward notification initially.

It was kind of hard to focus when Marikos was using him to bludgeon the Tarrasque. The apocalyptic beast was assailed from all sides. As Shiv impacted its skull once more, his Pillar of Orichalcum glanced off, like a metal rod impacting a meter-thick bunker made from titanium. Even so, the blow was hard enough that the Tarrasque turned its head, just enough to expose a slight crack lining its crystalline shell.

A slight crack that Hawgrave drove the tip of her colossal blade into.

Once more, her greatsword shifted. It became smaller and thinner, and it slipped between the cracks before the Tarrasque's regeneration could kick in. Black blood erupted out from the fissure, and the great beast let out a bellow of absolute agony.

But after a moment, the howl turned into a cackle of pained laughter. "JUST A LITTLE PRICK!"

"What the hells is wrong with you?" Hawgrave shouted back in its face. It reached out and drove a fist against the ground. Marikos shot upward, bearing his shield high. A resounding impact shook the world as he parried a descending gravitational attack.

The Tarrasque growled and pushed down harder. The gravitational waves intensified—but then two snaking ribbons of black lightning speared into its eyes. Blood erupted from massive sockets. The Tarrasque reeled back, blinded. Then, Marikos dropped Shiv down on the monster's back once more as the other Avatars unleashed their powers as well.

Waves of flame, force, ice, and more washed past Shiv and hammered the Tarrasque. A massive hand formed from dust pressed down on its body, and it let out a rageful cry.

"GOING TO SHOW YOU—"

Its jaws were slammed shut by a wave of force, and they pinned it just long enough for a certain special arrow to tear out from a dimensional rift and spear through its body.

The Tarrasque's flesh ignited once more, and it let out a choked gasp. That very moment, Hawgrave's sword, Rusty, exploded in width and length. The Tarrasque's entire body was split in half.

But it was already dead, and so the vitality it spent to return was paltry.

If nothing else, it gave Shiv the opportunity to finally rip some more of its vitality away. "Marikos! Plant me in its flesh, now!"

Shiv didn't know if the Dragon-Knight heard him, or if Marikos was simply responding based on pure instinct, but it worked out regardless. Shiv's pillar sank deep into the Tarrasque's bloodied carcass. A wet squelch greeted the base of Shiv's pillar as the Dragon-Knight slid him into oozing organs, and he reached out from his Orichalcum with his Vitality Drain Skill.

Shiv focused. He stopped time, and thought about what Sullain did earlier. He thought about how the Vicar managed to shift Shiv's vitality over into that sheen that lined the world itself.

The Deathless pulled, and faint streams of red lighted up his pillar, infusing him with a dose of life force. But though the warmth rushing into Shiv felt intoxicating, he was still drinking it in at a trickle, suckling water as if a man trying to drink in the sea. This wasn't going to work. Shiv knew that, but he kept trying. He focused on the vitality. He pushed everything else aside.

He ignored how his temporal shell shattered after eleven seconds, how the Tarrasque was resurrecting with a flash of white and red. Ignored how the Ascendants were hammering it with powers and skills that made the world shake, shudder, but not break.

Despite all their power, the Avatars inflicted little damage upon the world and maximal harm upon the Tarrasque. Yet through it all, their blows barely affected its vitality. It only cost the Tarrasque a sliver of life force for it to resurrect, and that annoyed Shiv the most.

When Shiv died now, he didn't lose any more vitality due to his Vitaemancy skill. As a Revenant, though, he'd immediately started bleeding vitality everywhere and fading from existence. Why and how the Tarrasque managed to skip this inconvenience made Shiv more than a little pissed off. He used that anger to fuel his Vitality Drain, and still the amount he pulled into his body barely increased.

But rather than being demoralized, Shiv thought there might be a point to that. This wasn't a matter of raw power. He was still missing something. Something based on understanding. He needed to adjust the way he was doing things.

Time to try something new.

So Shiv went against his instincts. Instead of pulling vitality from the Tarrasque, he tried to deliver a trickle of vitality back. Yet he found himself unable to. His threads of Vitae were frozen within his pillar, unable to overpower his Toughness. They quivered around him. And the vitality inside his body began to twist and flow. Shiv's eyes widened.

He noticed how everyone else seemed to emanate vitality in a faint aura. That was why they seemed like fires to him. But his vitality was fused with his soul, contained within it. And now, thanks to his Vitaemancy field, it didn't even leak from him. But everyone else? They were an imprint. They were radiating life force as if it was heat, letting the emanations spill over into the world.

But the Tarrasque was rather like Shiv. It was a closed System, a silo unto itself.

Then he considered the fourth party in the vitality equation. Existence wasn't a silo. Or even if it was, it was far wider and grander than Shiv was. And though he couldn't touch the Tarrasque or break off any of his Vitae within its body, the presence of reality, of the System and all Integration, it embraced Shiv. He existed within its structure, and he was only a part of the totality, as was the Tarrasque. So when Shiv drained the Tarrasque once more, he willed the flow of vitality to avoid him.

He used his skill to bend

the path of the Tarrasque's lifeforce, curving it away from himself and into the faint sheen lining reality.

And just as the Tarrasque snarled and reached out to rip at Shiv—who was still staked through its resurrecting body—its vitality shuddered and hemorrhaged. For the first time, Shiv felt his Vitality Drain Skill suffer a strain like never before. When he sapped the Tarrasque to feed himself, to restore his own life force, it was like sipping water through a straw. But as he diverted the currents of the Tarrasque's vitality into the embrace of the System's Integration itself, it was like he was muscling a river aside, trying to divert its flow, and Shiv was only barely strong enough to guide it.

A pulsing burst of brilliant red washed over the world, and the Tarrasque shook like animal in the middle of bleeding out.

Drain Vitality 74 > 76

"No, no, away, STOP!" the Tarrasque whimpered. It sounded like Shiv, but toward the end, its voice distorted, and a faint hint of Sullain lingered there as well. The Deathless would have flashed a feral smile if he wasn't encased in his own Orichalcum.

The Tarrasque's body shuddered. A rain of incandescent needles punched into its eyes, slipped between its teeth, sank into its joints, and detonated. Part of its skull imploded briefly, but then it regenerated, and it launched itself up from Shiv with a burst of gravitational energy. The Deathless heard Marikos cry out as the Tarrasque knocked him aside, slipping free from Shiv's pillar with a wet squelch.

The ground cracked as ash swirled high, forming an obfuscating curtain that masked where the apocalyptic beast fled. But Shiv could still see its life force, and it was dimmer than before. Noticeably dimmer. What's more, Shiv's Vitality Drain had also advanced a good two levels from the attempt, and it was then that his building thrill hit an apex as he noticed the reward notification still flashing before his eyes.

Select a Skill to Evolve to Legendary-Tier.

"Yes!" Shiv hissed. "Godsdamn finally! That took fucking forever." Though it hadn't been that long before, it felt like a lifetime ago when he'd accepted the Composers Quest. He'd changed so much since then, and he was about to change so much more. As soon as this fight was done, that was.

That dampened his thrill a bit, realizing that he couldn't just pick the skill right now, due to the risks posed by Delving. Even so, he had arrived. Shiv was almost a proper Legendary Pathbearer now, or someone an inch away from becoming a Low Legend, considering he was figuring out the true potential of his Vitality Drain, a skill that had never felt like it lived up to its Legendary Tier, up until now.

The moment felt surreal. It felt—

"Prismatic Guard."

A crisp and deafening voice shook Shiv to his very bones. He heard it inside his skull. He heard it outside with his ears. He heard it absolutely and clearly. He would have heard it even if he was deaf.

"March forth and secure Blackedge. Cleanse the town of all non-citizens and deliver aid to those who require it!"

A feeling of worry passed through Shiv. Uva. Valor. The orcs. If the Republic was moving on Blackedge, how were they going to respond to the Abyssals? How were they going to handle the people there who needed aid? And what were they going to do if the town just didn't stop? The Starhawk was pretty determined to reach the Abyss, and he probably wasn't going to just give up. Not when he was so close.

Shit. That's going to be a problem too. What about the Descenders?

"Also, mind the Dragon-Knights, and..."

The crisp voice paused for a moment. A flash of incandescent power was followed by a shriek from the Tarrasque. A flicker of motion shot past the corner of his eyes.

"...you can cut the orcs down if you find any present," the speaker finally finished. Shiv's eyes widened ever so slightly. It wasn't ideal that the Ascendants were planning to kill his orcs, but it also wasn't unexpected.

Frankly, Shiv expected his orcs would enjoy this too, even if it meant their certain and horrific deaths. Of all the things he had to worry about, they were the least. He could still hear some of them cheering and laughing, hounding the Tarrasque alongside him.

Another surge of motion jolted past Shiv's periphery.

"It comes again!"

Marikos roared. Then the Dragon-Knight was moving so fast that Shiv failed to react—failed to notice until Marikos had already driven the Deathless against the skull of the Tarrasque once more. A resounding crash shook the world, and Shiv focused, making himself even tougher.

Despite this, his Heroic-Tier Toughness was beginning to falter. The Tarrasque was practically immune to Hawgrave's blows by now, and the Ascendants' skills only inflicted superficial damage for the most part. The only thing Shiv could impart on the beast now was concussive force as Marikos swung him with his full might. It would have to be enough to stun the Tarrasque, enough to hold it in place until he—

The Tarrasque unceremoniously slumped dead against Shiv's pillar. It crashed down upon the ground like a crumbling mountain, displacing even more dust.

A wall of ash was displaced upward, coiling around Shiv, but he noticed something. The Tarrasque was utterly devoid of life force. It was empty and cold, which meant that it wasn't the actual Tarrasque at all. The Ascendants couldn't have killed it enough times to extinguish the rest of its vitality in that short of a period. Not when their other attacks were only getting skin-deep. But where was the monster?

Shiv tried to grit his teeth but failed to even move his lips. Something's really felling wrong right now.

"Aha!" Marikos shouted with glee, twirling Shiv high in a flourish of triumph. "The beast falls! Victory is ours!"

"Marikos!" Shiv cried as he struggled, but his Pillar of Orichalcum left him pinned in place. He couldn't even twist his neck to look around. "That's not the Tarrasque! That's not the Tarrasque! It's a decoy corpse! It's still alive! It's..."

But the Dragon-Knight didn't get Shiv's warning in time. The ground beneath them exploded upward in a geyser of ruin and shrapnel. A massive fissure split the land from horizon to horizon, and what seemed like a living mountain rose into the sky and crashed fist-first against Marikos's body. A series of sickening cracks sounded from his torso, and the Legend was wrenched free from Shiv and thrown high up into the air.

Hawgrave tried to respond—only for the Tarrasque to hit her with a contemptuous gravitic backhand. A blast of force tore a pocket in the dense cloud of ash choking the battlefield. The Republic Legend and her blade both yelped and vanished skyward from the impact. And then the Tarrasque swept its hands wide as it unleashed cascading walls of shrapnel toward the Ascendants.

As Shiv fell, he watched the Tarrasque open a gravitic well in its hand to pull Marikos back toward it. Then it gripped him with two hands and twisted. A horrific snap followed. Shiv screamed from inside his pillar, trying to get at the Tarrasque, trying to—

Then the Tarrasque smashed Marikos's limp form against Shiv. The Deathless felt a crack form throughout his pillar, and then things broke inside him as well. He barely noticed. His eyes were locked on Marikos. His body twisted over itself in a nauseating heap. The front side of Mariko's torso was now sprawled against his tail, and as the Dragon-Knight fell, rivers of blood trailed out from between his teeth and out his very eye sockets.

Shiv didn't know if Marikos was slain, if his vitality was merely flickering or fading altogether, and he didn't have time to make sure. The moment he extended his mana-hydra to pull away some of Marikos's wounds, the Tarrasque caught him as well, and despite all his durability, Shiv was much easier to break than a Legendary Dragon-Knight.

"The beast falls," the Tarrasque mockingly drawled, mimicking Marikos. It wrapped its hands around Shiv, but it didn't just use its brute force. Its body came aglow with shuddering tides of Dynamancy, and the Tarrasque's gravitational power was magnified a hundredfold. Shiv tried to go out of context, but the Tarrasque was faster than him. Far faster.

First, the cracks lining Shiv's Pillar of Orichalcum widened into chasms, and then they shattered altogether. A ragged cry of agony escaped from the Deathless as he felt the left side of his body get crushed to a bloody paste.

"Why is it always that side?" Shiv snarled in frustrated misery.

He tensed and waited for another death to follow—prepared to cast himself back across time the moment he resurrected back to Blackedge, leaving the Tarrasque to the Ascendants and the Auroral Council. But then a cage of black lightning crashed down around the Tarrasque's body, and the tip of its index finger was halted but a scant centimeter away from Shiv's falling form.

The Tarrasque shrieked with frustration, but its shriek was drowned out as a high and alluring voice began singing once more. Shiv's pain immediately faded. His wounds vanished as the song passed through him, as the song swallowed his agony and left only joy in its wake. That voice was beyond divine. That voice was holy. That voice was everything Shiv wanted and everything he would ever want in this life.

That voice—

Psycho-Cartography: That voice is ripping through your mind and slowly conditioning you into becoming a slave. Remember, the Ascendants aren't your allies here. Focus on something else, anything else. Collapse your eardrums.

And Shiv did as his Master-Tier Psychology Skill demanded. His heart screamed as the sweet melody was cut off, but the moment it vanished Shiv felt his senses return, and he noticed how vulnerable the Tarrasque was. Its eyes were wide and distant, and a strangely childlike expression lingered on its face. Through the chaos and carnage Shiv caught sight of a small and slight body, and despite his ears being burst, a giggle washed through him, the giggle of a child.

"You finally got him held still, Halsur!" a young girl's voice said cheerfully. Her words washed through Shiv from the inside out, and unlike Kathereines, whoever this was filled Shiv with a sense of impending dread. "Well, looks like it's time for me to play doctor. I want to find out what the insides of a Tarrasque snack look like..."

And then Shiv struck the ground, his body left fragile after his Toughness skill broke in several places. His bones tore out from his flesh in compound fractures, but he didn't let that stop him for long. He fed his injuries into his Biomancy, and they ignited around his field, rendered into crystallized spell patterns.

"Alright, I just need—oh, shit!" Shiv gagged as a waterfall of oil-like blood smashed into him. A waterfall of blood followed by a plunging shadow. Shiv's eyes widened as the Tarrasque's corpse toppled forward. He went out of context before it could crush him, and soon, he found himself standing within a wide chasm lining its throat. It was like someone managed to garrote a literal mountain open. How did they get through the crystal and everything else underneath? This cut is clean and deep...

He had no idea how the Ascendants had managed to wound the Tarrasque this badly, but he wasn't going to complain, especially since it gave him the opportunity to continue experimenting with Vitality Drain. He flung himself deep into the Tarrasque's wound. As he swam through the mess, he soon found

himself pressing against a cracked wall of crystal. There was so much blood washing over him that it was hard to tell where what was or even which direction he was heading in, but he simply needed to make contact, and as soon as he did, he began funneling the Tarrasque's vitality into existence once more.

He bent the flow of the Tarrasque's lifeforce, and this time, he saw in full what it looked like. Instead of all the red rushing into him, it began to swirl atop his palm and coil around his body. Shiv was a singularity for the vitality, but he wasn't its ultimate resting place. Instead, he was just a guide now, and he groaned as he continued channeling his power, letting the vitality dance around him in an unending current.

The vitality flowed constantly, ceaselessly, forming a maelstrom of bright-red essence that slowly began to dissolve into existence. Every bit of brightness that was drained out from the Tarrasque nourished the world itself, and that faint sheen of vitality layered over everything became ever denser.

Chapter 163 (II) Descend [II]

Veronica flinched back from where she hovered in midair as a massive maelstrom of vitality began to swirl within the downed Tarrasque.

"What the hells is it doing?" she asked her Ascendant.

"Hm? Oh, well, I don't know, dear. Do your best." Kathereine's words were nonchalant, but Veronica knew her grandmother well enough to know the woman was distracted. A breath of annoyance escaped the Councilwoman, and she shaped another spell.

A dome of Dimensionality emerged over the Tarrasque, but the world itself was beginning to tremble with overflowing vitality now. Veronica's eyes widened as brilliant colors of life force began to turn and

turn. In the distance, she saw ruptures close. She saw mana storms vanish. The air felt fresher. Reality somehow grew denser, and most astonishing of all, Kathereine's presence grew fainter.

The other Avatars were affected too. Their incandescence was reduced. The divine mana leaking from their bodies, hinting at the presence of their Ascendants, grew muted.

And thus, it was Kathereine's turn to ask a question. "What is happening, Veronica?" Her voice was a hiss, and her sudden urgency just made her granddaughter roll her eyes.

"Who knows? We're not sticking around to find out." Veronica waved a hand, and, with a casual gesture, she and the other Avatars were relocated three kilometers away from the Tarrasque. They blinked back into existence just over Blackedge, standing atop the planar gate Veronica had manifested earlier to unleash the Prismatic Guard. In fact, the guard was still spilling out beneath them. The top, however, was entirely stable and perfectly suited to bear someone's weight.

Beside her, Anthony was standing up now. His jaw was hanging wide open, and he staggered out from his bathtub in a hurry, no longer treating this matter like an annoyance. The other avatars and Councilmembers were looking around as well.

"I got it! I killed it once!" a girlish voice declared with pride. The Waif danced past Veronica, flicking blood off her crimson-soaked body. Her golden pigtails spun in the air, and Veronica's right eye twitched as she felt some of that blood splatter against the back of her neck and her hair.

"The beast! Where!" A ragged gasp escaped Stormhalt as he shot up and swung his head from place to place. His flesh was badly charred. What bits of his body weren't burned were now raw-red, making him seem like a slab of uncooked meat. His armor was mostly melted as well.

He had been over-channeling Halsur's power, and now the Ascendant was looking down upon his Avatar in confusion. Black lightning flickered around Stormhalt, but every now and again, the electricity would briefly pulse blue or white, shifting back to mundane Aeromancy.

As Stormhalt's breathing calmed, he staggered to the edge of the planar gate they were all standing on and watched as the Tarrasque was drowned in a confluence of twisting bands. Curving gales of vitality were bleeding out from its form and sweeping into reality, dissolving in moments.

"What is it doing?" Stormhalt asked.

"I really hope someone else can ask me that question again," Veronica said through clenched teeth.

"What's it doing?" the Waif squeaked.

Veronica decided to do the mature thing and briefly teleported the small girl into a plane filled with clowns. The Waif hated clowns.

With punishment administered and silence restored, everyone just stared as the Tarrasque resurrected and groaned. A few kilometers away, Hawgrave plunged down through the distant clouds and made a pluming crater in the ground. But no one bothered to spare her a glance. Instead, all eyes were aglow with Divination and locked on the Tarrasque.

Yet, as Veronica gathered her power and sifted through the chaos swirling about the Tarrasque, she centered her focus on one single thing: the second presence still hidden within its body. The second

presence that was the composer of this maelstrom of life. It was that boy she'd caught sight of earlier, the boy encased in Orichalcum, the boy the dragon was using as a bat to beat the Tarrasque. Vitality was rolling around him in a hurricane.

"Oh," Veronica breathed, realizing what she was seeing. "He's doing the Funnel. Wait, who is he? Who are we looking at? Why does he have a Vitality Drain Skill?"

What's more, she realized that she knew the boy.

Without waiting for any of her colleagues to respond, Veronica triggered her Legendary Memory Skill. Time slowed to a near-halt outside as she fell into her Perfected Memory Palace. An endless structure of vast and impossible geometries in the shape of a shining mansion expanded around her, and she moved through her own recollections, taking every instance of memory she had of that boy and organizing them into rooms.

She knew his face. She'd seen it somewhere before, and suddenly, she started walking back some more, following her instincts. Doors upon doors upon doors materialized before her. She walked through many rooms containing other memories, other moments from her past, and finally, as she turned the knob of a wooden door, she stepped into a small office.

She slowly walked up to the wooden table at its center, where a pale woman who looked to be in her late twenties sat with her face collapsed into her hands. Her hair was dark and curled at the ends, as it was now.

Veronica looked over her younger self's slumped shoulders, where a file sat on the table.

Her eyes turned to regard the file, one that she'd received some 18 years ago.

It was a harrowing report. A tragedy had occurred at Blackedge, something beyond reason, something foul and black and nonsensical.

Two members of the Eclipsebreakers had turned on their trusted companions. Vera and Harlon Lowe had enacted a vile ritual, using Rose Van Erren and her unborn daughter as sacrifices.

Vera perished during the ritual.

Harlon was subsequently slain by Roland. Without a fight.

Veronica looked down at Harlon's face, and her gaze lingered for a moment. She had many other memories of him, but she let them go for now. No sense in dwelling on old pain while new miseries lurked on the horizon.

She stepped out of that room and returned to a recent memory, one from just a few seconds ago. It was of the Dragon-Knight flying through the air, swinging the boy around. Veronica halted time within her mind and regarded the frozen face of that boy, encased in Orichalcum.

As everything stopped moving, Veronica walked across the air and stood across from the subject of her interest to better study him.

"Yeah. He does look like you, Harlon," she whispered. "And a bit like Vera."

She sighed. The son. The child. The Omenborn that Roland refused to release. Godsdammit. Why did everything have to be so messy and complicated? She wanted to be back at the capital, dealing with feuding nobles. That was at least straightforward. But she was here now, and so she would have to unravel the situation. "So what is he doing here?" she asked herself.

"Curious, isn't it?" Kathereine said. Veronica looked to her right, where her grandmother stood, regarding the boy with a slightly lascivious expression. Veronica cringed.

"Grandmother, come on. Seriously? You're going to leer at the boy inside my mind?"

Kathereine rolled her eyes. "Oh, come now. If we cannot leer at people within our own minds, where can we leer at them?"

The Councilwoman simply stared at her Ascendant flatly. "Our minds?"

"Yes," Katherine said, briefly patting Veronica on her head. "After all, there's no you without me."

Veronica simply glared at her grandmother quietly before she scoffed and shook her head. "Okay. Well. At least we know who he is. Now. Other questions: Why does he have Vitality Drain? That's a Legendary Skill, and unless we're looking at some Legendary-Tier ratfuckery—" Her voice trailed off as another memory smashed into her the moment she thought of a certain Legendary Ratfucker who made her a rat-fucked mess during the war. "Udraal fucking Thann. Godsdammit. Okay. I have a guess."

“Hm,” Kathereine hummed with pride. “And that’s why you’re the first among equals on the Council, dearie. Now. What’s the guess—”

And as if to spill oil upon fire, a Quest notification appeared before Veronica’s eyes. It appeared before Kathereine’s eyes as well, considering how she suddenly stopped talking.

Hidden World Quest Activated: Slay Tanner “Shiv” Lowe, the Deathless, before he fully comes into his power and forcefully drives your world beyond its current Mana Stability Threshold.

Success: Integrated Earth will experience its next Ambient Mana Threshold Evolution. The [Mythical] Skill-Tier will become available to all Pathbearers within this Ambient Mana Zone; Evolve 10 Skills to Legendary-Tier.

Failure: A specialized Incursion will be triggered to destroy Integrated Earth in 10 years, 6 months, and 5 days.

Both Kathereine and Veronica stared at their notifications. Speechless.

“Grandmother,” Veronica said after a few moments. “Did you happen to get a Hidden World Quest, perchance?”

“Perhaps,” Kathereine replied. “And I might not be the only one.”

Shiv didn't even notice that he left his Outside Context Problem state as he continued draining the Tarrasque. He was too enchanted by the churning sphere of vitality dancing upon his right hand, by the vortex that constantly spun around him. A loud and thunderous groan shook Shiv's ears as the Tarrasque resurrected once more. Shiv's draining was briefly interrupted as the monster's vitality collapsed inward.

A heartbeat later, a dense wall of tissue healed over Shiv, leaving him pinned in place as if an insect sealed in wax. But he never stopped draining its vitality. He never stopped feeding its life force into Integration. Shiv was wrong earlier. The Tarrasque wasn't an ocean. The System was. The world was. The world had a life force of its own, just as Shiv, just as the Tarrasque, just as everyone else in Integration.

"Stop... Sucking..."

Shiv could hear the Tarrasque groaning, but he didn't heed it. He drained as much vitality as he could, and he relished as he watched its blazing life force dwindle

"Stop!" the Tarrasque cried out with a wrathful snarl, and waves of gravity suddenly rushed inward. Shiv didn't get a chance to respond. The crushing force passed through the Tarrasque and splattered him in an instant.

Pillar of Orichalcum 221 > 224

Gravitic Wrestler 171 > 175

Strider of the Unbending Path 151 > 153

Vitaemancy 86 > 89

Outside Context Problem 76 > 82

Vitality Drain 76 > 83

He died, and in the same moment, he shifted the path of the Tarrasque's vitality back to himself. Once more, his drain went from a flood to a trickle.

A trickle wouldn't be enough to save him. The Tarrasque's cascading waves of gravity continued to crash inward. They battered Shiv's Vitae form, like tsunamis of metal crashing against a house made from clay. Coldness exploded through Shiv in patches, and his insides went into freefall as he felt the telltale chill of final oblivion loom.

But Shiv wasn't going to go into that nothing without a fight. He drained harder, he drained, and he thought once more. He thought about how everyone else's vitality radiated, how they were always bleeding lifeforce into existence.

But I'm not like that, Shiv thought as he was reduced down to a chunk, then a rope, then a string, and then a fraying knot. I'm not like that. The frigid cold was seeping into his very soul, settling into the deepest part of his being. Can I be like that? Shiv thought. He tried to open himself, but he failed. He had

no concept of how to do such a thing, and it might be impossible anyway, considering the shape of his soul.

Yet he wasn't done. He thought about how the world sapped so much vitality from the Tarrasque. He thought about the flood passing into the world. So what if... What if I let the world drain from me? What if I do that while I'm still connected to the Tarrasque? What will happen then? Will... will it just kill me or... No. I have to try. It's death anyway if I don't.

As he felt that final piece of himself begin to come asunder, he knew there was no more time and no more chances. So he took a final risk.

And he discovered the true depths of his first Legendary Skill. Vitality rushed from the Tarrasque into Shiv, but he added a third point to the junction. Shiv reached out to that faint, red membrane lining everything, and he compelled it to take from him, to take from him just as it had taken from the Tarrasque a few seconds ago.

And the world used Shiv as a channel to drink the Tarrasque hollow.

Drain Vitality 83 > 85

Shiv let out a cry of discomfort as a rush of frigid nothingness swam through him. That frigid nothingness was promptly scattered as a cataclysmic blast of heat ignited his insides. The Deathless resurrected instantly. In less than a second, he went from being a knot to a sprawling mass, and then a full person once more.

And he kept draining. He didn't stop. He drained and he gave, pulling from the Tarrasque and giving unto reality. And where Shiv could only pull in a trickle when he only called vitality into himself, Integration was far greedier than he. Even with him serving as a bottleneck, the sheer amount that the world drained every second dwarfed the total vitality residing within Shiv by exponents unimaginable.

A moan of misery sounded from the Tarrasque once more. "Bleeding... my... soul..." It slurred its words. And for the first time, Shiv thought he might be able to win this fight. He might be able to bring this thing down. "Let me go!" it screamed.

"Make me, asshole," Shiv growled from inside its body.

This proved to be the wrong thing to say, as a tentacle blasted through his chest, leaving him impaled. Shiv let out a bark of surprise, but halfway through, blood spilled out from his mouth, and he found himself dangling limply as the eye at the tip of the tentacle turned around to glare at him.

A concentration of translucent mana began to gather within the eye, and Shiv just sighed.

Then he cast himself across space and time, back to Blackedge.

The thrill of his newly mastered power and a building thrill pounded through him with the beat of his heart. But this wasn't done. As he blinked back into the Perch, he prepared himself for—

Hidden World Quest Activated: Slay Tanner "Shiv" Lowe, the Deathless, before he fully comes into his power and forcefully drives your world beyond its current Mana Stability Threshold.

Success: Integrated Earth will experience its next Ambient Mana Threshold Evolution. The [Mythical] Skill-Tier will become available to all Pathbearers within this Ambient Mana Zone; Evolve 10 Skills to Legendary-Tier.

Failure: A specialized Incursion will be triggered to destroy Integrated Earth in 10 years, 6 months, and 5 days.

Shiv let out a miserable groan as he stomped down on the ground, repeating the action of his temporal echo, and nearly doubled over at this new helping of bullshit. System... what the fuck is wrong with you? Why do you hate me more than everyone else?

Chapter 164 (I) Descend [III]

Psychomancy will wound your heart, Uva.

There is no way to avoid the pain. The people often talk about ethics and rules regarding your skill, but so little about what it will inflict on you.

You are a person. Never forget that.

Even if you gain the ability to shape your own mind, there will still be places where you remain fragile. Because we perceive ourselves to be a certain way, and we imagine ourselves to hold to certain forms.

And I think that is what cuts us most deeply: The moment when our sense of self does not match the brutality of reality.

I was your age when I slew someone in the name of our Lady Arachnae.

Oh, do not look so envious. It is a black thing, ending another life. Watching the vampire's life dissolve behind her eyes left me shaken. Beyond the hate I held for her and her kind, she was still a person. And you will understand this better than I ever will. Because you will be looking into someone's personhood. You will be blessed and damned to truly know what it is like to step beyond your own flesh.

Our skills are not just weapons to use against our enemies. They can misshape us as well. So, before you do anything, understand the cost. And take care of your wounds. Take care to cleanse your injuries so that they do not fester. Take care to treat yourselves with honesty so that you are not brought down by your own lies.

Take care to shape yourself into who you wish to be.

That is most important. Shape yourself. This is something that must be done beforehand. Done with intent and focus. You cannot live thoughtlessly. Not like the rest of us. The power you have is too great, too invasive, and all acts you perform on another's mind will come with their own reactions.

They will chisel at your sense of self.

So, learn to be a good sculptor. Learn to think ahead. And understand that even the highest rewards come with their own perils. A setback could save your life, and an inappropriate evolution can become your peril.

Know yourself. Above everything and everyone, know yourself.

Because if you do not, you will die lost and afraid before the end.

-Sister Phure Mettabon to her daughter, Uva Mettabon

Uva felt like a cauldron as the Starhawk's unfathomable power boiled within her. The divine mana that he channeled clashed with the colors of the Outside, mingling as they flowed free from her being and her many skills. Her threads of Psychomancy were lit with gradients of shifting color and resonating pulses of incandescent mana. What used to be translucent strings that inflicted supple and subtle wounds on minds became tangible cords. Cords that bled heat into reality. Cords that could be woven into a nest to serve as protection.

As such, when the Republic's forces suddenly descended from that colossal dimensional gate that manifested in the skies above Blackedge, Uva coated the spire of Starhawk's Perch with her newly-empowered Psychomancy and barred the intruders from entry, like a spideress sealing the entrance of her nest.

The manifestation of the dimensional gateway was a staggering display of power in and of itself. It was larger than the town itself, with its innermost ring more than capable of swallowing Blackedge.

Thousands of Pathbearers flowed out every passing second, and they descended in orderly formations, with the Cavalry soaring through the air, forming a defensive perimeter and monitoring the space. Then plunged the heavysset Vanguards, Pathbearers clad in adamantine armor and bearing massive shields or colossal weapons. They slammed down upon the town, avoiding the wounded citizens while making for the collapsed ruins. They began lifting massive pieces of debris and slabs of rubble off bodies, and the Geomancers among them began reconstructing the town of Blackedge as well.

Finally, there came the dedicated magi. The Republic fielded mixed-lore formations of magi bearing all elemental affinities. The voice called them Poly-Magi earlier, and Uva assumed they were a combined-magical skill force meant to be adaptable and overwhelming at the same time. They hovered just above the city in their varied formations and stood atop magical platforms with spiraling spell patterns quivering beneath their feet. The magi unleashed waves of Biomancy and Hydromancy, delivering rain and healing for those who needed it.

And after the brutality Blackedge had experienced at the hands of Vicar Sullain's Retribution Crusade, the survivors needed a great deal.

Among the Republic's forces were also Psychomancers. So many Psychomancers—more than Uva ever recalled seeing at once. Weave was a city-state, and a young one at that. Of the Five Faiths, Uva was under no illusion as to which was the weakest. But she didn't serve her Lady Arachnae because Weave was powerful. No, she did it because it was just, just in the face of overwhelming odds, and the only chance for Umbrals to escape the vile fates that awaited them.

In her time as Sister of the Order, Uva faced vampires, Dragon-Knights, Compact mercenaries and their hired demons, even Necrotechs in the field. They were treacherous adversaries, overwhelmingly powerful in their own specialized way. But the Republic was on a whole other level.

She had always known the surfacers were formidable adversaries. The stories passed down from the Abyssal War primed her with respect and wariness against the Pathbearers of Yellowstone. But she still had underestimated them—underestimated how many of them there were, underestimated the sheer variety of skills they possessed, and how powerful their skills were.

Over a hundred Psychomancers were assailing her now, each a Hero or a High Master. Weave, comparatively, couldn't possibly come close to even matching a tenth of that in totality. The Yellowstone Republic mustered them in a casual instant.

Yet there was something else that Uva found herself awed by. It was the fact that even as more than a hundred Psychomancers of differing skill evolutions were working in tandem, shaping massive spells that swirled like transparent spheres above the town of Blackedge, they couldn't push through Uva's protections. They still had no chance to overpower her defenses. And that was thanks to the Starhawk pouring his power into her. His mana was further tempered by the influence of the Outside, and anyone who reached too deeply suffered madness and mana strain alike.

Puppeteer of the Formless Strings 141 > 142

And it was then that Uva learned the true distance between a mere Pathbearer and a god.

Uva thought herself formidable at Heroic-Tier. Such a threshold of power was something that she'd only indulged in private fantasies all her life, thinking it to be only achievable in the far-distant future, or if the System intervened on her behalf. The latter happened in the form of Shiv, and now she faced adversaries beyond her reckoning; foes that should have killed her time and time again.

But she didn't die. She prevailed, and the System awarded her for surviving its attempted murders. Yet, there was no chance that she could survive the Starhawk's wrath. Not if he decided to inflict his violence upon her.

He was the sun, great and terrible in its glare, and she wasn't even an ember. She was but cold ash.

The Republic Psychomancers pulled and struck at her dense weave of mana strands, and they couldn't budge her at all.

She was an impenetrable wall of iron, and they weren't even waves. They were moisture in the air, clinging as condensation to her, and nothing more. She had anticipated a struggle against them, a battle. But now she simply did as the Starhawk requested. She moved Blackedge toward the chasm, preparing its descent into the Abyss, for that was the main purpose of their bargain: To deliver Blackedge, and Starhawk's Perch in particular, into the embrace of the Great One and ensure the Starhawk's scheme came to fruition.

The town was wounded, and Uva wasn't nearly as versed with the Starhawk's power as Roland was. Furthermore, she was a far weaker Pathbearer compared to the currently crippled Town Lord. As such, Blackedge floated slowly, awkwardly, dragged along by a few errant strands grasping at the air.

But still it flew, and it hovered mainly because of the Starhawk's divine might. Oddly, it also let out an emission of ever-changing colors. And from those colors, faint sounds followed, whispers of beings lurking just beyond the veil, close by, yet impossibly far...

"Refrain from touching my being again," the Starhawk commanded. There was a tone of severity in his voice, and Uva looked behind her to find the ethereal form of the Ascendant towering over her.

"Pardon?" she said, trying to keep her nervousness in check. She reached for her power, yet realized that it was pointless. Again, she wasn't even an ember. She was less than ash.

"Not you," the Starhawk replied, his tone softening. "The thing within you. The thing you have so unwisely decided to grant residence within your soul."

A twinge of annoyance thrummed through Uva. "You say that like any of this was ever my choice. The circumstances between me and the Dreamtaker resemble our current arrangement more than you might think. It was this or certain death."

The Ascendant didn't take offense; instead, he fell quiet. And what came from him thereafter surprised Uva. "I apologize," the Starhawk said, his voice somber. "I am frustrated. And I feel powerless. The Dreamtaker intends to take advantage of my fragile state and expand her influence. I refuse to allow that."

That certainly wasn't what she'd expected the god to say. She didn't even expect him to apologize, much less admit to emotional fragility. Such things were beneath powerful Pathbearers, and deities even more so. Yet, the Starhawk didn't act like a god. No, he was more akin to a man. A man with far too much weight on his shoulders. Weight, she was beginning to feel in his stead.

He reminded her of her Lady.

"I have faced many enemies for the Republic," the Starhawk began. "Most can be slain conventionally. Most can be understood. The Outside is different. Their presence leaves me uneasy. And with you being a Seeker, my worry only grows."

"I cannot say I blame you. The eldritch is... volatile in the best cases and treacherous for most minds to behold," Uva said. As soon as she finished speaking, she felt a shudder of power pulse out from her eyes. The Dreamtaker's attention was seeping out, and the colors drifting free from Uva's mind reached out toward the Starhawk's face as if to caress him. Uva restrained the colors, drawing them back into her eye, and she felt something almost approximating annoyance resound from the Dreamtaker.

"I merely want to observe," the Dreamtaker muttered from inside her.

Your observation might come with actual harm, Uva shot back mentally.

The Starhawk inclined his head ever so slightly. "I thank you for your consideration, Sister. I suspect I am not so different from you right now. Both of us are bound by bargains we did not wish to make. If only I was less of a blind fool, I could have seen the threat coming, and this wouldn't have been necessary."

Uva studied the Starhawk for a moment and realized what he was trying to do. He was attempting to establish a bridge between them, a common point. If he was doing it consciously or unconsciously, she couldn't say, but once more her guard was up, and she wondered if the Ascendant was trying to manipulate her.

"It is not your fault, my Lord," Roland forced out through clenched teeth. He was sitting not far away from Uva. His personal chair was once a magnificent thing carved from the finest wood that would have cost a fortune down in the Abyss. Now it was barely more than splinters, and that it was holding together at all was a testament to its quality.

By his side, one of his surviving Biomancers continued treating him while Rose held his hand and snarled at him, demanding that he stay focused on her, lest he fall unconscious. She cursed at him every time he slipped close toward unwilling slumber.

"The failing is mine." Roland coughed through his words. Uva tasted the shame and sorrow radiating from the Town Lord. Now that he had been brought back for a while, his thoughts kept drifting to the people outside, the people he felt he had abandoned, the people he felt he had led to their slaughter. Blackedge was a fortress town, but ultimately still a town. It was a tripwire more than it was a bulwark against the Abyss, and an attack of this scale had not been anticipated, with the treaties between the Abyss and the Republic still standing.

Before the war was over, the matter was supposed to be settled. Yet here they were, repeating old mistakes, renewing old conflicts. But things were more complicated than that. There were so many hidden agendas and hidden forces going around that Uva couldn't fully tell who she was fighting

anymore. The Ascendants weren't a unified faction, and the Starhawk was determined to escape from them.

"The fault is not yours," the Starhawk said to his champion, lowering his head. "The fault is mine. I should have seen this coming. I should have kept a closer eye on Kathereine. I knew this was not beyond her or Stormhalt. Yet I was too obsessed, too focused on the grand vision that I let the details slip by."

"Enough," Valor said, cutting both the Starhawk and Roland off with a scoff of annoyance. "You are not children. There are consequences for every choice we make. I know of regret, but this is not the time to indulge. Face your mistakes and continue. Learn but do not be ashamed."

"How can I avoid shame?" Roland asked. He gritted his teeth as he shuffled in his seat. "How can I, when so many of my people are—"

"No." Rose shook her head as Roland tried to stand. She held him down, planting a firm hand against his chest. "Knock it the fuck off," Rose growled. "If I see you strain yourself one more time, I'm going to choke you out myself."

Roland blinked, and Uva shared that response. She wasn't sure if he'd heard his wife's words accurately, but then something impossible happened. The Town Lord laughed. Uva didn't think he was capable of such emotion, with the sheer amount of misery radiating from him.

"Choke me out," Roland gasped. "Yes, I suppose you are my Rose. I suppose I am not dreaming. Who else would threaten me so sweetly..."

Rose smirked and lightly flicked him on the chin. Roland winced in pain. She whispered a muttered apology to him, but then flicked him again.

"Lady Van Erren," the Biomancer protested, eyes wide. "Please, Master Arrow is—"

"I know how he is," she snapped, cutting the Biomancer off through clenched teeth. A snarl escaped from the woman. "I know my husband. You don't need to explain this to me. I've patched him more times than I can count on the battlefield, and right now, this is what he needs." She poked him on the forehead, and Roland let out a slight gasp of incredulity. "A little bit more agitation, a little bit of frustration, and someone to smack him over the head every time he gets close to blacking out." She leaned in toward Roland. "You are not allowed to die when I just got back, Roland. Otherwise, I'm going to reach into whatever hell you plunged into, and I'm going to raise the worst fit you will ever experience in this life and all the lives to come."

Roland lifted a shaking hand, and he rested it on his wife's extended arm. "I missed you," Roland choked out. "I missed you so much, across so many years, I've dreamed. I've dreamed..." And then he began to sag once more, and Rose did as she promised. She slapped him across the face, using the warmth of her palm to lead him back into the waking world.

Uva drew her attention away from the two after that. It felt like she was intruding on something private, something at once barely publicly appropriate, yet also too intimate for her to intrude on.

Something commanded her focus just then. Another hammer of Psychomantic force crashed against Uva's external wards, and it was followed by a thin beam of Dynamancy. The second bounced off Uva's dense strands as easily as the first did. Once more, she was reminded of her power. Of the power I borrowed, she reminded herself.

"Ignore them," the Starhawk reminded her once more, "simply focus. We are almost..." The Ascendant trailed off, and a sudden surge of pressure hammered down on Uva from above. Her awareness screamed, and her instincts went haywire. She felt terrified for some reason, and she didn't know why.

Unwillingly, unwittingly, her head turned upward, and she stared through the ceiling, a ceiling that was thoroughly cracked, leaking divine mana. Through that ceiling, she saw them. Twelve divine presences, far above Blackedge. The other Ascendants and their Avatars were there.

Chapter 164 (II) Descend [III]

She knew the identities of the shining by intuition alone, and perhaps because the Starhawk was bound to her mind as well.

"They are here," the Starhawk declared. His ethereal form solidified with a gust of flame, and some details materialized on his body. She noticed the great halberd he bore, a thing that seemed capable of cleaving stars and planets alike, even in this muted representation of itself. She noticed his bow, forged from brightest starstuff, with an arrow nocked that trailed cosmic destruction.

Blackedge began to shiver as Uva prepared herself for a coming attack from the Ascendants.

But she was concentrating on the wrong thing.

A pained shriek shook the world from kilometers away. It was a cry of misery and pain, but it wasn't a human voice that delivered it. No, it was the Tarrasque's. And she turned her awareness outward, to six kilometers away, through a wall of descending ash and falling debris. She saw the large form of the Tarrasque, but more than that, she saw tides of swirling red.

It was like a typhoon was churning over the land, but rather than carrying wind and water in its wake, it displaced waves of vitality, waves of vitality that simply circled over and over again. Uva wasn't sure what the Tarrasque was doing, but her thoughts immediately went to Shiv, and she tried to reach out to him.

He didn't respond.

Their link had broken some time ago, either because he was slain, because of the Tarrasque's discharge of Magical Resistance, or because Shiv used his Outside Context Problem.

She turned her Psychomancy to Adam, and took a peek at the unfolding situation through his all-seeing eyes. His Seer of Horizons was active, and he was gazing upon the Tarrasque directly. It was writhing, its body was boiling with vitality, and that corona of white and red that swirled around it, which allowed it to resurrect time and time again, was dimming. Adam's Awareness jumped into the Tarrasque's open jaws.

Everything was a deafening storm of noise and chaos. Adam's awareness bounced between several walls of cracked crystal and bleeding flesh. In seconds, the Gate Lord found the one he was looking for: Shiv.

Shiv, who was partially embedded in the Tarrasque's flesh, Shiv, who was fused inside the beast's body and ripping the vitality out of its very being in an unceasing torrent.

"How is he doing that?" Uva asked.

"I am not quite sure," Adam replied, "but there was a tinge of excitement at the end of his voice. I think he's bleeding the big bastard dry." The Gate Lord fired another two Veilpiercers, and only then did Uva

notice he was far above the clouds, hiding from the Ascendants. After taking a peek into his memories, she realized he was focusing on culling weakened orcs to further recharge his special arrow, and with a few more deaths, he would be primed to unleash absolute havoc. "But what of the Avatars and other Ascendants? When did they get to Blackedge?"

"Just now," Uva answered. She sent him a brief packet of memories, condensed so that he could stay updated about matters happening inside the perch and around it. A cold pool began to spread from inside the Gate Lord's abdomen. He was worried for his family, worried about what might happen to the Perch, and worried for Uva as well. The thoughts began manifesting in his head, but Uva stopped them before they could fully form.

"Do not try to distract the Ascendants," Uva said. "The risk is too high, and they are too powerful. You need to remain in place on watch to support Shiv. The other Ascendants have not acted yet, so I will remain in place and see that your family is protected, and that Blackedge is delivered to the chasm."

"Right," Adam acknowledged with a slight grunt of displeasure. "I... Take care of my family, Uva. And if anything happens—"

"You will know. And I will do everything I can to make sure your parents are protected. Now, focus, Hero Adam. Because I may have need of your eyes and arrows soon enough." She briefly squeezed Adam's mind, offering him a pulse of reassurance that she didn't entirely feel right now either. Still, it was enough to calm him, enough to get him to focus once more. "Now, how long until you're ready to fire your smiting arrow?"

His arrow ignited with blinding power as a stream of azure fire was injected into it from the sun hovering over his head. "Right now," Adam snarled. He took aim, drawing his Spellstring back. Several of the bow's strands came aglow with mana as he began to concentrate power. The Veilpiercer was brighter than the emerging dawn, and for a moment, Uva was afraid the Ascendants far below might notice

Adam, that they would see just how radiant his arrow was, even through the dense clouds of the stratosphere.

But nothing happened to him.

“They are distracted,” the Starhawk declared. “They are trying to understand what is happening with the Tarrasque as well.”

Ah. Good work, Dear Brute. Your chaotic nature is aiding us even now...

Just as Adam prepared to loose his shot at the staggered Tarrasque, a flash of golden mana pulsed out inside Starhawk's Perch. A loud bang filled the room, and Shiv rematerialized, slamming his foot down the same way he did earlier. And just as he did, a notification flashed before Uva's eyes. A notification that made her stomach curl in horrified disbelief.

Hidden World Quest Activated: Slay Tanner “Shiv” Lowe, the Deathless, before he fully comes into his power and forcefully drives your world beyond its current Mana Stability Threshold.

Success: Integrated Earth will experience its next Ambient Mana Threshold Evolution. The [Mythical] Skill-Tier will become available to all Pathbearers within this Ambient Mana Zone; Evolve 10 Skills to Legendary-Tier.

Failure: A specialized Incursion will be triggered to destroy Integrated Earth in 10 years, 6 months, and 5 days.

She noticed then that Roland was also frozen. He was reading something in front of him, and Rose was as well. Valor was staring off into the distance, the flames within his eye sockets flickering. Nearby, Roland's personal Psychomancer, Biomancer, guards, and more found themselves speechless at the Quest they'd just received.

Practically everyone here had gotten it. Which meant the Starhawk...

Oh, Composer. Uva's insides went cold. The power of the Starhawk trickled into Uva, but then began to slow. Her divinely-lit Psychomancy dimmed, and immediately she began to feel the pressure from the pressure of the hostile Psychomancers prying through her strands from outside. A sudden tension exploded inside the room, and the only one who didn't notice was Shiv, mainly because he was too busy cursing the System to properly react. Distrust spilled from Uva into the Starhawk, but his attention ultimately drifted away from her and settled upon Shiv.

"What are you?" he whispered, and his words went unheard by the Deathless, but the Umbral took them in as something akin to a threat. The Starhawk must have sensed her feelings, as he quickly turned toward her. "I do not intend to claim his life, but the other Ascendants will—"

"Shiv," she called out, ignoring the god's words for now.

The Deathless rose, and he had a haggard look on his face as he met her gaze. "Oh, hey, Uva. Was busy learning how to drain the life out of a felling Tarrasque. System decided to reward the usual way for figuring that out. So, uh, did you all get that Quest?"

"Felling shite, son," Georges muttered, worry etched deep into his face. "The hells did you do?"

"Exist," Shiv replied with a faint snarl. Valor moved to speak with Shiv, but there came a roar, and the Deathless's attention snapped back outside. He did a double-take as he realized the exterior of Starhawk's Perch was coated in a dense wall of Psychomancy mana, but that didn't stop him. "Godsdammit. Don't have time for this. Uva. I'm going for the Tarrasque. I'll try to finish it off. If it gets close, stun it if you can. Hold it in place. I'm going to leave it empty."

And as one of her strands shot out to link with his mind, he vanished. He splashed into himself in a burst of white and red, and then disappeared from her awareness.

For the next three seconds, Uva didn't know what she was staring at, what she was just about to do. She didn't even know Shiv existed. Then he resurfaced, and everything came back to her all at once.

"Uva," Adam called out, "I have eyes on him."

Uva looked out through his eyes and saw Shiv cutting past a group of magi trying to crack the perch's defenses in a burst of speed. While Shiv barreled through unprepared Republic Pathbearers, approaching the devastated town fast was the massive shape of a Tarrasque.

It wasn't moving quite as fast as before, and no gravity trailed around it. The air wasn't ionized; it wasn't even ablaze. However, it broke through the sound barrier, and it tumbled still, tumbled toward the undefended town.

Something is wrong here... Something doesn't feel right...

The gathered Poly-Magi noticed the Tarrasque, but then Shiv's form resonated with a pulse of pressure. As soon as he rang, the System sent a new notification.

The Deathless has been spotted. First to extinguish his Vitae will obtain the quest reward.

And judging from how thousands of other heads suddenly snapped to Shiv, he was probably pulsating right before their eyes too. The Republic's Pathbearers reacted in two ways. The First formed a barrier, a layered set of wards meant to intercept the Tarrasque, but more than a few others unleashed their spells at Shiv.

Just a shame they were too slow.

A dimensional arrow ripped open a rift in front of the Deathless, and suddenly, Adam burst out and pulled the Deathless inside. A barrage of spells cut left and right around the rift, and a fist formed from Dimensionality splashed against its entrance, collapsing it entirely. But by then, Shiv and Adam were both gone, displaced back above the stratosphere.

But before Uva could let out a breath of relief, the Tarrasque impacted the hastily-constructed wards and blasted through half of them. Its immense body shattered spell pattern after spell pattern with sheer weight alone, and just as the final layer began to collapse, a brilliant arrow erupted from a new dimensional wound before it exploded against the Tarrasque's form.

The titanic beast came ablaze with radiant fire, and the limpness of its body indicated it was already dead. Uva lashed out with her Psychomancy threads. They blasted through the Tarrasque's body, digging divots of gore and gouging deep into its flesh. Yet, as Uva's puppeteer strings searched, she

couldn't find any purchase on its mind. In fact, she couldn't find any mind at all. It was then that she realized something. The Tarrasque was dead. There was no mind in it.

It was hollow, nothing more than a corpse.

But if it's truly slain, then why haven't we gotten the Quest rewards?

A storm of offensive spells crashed against it as the Republic's Poly-Magi began shaping siege-level magics, flames so hot that the sky turned pale. Destruction slammed down against the Tarrasque's rupturing flesh in the shape of a hammer falling on an anvil of magma, a rain of Hydromancy beams fused with Aeromancy, and arrows shaped from dense pillars of water and pregnant with screaming electricity.

More spells hammered against with every second it as the Republic's forces tore the apocalyptic beast apart in an overwhelming barrage.

The mutilated corpse of the Tarrasque slid off hastily erected wards, and as no movement followed, the tension within Uva climbed to a boiling point. "Adam! Shiv? Do you have eyes on the actual Tarrasque?"

But it was the Starhawk that responded first. "I can feel it. Its presence is..." The Ascendant froze. "No. Sister Uva. It's coming from—"

A deafening shriek shook the world. The ground trembled beneath Uva's feet, and a predatory mind bearing a storm of violence, hunger, and hatred exploded upward from below Blackedge.

Before Uva or anyone could react, the Tarrasque blasted free from the parting earth and crashed fist-first against the underside of Blackedge.

The town's very foundations shattered like a crumbling brick.

But before Blackedge could come apart entirely, Uva's empowered mana strands surged down, piercing through the material and stitching the dense clumps of crystal and stone, pulling Blackedge's base back together. She could feel the Tarrasque' grinding against her powers, wrestling against her with its dominion over gravity.

She responded by whipping its mind with her magic, and for the first time, her mana strands struck its mind—

But it was Uva who screamed thereafter. Screamed as a crushing maliciousness hammered through her Psychomancy and seized her very ego. A loud voice boomed within her mind as she learned firsthand why it was a mistake to trespass into a Tarrasque's mind.

“AND WHAT KIND OF COOKING-MEAT ARE YOU?”the monster bellowed with a loud cackle, sounding far too much like Shiv for Uva's comfort.

Chapter 165 (I) Descend [IV]

Have you ever gazed into the heart of an apocalypse? I have. I have seen things inside the mind of Tarrasque so deep, so true, inevitable. It is our inevitable end. They... they aren't born yet, do you know that? They aren't born yet. They're made later. They're made later by the ones at the end.

Because they are the fate of everything, the fate that waits at the end of strife.

You have to understand... You must know, they are fate embodied, because the fate of struggle is destruction, is death. They are things that don't break, that don't die, that know without thinking. That's the worst thing there is; there's not truly a mind there, it just knows. It always goes back to normal because it's always fated. It's fated. It's fated to kill us. It's fated to destroy us.

We're fated to die. We're fated to die.

We're fated to die.

No escape, no escape, no escape.

I drowned in its mind. I drowned. I didn't come back. This isn't me. There is nothing left of me. I drowned, and I'm still there. At the end, I will wait for you in the emptiness. I will wait, but in time you will see.

You will see.

-Interview with Master-Lieutenant Harrison Haebenauer of the 101 Mindthieves, Yellowstone Republic
Special Operations after Operation Gravewalker

The Tarrasque's bestial madness gored Uva's consciousness like a thing of claw and fang. Though Uva drew upon all her empowered Psychomancy, she was still drowning, drowning beneath the Tarrasque's overwhelming weight. Its mind was unlike anything she'd ever tasted. It didn't so much have thoughts as it did axioms, things it had to do. There was no choice in the Tarrasque's mind.

Violence, destruction, death, cruelty.

These were the only options it had, the only things it truly understood.

And connected to its emotions weren't memories, but what felt like a physical reality, a realm made up of ruined buildings, of the bodies of Necrotechs, Umbrals, elves, humans, goblins, and more. It was a bleak world, punished by blackest rain, where dragons plunged down into a festering wasteland, where the rivers ran with foul black ichor, and where the very winds were infused with sickness and wilting decay.

The mind of the Tarrasque swirled like a tempest madness, and Uva felt herself be torn free from her corporeal form, dragged into the depths of the great beast in a brutal instant, drawn into the black reality hidden within the Tarrasque's mind.

Everything blurred. She bit back a haggard cry as she tried to keep her mind from breaking. And then she landed hard on the ground, and something inside her broke as her Non-Euclidean Physique failed to respond. Her Blastmolt Skill triggered. She blinked into place a meter away from where she struck the ground, and her Blastmolt exploded beside her, launching her further. Pain blossomed along her ribs first, but then it began to spread across her skin and down her flesh.

It was then that she realized the foul darkness within the rain here was eating through her.

Uva held up a hand, and her eyes widened in animal panic as her armor began to flake and dissolve, and the skin underneath was peeled layer by layer. Misting trails of blood danced around her, and the agony she suffered grew from severe to exquisite.

"Mine, now." The Tarrasque cackled through the howling winds. It was nowhere to be seen, yet it was everywhere; all around her. Its voice rumbled like distant thunder, and as she looked up into the sky, there was a long, scarred stretch in this reality that stood before her like a pillar made from scabs. It went high up into the air and slipped past the thick blanket of ill clouds spewing tar-like venom upon the land.

As Uva lowered her head, she also realized she stood among a mountain of bodies, a sea of bodies, a world of bodies. These writhing corpses—No, not corpses, people, people still alive, still suffering, cried out all around her. A symphony of nightmarish suffering greeted her senses. Most of the victims here were flayed down to the bone across half their bodies, and from their open wounds wept sores, sores that were constantly nourished by the black, sludge-like rain.

More rain hit Uva as well, and it began to burrow into her rotting flesh, into her mind. The Tarrasque's fell influence was tainting her, settling into her body and soul, compromising her mind, and filling her with that same malicious desire that constantly oozed from the monster's every fiber.

Bit by bit, she felt its mind intrude on her. If it were an ocean, and she was a pond, she wasn't just being swallowed; she was being subsumed. Soon she would join the other victims here, be flayed down to the bone, made into an exposed husk of spewing viscera, and her mind would go as well.

Here she was no Psychomancer, not even a Pathbearer. Here she was sapped and withered, weakened and decayed. Here she was—

"You are not alone."

The Dreamtaker's pulsing words were spoken in cadence by the Starhawk, and for the first time, truly the first time, both her eldritch ally and the Earthwhile Ascendant moved in tandem, unleashing their power through Uva, driving the Tarrasque's brutal presence back.

Uva flared with power, and a deluge of colors exploded from her eyes. She turned her Dreamtaker's Gaze upward, and twin beacons of eldritch brightness cleaved a scar through the fetid night sky.

The foul clouds were parted in twain, and the black rain dissolved before the sudden presence of the Outside. The Tarrasque let out a cry as something foreign and hostile intruded into its mind. Cracks began to form within this mindscape, this inner hell that resided in the Tarrasque's consciousness. She felt it lash at her blindly with its overwhelming magic, yet its waves of mana were raw, unrefined.

Colossal tides of magic smashed into her, translucent waves that impacted her mind, yet they were cut aside, for even gale-force winds couldn't split a mountain, and that was what Uva was with divinity burning in her veins.

She was a Psychomancer, she was a Pathbearer, and as the Dreamtaker and Starhawk had declared, she wasn't alone. She had the backing of something more, something higher, and with the Tarrasque's intrusive powers stalemated, she struck back in return.

Blastmolt 89 > 90

Puppeteer of the Formless Strings 145 > 146

Her retribution was meticulous and multi-angled. Her strands exploded out in all directions, rooting through the Tarrasque's mindscape, piercing and shredding. She couldn't find any thoughts for her to break, couldn't find any memories for her to manipulate. Again, this thing didn't have a consciousness, not really. It had intentions, it had things it knew, and it seemed to have a living world, or rather a living nightmare, that resided in its depths. But she was here, and one thing about the nightmare was that it still had a shape. It still was a thing of patterns, horrifying though the contents may be, and so she attacked it.

She turned her gaze down upon the victims littering the ground, their bodies draped over the many jutting ruins that characterized this place. As the colors of the Outside swept through their bodies, they dissolved, turning into flaking hues that merged with the eldritch gradients. The Tarrasque cried in outrage, offended that she was unmaking some of its destruction, stealing away some of its victims, and so she adapted. She turned her Psychomancy on the other bodies. Their minds were mostly hollow, but there was still a sliver of them left. Of course, there had to be. If not, how would they suffer, and how would the Tarrasque continue to feed?

She burrowed into them and crushed them without mercy. She didn't have time to consider the ethics of what she was doing, if this was right or wrong. As she shattered them, she felt a piece of the Tarrasque break as well. It was rooted within its victims. It was forged from them, seemingly. She didn't understand how its mind worked, but now she had a theory. Perhaps it gained more consciousness with every person it slew, with every body it destroyed, with every mind connected to a Pathbearer. If that was the case, then it made sense how it was gaining sentience so fast.

It was literally sapping it from its victims, not so unlike a Jealousy.

But what about this world? Why was it physical? Why was it so unlike any mind she'd ever entered? Her mana strands cleaved deep gouges through the ground, her every movement like a natural disaster, and countless writhing bodies came apart in face of her attack.

Beyond the weltering gore and water falling organs seeping out from widened wounds, she noticed structures, bits of debris and ruins. She recognized some of it. There were pieces from Blackedge, judging from the architecture, but others were chunks of material from Abyss. She recognized the face of a partially collapsed residence block—Descender style—and with every revelation, her understanding climbed to new heights.

A Tarrasque was a creature of destruction. It fed from destruction, it was nourished by destruction, and her mind instinctively turned to another type of being that was sustained the same way: orcs. Did the Challenger have a hand in creating the Tarrasque, with how it acted and lived?

Warning: You seek dangerous information. Pursuing this line of questioning further will put you at risk and draw the notice of the Farwalkers.

Farwalkers? Uva remembered hearing of them. They were the ones that created Inertium, a strange group that hated mages and magic. But what did they have to do with Tarrasques?

The System's next notification came as suddenly as the first.

It is recommended that you do not pursue this line of inquiry any further.

This second notification came with a pulse of dread, dread that seemed to seep from the very world itself.

The System was warning her. Uva couldn't remember it ever doing that before, or even hearing of anything similar happening to anyone.

Are you aware? Is this your doing? System?

Uva's thoughts went unanswered.

No further notifications came. But the dread lingered, as did the feeling that she had overstepped. She pushed it aside, as the Tarrasque unleashed another wailing rainstorm of entropic destruction upon her. Bodies dissolved into crimson mist, and as it came crashing against her, she wrapped herself in the dense nest of Psychomancy. Once more, the winds broke against her, but then she was moving.

She cast herself into one of the bodies, and she avoided another attack by diving deeper into one of the many minds sustaining this whole nightmarish reality. The Tarrasque went after her by destroying the body. A tide of rot and decay slammed down upon her vessel, and she was dislodged in an instant. She couldn't wrap herself in time, and so she lost an arm.

A pained wail escaped her as her flesh and bone came apart, but she unraveled herself into mana and blinked elsewhere. It gave her enough time to recover and preserve the rest of her body. A sickness burrowed through her flesh, but before a fever could overcome her, a rush of flame exploded free from her very pores as the Starhawk unleashed its cleansing influence, matching the Tarrasque's pestilence—but not for long.

The ravaging winds surged to even greater speeds, and the howling noise drilled into Uva's skull.

The first cry of struggle sounded from the Ascendant lending her his power, and a melody of torment escaped the Dreamtaker as well. A churning malestrom of pestilence, decay, death, and more crashed down on Uva, clenching her, and slowly it took the shape of a massive claw, a Tarrasque's claw holding her at its epicenter.

"I will not be able to endure this for long," the Starhawk growled, forcing the words out through their connective link. Uva was astonished at the Ascendant's weariness.

"Is the Tarrasque truly stronger than you?"

"No," the Starhawk shot back, "but its mind... Its nature cannot be changed. I am faced with an Axiomatic Skill. It is an absolute, unchangeable thing. The Tarrasque does not have a mind like most beings. It has a Delve. An ever-existing, never-ending Delve. And we are now trapped inside it."

"I'm within a skill?" Uva asked, her mind racing. And as she looked around, noticing the many broken corpses and ruins, it finally clicked.

Of course there would be mountains of bodies here. Of course this would be a place of unrivaled destruction. It is the literal legend that made up the Tarrasque's existence in the eyes of the System.

"Its Delve cannot be broken," the Dreamtaker hissed. "Escape. Escape is our salvation, escape is the path-way out-survive."

Uva tried to reel herself back into her own body, but found herself unable. A single thread led up into the air, but it was being gripped tightly by the turbulent atmosphere. The Tarrasque kept her pinned, and she could feel its malicious faux consciousness grinding against her. She was locked here, like an

anchor pinned between two stones. She pulled harder, used the fullness of her mana, even used the power lent to her by the Starhawk and the Dreamtaker. She barely managed to budge herself. So long as the Tarrasque was focused on her, she wouldn't be getting out.

"No escape! Just feed! To be food! You are..."

The Tarrasque's malicious voice trailed off, and a heavy hint of Shiv bled through. For a briefest of moments, Uva flickered with a pale-white glow—a pale white that she remembered seeing through Shiv's eyes.

This was the Chef Unwavering, and she was being marked as something edible.

Disconcerting, Uva deadpanned to herself. Right, so I'm a prisoner right now, trapped in this place. I need to part the Tarrasque's attention, otherwise my Psychomancy will eventually be battered aside, and that will spell certain death for me.

But how was she supposed to distract the Tarrasque? She turned her eldritch gaze on the ground again, and the countless writhing bodies, along with jutting edifices of past destruction, turned to brilliant hues as they were swallowed by the Outside. Uva's eyes widened further, and she devoted all of her power to her Dreamtaker's Gaze.

The Eldritch Unique Skill once again carved a gaping wound through the Tarrasque's mind, and it briefly let out a very Shiv-like yelp of pain, but then the yelp died down, and the Tarrasque began to laugh.

"Ah! New place, new prey."

A gap briefly opened within the Tarrasque's Delve, and a pathway to the Outside formed. Strange, formless monstrosities flooded the Delve—and were promptly devoured by the merciless downpour and wilting winds.

The feathered serpents Uva had used against the Recollector undulated into the Tarrasque's Delve as well, but they, too, were withered; they, too, were extinguished, first deprived of color, rendered dull and gray, before they finally dissolved into motes of ash.

Uva's heart plummeted. If that didn't work, then what else did she have? She brought up her skills, and her attention settled on the only other Heroic-Tier skill she had: Shaper of the Aberrant Fractals. She remembered how she'd created the Fractals, remembered what they could do. And as she looked around her, she saw so many bodies here, so many bodies infused with trauma and consumed by madness.

A nervous breath escaped her. This would either work, or she would be completely and utterly doomed. But she had a feeling that the Tarrasque was about to learn what it was like to have a swarm of screaming shrapnel rip out from the inside of its being.

Her mana strands exploded out in all directions, and she screamed as the pain ravaging her increased a dozenfold. It felt like streams of acid were trickling through her flesh, ripping her asunder from the outside in. But as the Tarrasque roared with glee, Uva unleashed her Aberrant Fractals, compelling them to arise as she pulled at the broken people around her.

Victims cried out and shuddered.

Hundreds of writhing bodies went stiff as Uva's many strands were drawn taut. And at once, she pulled. She pulled like she was trying to reel a particularly tenacious fish free from the grasp of a frozen pond, but with a final cry of effort, she wrenched them free.

Dancing shards of strange geometries glided through the insides of the Tarrasque's Delve. Space itself was shorn apart, and Uva directed them outward, directed them with a single command: "Rip and tear until I am free!"

The Fractals heeded her command, and as they did, they began to shred through the bodies, the collapsed buildings, and through the fetid ground as well.

Blood, dust, and other matter sprayed free into the dark sky, and though the Tarrasque tried to crush the Fractals, the space around them always bent, for geometry was twisted around the Aberrant Fractals, and so the destruction of her newest assets was delayed. Her cloud-shaped eldritch nightmares tore through matter like a swarm of locusts, and they narrowed and thinned, extending in all directions as they left gouges and gashes across the mindscape.

Uva found herself grateful that the Starhawk was empowering her once more. Originally, when she invoked one Aberrant Fractal, fatigue washed through her body. A lingering fatigue that lasted hours. Now? Now she'd summoned hundreds, and she was barely breathing heavily.

“Cutting my... planneeee...” the Tarrasque groaned. A bit of its sapience was seeping away. Its grammar was collapsing, and its words became slurred. Perhaps she was right. These dead bodies and the minds they were connected to did host its greater intelligence, and as more corpses were wiped from existence, the effects were debilitating.

The winds around Uva began to die down, and the black miasma staining the air abated. But as the winds all but halted, the oil-slick rain escalated into a torrential downpour. She realized that the miasma hadn't disappeared; it had merely left the winds to unleash itself from the rain with renewed focus, and the cascades of wretched liquid now hammered her Fractals.

Though air, wind, and matter parted around the Fractals, the rain came with a festering aura, and that made her Aberrant Fractals decay. Their glass-like shards grew dull and black as cracks spread along their lengths. One after another, they began to split and shatter, but the Tarrasque was no longer looking at her, too focused on shattering the eldritch intruders, and she reeled herself back with a final exertion of will.

This time, nothing held her in place, and she zipped free from the Tarrasque's mind and returned to her own body.

Puppeteer of the Formless Strings 146 > 149

As soon as her mind slammed back into her flesh, she found Roland and Rose leaning over her, along with Valor holding her still. Uva blinked and found blood spilling down her lip, her tongue partially bitten through. She wanted to say something, but Valor simply held and pressed a hand against her head. “Uva, Uva, are you well? Are you whole?”

She turned one of her strands into Valor's mind and sent him a telepathic confirmation. “Yes. What happened?”

"You touched the Tarrasque's mind and went mad. You were twisting and writhing on the ground. We only managed to sedate you thanks to Roland's servants." Uva looked to her side and found a short-haired woman and a stout man staring at her warily. The woman was a Psychomancer, while the man was Roland's surviving Biomancer. She offered them a grateful nod, but then noticed that the dense nest of Psychomancy protecting the Perch was still in effect.

That should have collapsed with my incapacitation, Uva thought, blinking. How did it not?

The Stranger smiles upon you.

He wants you to know that he will not let you die so easily, Seeker.

Skill Altered: Parallel Thinking (Adept) > Splitmind (Master)

Uva understood what had happened, then. She clenched her teeth and tasted the blood running down her throat. Right now, she was bound together with the Dreamtaker and the Starhawk on a level tighter than most could ever conceive of. Of course the Stranger would use this moment to intrude and seize another one of her skills.

Still, it was helping her. And that was what she needed right now. All the help she could get...

Another roar shook the world, and the Tarrasque sounded furious, but at the end of its call, a new notification appeared within Uva's vision.

Feat Gained: Dreamer of the Black Gnosis (Unique) - Allows the Pathbearer to sense, absorb, and dwell within spots of psychological madness. Absorbing madness will hypercharge the Pathbearer's Psychomancy and Eldritch Skills.

Chapter 165 (II) Descend [IV]

Uva stared at the Feat for a moment, and immediately several spots in the room came to light before her. She turned to regard them. She realized they weren't spots, but rather crevices lining various minds. Roland had so many scars inside his consciousness, so many scabs to pluck and feed upon... He was so close to fully descending into madness, having suffered so much all his life. And as she took in his once-hidden fragility, an inhuman hunger pulsed through her.

She turned away from him just as she found herself running her half-severed tongue across her lips, immediately horrified by what she'd just been considering, and a bead of sweat rolled down her face as she realized the Starhawk's presence was still close to her. He noticed her new Feat too, but he didn't comment.

"I wasn't going to—" Uva began, but she was cut off as the Tarrasque cried out once more. Her attention descended, and she found herself staring at the Tarrasque, remembering its colossal mind, the hellscape it called consciousness. It wasn't madness, it was destruction distilled into a psyche. There was no mind for it to lose, for it was shaped by a Delve. But even so, there were people within its mind, and that was a sea of madness she could use to water her powers.

"Uva! Uva!" Adam's thoughts called out to her. The Gate Lord was stressed and overwhelmed. "Uva, we need you right now! We—"

His voice was cut off as something impacted the town once more. As Uva shifted her mind and looked out from Adam's eyes, she found the Tarrasque grinding Shiv's body into the underside of Blackedge.

Pieces of the town began to crumble as the Tarrasque threw out both its hands and pulled in opposite directions, crashing wavelengths of force cascading out from it. Blackedge groaned. Uva's Psychomancy threads grew tighter and tighter. But even though she could exert physical force using her mind magic, it wasn't meant for it, and she was slowly losing that struggle.

So she abandoned defense and went on the offense instead. She directed her mana against the Tarrasque's mind once more, and when it pulled her in, she didn't resist. She descended into the realm of suffering, but instead of collapsing like a surprised victim, she plunged in as an arrow of divine vengeance.

Uva was encased in her own Psychomancy, and her threads exploded out like a bursting spider's web. A tide of black, festering rain washed over her, but she cared nothing for it, because before it could affect her, her mana field touched the many victims still residing here.

A soul-deep hunger flared to life within her.

And, with a ravenous indulgence, she fed on them.

Her Feat flared to life, and her translucent mana screamed with the songs of the Outside.

She felt her physiology change. She stopped being so human, so restricted. Her limbs became like the legs of a spider and then the branches of a tree. Geometry broke around her, and her mind became stronger than ever before, like an armored gauntlet where once she was but a clawed hand. Her strands grew thick, becoming shifting pillars rather than threads, and she swept them through the wasteland.

Bodies shattered, and Aberrant Fractals were summoned into being. The Tarrasque struggled once more, trying to deal with Uva while also doing all it could to preserve this world, this mindscape ruled by destruction. She channeled her gaze, and rather than coming like a beacon, it spilled across the world in a flooding torrent, and it just kept expanding more and more.

She didn't feel nearly as weak now.

Uva could keep channeling. So long as she had madness to feed on, she was endless, and the taste of broken minds and shattered thoughts was intoxicating. If this was what drugs felt like, then Uva was thankful she'd never indulged, for she was certain it was impossible to resist this highest of pleasures.

"Stop," the Starhawk called, but she didn't. She didn't want to. She never wanted to. The Seeker wanted to find the point where the beast simply became a beast instead of an engine of destruction, and then, when it only had one fragment left inside its Delve, she wanted to break it.

Uva would—

"Uva! Master yourself!" the Starhawk shouted. His voice was loud enough that the inside of her skull rang like a bell, but it was enough to shake her free from her fugue.

"I—" She realized how heavily the power was affecting her mind and swallowed. The Feat was feeding her with more power than she was capable of wielding. A burst of shame swelled in her chest, but she crushed it and turned her mind to adjusting her psychology. She needed to dull these sensations if she wanted to focus.

But before she could get anything done, that scarred length of torn space she saw at the center of the realm's sky earlier ripped wide open. And as it spread, she thought—No, that's not a portal. It was like a

pale, baleful eye. It flared into existence, bringing with it an invisible force that ripped ruins and bodies within the Delve asunder, and Uva briefly caught sight of something on the other side of that eye, something—something massive—

A beam of Psychomancy crashed against her. It nearly split clean through her protections. Without the Starhawk barely diverting the blast away, she would have boiled away into nothing.

You have seen something you shouldn't have. You are now hunted by the Farwalkers.

Before she could ponder the implications of that or start worrying about it, a massive gale of festering wind impacted her, and this time even the Starhawk failed to hold the entirety of the blow at bay.

There was more destruction and rot in the attack, and it washed through Uva's protective strands, digging into her supple consciousness. It seeped through her flesh, and Uva cried out as her body decayed and more of her psyche tore. But madness was her sanctuary, and she drew on her own wounds as well. Her pillars became the size of buildings, and soon the damage was blunted.

But the Tarrasque's entropic aura proved to be insidious. Every second she spent in this place left her mind blackening like a burning piece of paper. If she stayed in the open, the monstrosity would eventually winnow her down to nothing.

So she adjusted her strategy. Uva cast one of her mana strands into a nearby body, though it was far larger than the vessel it pressed upon. She injected herself across her mana, and she vanished entirely. This time, as she dove into her new vessel, she found herself plunging deeper and deeper, diving into the sea of madness that resided within their consciousness. She was like a droplet joining the ocean, and she lit the waters of their ruined mind with the colors of the Outside.

Soon, there was no trace of Uva in the Delve at all. Nothing but ruins and corpses to be remained. Ruins, corpses to be, and the baleful inner eye of the Tarrasque.

“Disappeared?” the beast’s voice cried out.

The Umbral smirked internally. Time to see if I can teach this beast a lesson in counter-Psychomancy.

She came up with a planned strategy: to constantly raid and wreak havoc within its mind. To summon Fractals and slowly approach the scar-rimmed eye that lingered at the center of this skill. There, she would see if any true damage could be caused, contrary to the Starhawk's words.

But the thing about best laid plans was that they required your enemy to act in accordance with your expectations.

The Tarrasque wasn’t particularly clever, but it was absurdly powerful. And when it realized it had lost her and was potentially in danger, it discharged its Magical Resistance, and Uva was ripped free from its mind with an explosion of pain.

For the second time, she snapped back into her body, and this time, she curled into a ball and whimpered as the worst migraine of her life took hold.

And she wasn’t the only one affected. Across the town, she dimly heard Republic magi and other Pathbearers cry out as they, too, were incapacitated.

“Stop doing that shit!” Shiv snarled as he felt his Biomancy get torn apart for the hundredth time.

The world spun before Shiv's eyes as he coughed up blood and pieces of broken teeth. A minute ago, things were going well. The Tarrasque was briefly stunned by Uva's Psychomancy, and he took that opportunity to drain another pond's worth of vitality from it. But then it discharged its Magical Resistance, and everything was back to hell.

Shiv tried his prior draining strategy, but the Tarrasque was growing wise to his tactics. It immediately began using Dimensionality against him to teleport him out of its body and hit him at the point of his arrival. That's how he ended up embedded in the underside of Blackedge.

The only reason he hadn't died was that Adam blunted some of the impact with an arrow, a Dynamancy projectile that infused Shiv with greater protection. The magic shattered immediately, but Shiv had it to thank for only having a cracked back instead of being a splatter against dense stalagmites made from mithril and other magic-conducting materials underneath his hometown.

Pieces of Blackedge plunged down and struck the Tarrasque in the head, but it simply snarled and kept going, grinding Shiv deeper into the structure. Strangely, the beast was disoriented, shaking its head constantly while muttering to itself. Uva did something to it. Just not enough to spare Shiv the experience of being used as a meat-sponge.

Adam's arrows crashed into the Tarrasque's eyes over and over again. The Republic's Poly-Magi had been bombing it earlier too, but they were all stunned now, their fields shredded by the Magical Resistance discharge. Only the Gate Lord and Shiv were still active. And with how the Tarrasque was rearing its humanoid fist back, the latter was about to earn another death real soon.

Gravitic Wrestler 175 > 178

Pillar of Orichalcum 224 > 225

But then there came a bolt of black lightning, and before the Tarrasque could hit Shiv again, a net of electricity wrapped around its arm. It tried to push forward, but the stormstuff thickened until its body was coated tight, and just then, a portal opened above the Tarrasque's head, unleashing twelve figures.

"Fucking finally," Shiv wheezed. He glared as the Avatars finally entered the fray. They hovered but a few meters above the Tarrasque and—

Well, they weren't really looking at the monster for some reason. Shiv didn't get it at first, but then he got the notification.

The one to extinguish the Deathless's Vitae will gain the Quest rewards.

And as the Tarrasque struggled against Stormhalt's and Halsur's lightning, the other Avatars continued facing Shiv.

The Deathless grimaced. The reward on his head was far too large compared to the Tarrasque. He realized what was coming, but even so, he couldn't help but be offended. "Really? You're going to—"

The first among the Avatars waved a hand, and Shiv cried out as he was torn away in a flash of all-encompassing Dimensionality.

Blackedge vanished. The Avatars vanished. The Tarrasque vanished. The battlefield vanished.

Adam appeared in the corner of Shiv's vision, his expression frozen in a silent scream—but he never even came close to reaching his friend.