

Deathless 166

Chapter 166 (I) Prison

Drown in your defeat. Learn to savor the taste. Let your limitations hurt you. Let yourself rage against your failure.

Or, you can turn away. It won't fix anything, but there is a mercy to getting struck down from behind. Warriors hate to admit it, but there is a blissful ignorance in not knowing what kills you. Not knowing the reason you failed. We do it as children. We close our eyes and pretend the problem isn't there. Because it is comforting. Because knowing that we are not enough scars us in a place that some would rather die than face.

And I suggest that you do die if you cannot face your heart with honesty. It is a mercy. Death is merely silence. Life will teach you greater depths of pain. And to sink into yourself and never rise again while challenging the Delve of a Legendary Skill is something most warriors would imagine to be a nightmare.

But most warriors are fated to feed the mud and soil. Most warriors never truly grow to become the adult that can face their problem with open eyes. They remain a child in pain. A child in the end.

You cannot be a child if you wish to be a Legend. Not in this world. Not against your sins.

You can doubt yourself. You can believe that you are weak. You can even fear. But these are just feelings. Sensations. What will save you is courage, and beyond it, understanding. Understanding, but not acceptance.

We all have limits. And we are to know and loathe them.

We all have flaws. And we are to rise above them.

Thus, if you stand on the precipice and find yourself uncertain if you might surface from the Delve, ask yourself this:

“Can I face the ruins of my self? Can I face my greatest shame, and find a way to stand beyond it? Can I survive the darkness of my heart?”

I cannot give you an answer. But those of you who understand already know. And those who are uncertain should wait until they do.

You must be paradoxically merciless and kind to yourself in different ways. There is a madness in courting the System’s power, but it takes a sane mind to master the insanity needed to prevail. Be both. Be everything. Be more.

Drown. But do not die. Drown, and learn to live with the suffocation.

-Legend: Reforged from Ruin, Written by Semper Paragon Caine Hauser of the Descenders Union

A mountain’s weight in pressure crashed down on Shiv as he was teleported. He tried to swing his left fist at the walls of Dimensionality washing down around him, but his gauntlet was still broken, and his hand passed through the mana as if it was a flowing current. His own Portomancy was feeble and new. If Shiv had to guess, he wouldn’t even be able of teleporting a pebble right now, and considering he was probably trapped in a Legendary spatial magic skill...

Not felling good.

His insides boiled with rage and frustration. He had been busy trying to bring the Tarrasque down. The damned Avatars and Ascendants had been absent for most of the fight, and even when Shiv figured out how to weaken the world-ending monster with his Drain Vitality Skill, they held back. What was the point of being a divinely empowered warrior beyond the limits of a Legendary Pathbearer if you were too scared to put your life on the line? Cowardly shi—

Psycho-Cartography: Complain less. Focus your mind. You're drifting all over the place. We need to get back to Blackedge and finish off the Tarrasque. We can't leave Adam, Uva, and everyone else on their own. Complaining serves no purpose. Accept. Adapt. Deal with it. This is no different from hunting lesser vampires as a Pathless. Solve the problem. Get the meal done.

Surprise pierced through Shiv as his own Psychology Skill intervened to re-center his mind. But it was what he needed. Why did he expect anything to be reasonable? Why did he expect things to be fair in any capacity? The System didn't care, and neither did the Avatars or Ascendants. But Shiv did, and so he was going to need to deal with it.

Everything is shit until you finally get it right for the first felling time, Shiv thought, thinking back to what Georges taught him. Fix all your main fucking problems. Then focus on being great.

And that's what Shiv did. He was being flung across time and space—could barely move with how much displaced pressure was crushing him. He didn't have any means of disrupting the magic; his Portomancy was too feeble to contend with the spell. But that didn't mean he was out of options.

In fact, Shiv had options available to him and only him.

He knew that because he could still see a sheen of vitality lining the world around him. Immediately, he started draining life force from Integration itself. A warning popped up before his eyes. He ignored it with a smirk.

Warning: Ambient Mana Threshold is being destabilized. Continual destabilization will increase the chances of a Dimensional anomaly.

“Dimensional anomaly might just be what I want,” Shiv muttered. His Vitae strands tore into the flesh of existence and began to draw in surges of vitality. He was a glowing shape of white and red within a cascading sea of static darkness. That didn’t last. As he drained more, a rupture formed, and a claw of curling fire exploded against him. Shiv clenched his teeth as the hairs on his skin were singed. The temperature only climbed higher as the rupture was opened even wider.

For the first time, Shiv took a moment to gaze into the magical wounds he was inflicting the world, and his eyes widened. Within the rupture, he could feel mana of all varieties clash and intermingle. So many fields were oscillating and clashing together, and as Shiv thinned the barriers of existence, the strongest fields broke free. Such was why the heat was getting so intense so fast. And why there were other types of mana following it.

A solid fork of crystallized lightning nearly took Shiv’s head clean off. He tilted his neck and blocked the blow with his arm. It still scored a deep scratch along his shoulder, and his wound bled openly—

For about a second. Then, he felt that familiar sensation of cancer spreading through his cells. A faint pulse of unstable Biomancy was hidden among all the other magical fields, and Shiv just snorted as he understood his impending death.

Magic was bullshit, but wondrous bullshit. Shiv loved every little thing it did to him or anyone else.

Dodge 21 > 22

As he took in another dose of vitality, the rupture before him burst open fully, and it was only the use of Outside Context Problem that saved Shiv's life. The flames that came for him were alive. A winged creature made from a white-hot blaze tore across the space where Shiv just existed, but cocked its head back in confusion as it realized he was gone.

Meanwhile, within the confines of his own Vitae, Shiv observed a fast-moving hawk-like creature and guessed that it was a phoenix or something. It was slightly larger than he was at his baseline state, but it radiated with such potent Pyromancy and Shiv suspected that it wouldn't face much difficulty if it wanted to turn him to ash. It flapped its wings, and the Dimensionality mana combusted. Its fire was more than physical, it was something that consumed the magical as well. Holes were burned into the dense, static mana that held Shiv, and through the gap, Shiv looked beyond the veil of dimensions for the first time.

And that proved to be a mistake. Shiv tried to pull his gaze away, but it was too late. His sanity was ripped open. It felt like someone had dragged a hook blade across his consciousness. Shiv gasped as he gripped his head and looked away. The effects of looking through the gap were so bad that his Outside Context Problem Skill collapsed as well. Once more, he returned to reality—and immediately died as he was vaporized by a passive wave of force and fire that exploded out of the phoenix.

Another downside to Pillar—it needs to be focused on to reach its true effectiveness.

His wounded Pyromancy field was mutilated further, and the thick weave of Vitae that emerged from Shiv's parting ash came out writhing.

Pyromancy 15 > 19

Gravitic Wrestler 178 > 186

Pillar of Orichalcum 225 > 226

Outside Context Problem 82 > 85

Vitality Drain 85 > 89

The additional level applied to Shiv's Pillar was the only reason he didn't immediately turn to dust before the phoenix. That, and the sudden dimensional storm that exploded out from the rupture. A dense flood of Dimensional mana clashed with the existential magic already encompassing Shiv. Space didn't so much tear as it did burst like a bubble. Shiv flinched, expecting chaos and madness to assail him.

Instead, he found himself crashing against the ground. A ground made from a reddish-gold substance—the very same hue as his pillar. The Deathless shook as he took in his surroundings, and he found himself in a ten-meter-long cylinder. The walls were lined with spell patterns, and Shiv offered the world a silent sigh as he realized he was in a teleportation anchor again. One that already had an occupant.

A huge, muscular wolf-man hybrid lifted its head and stared at Shiv. The lupine creature was chained to the walls by reddish gold bindings as well, and by this point, Shiv was reasonably sure the material composing this cage was Orichalcum. The wolf-man sniffed the air briefly and finally cocked its head. "Not food."

The Deathless has been spotted. The one to extinguish his Vitae will gain the Quest rewards.

The wolf-man's bright-blue eyes widened. "Huh. Well, that's something else. Wait. Are you the Deathless?"

Shiv wanted to reply, but his Psychomancy was in tatters, and he didn't have a mouth. He slowly held up two tendrils of Vitae to show he didn't mean any harm. Before he could ask the wolf man where he was, a loud siren pulsed through the room, and there came a booming voice that shook this anchor-prison.

"ATTENTION ALL WARDENS! CELLS NADIR-00344 AND 00551 HAVE BEEN COMPROMISED! THE CAUSE IS LIKELY A DIMENSIONAL ANOMALY. REQUESTING PYROMANCER/MAGE-HUNTER CONTAINMENT TEAMS RESPOND AND HEAD TO 00551 IMMEDIATELY. RESPONSE TEAM ZERO, YOU HAVE BEEN ACTIVATED. THE THREAT IN 00344 IS LISTED AS PRIORITY ZENITH BY LEGEND-COUNCILWOMAN VERONICA CHANDLER. ALL NON-MARTIAL PATHBEARERS ARE TO TRIGGER MAGICAL COUNTERMEASURES AND EVACUATE FROM THE VICINITY OF 00551. A LEGENDARY-TIER PHOENIX HAS BREACHED CONTAINMENT."

The telepathic broadcast hit Shiv like a concussive blast to the skull, and by the time it was done, his mind was ringing.

Well, I guess that explains where the flaming bird went. Shiv winced. He thought about the phoenix causing more damage or hurting people. He didn't want that. But like always, unexpected shit happened when he used his skills. The System was probably mocking him deliberately by this point—escalating the collateral damage he inflicted whenever it could.

“What are you?” the wolf-man asked. Its voice was low and inquisitive, and Shiv found it just an inch away from his body. Shiv tried to reply, but quickly realized he couldn't reliably do that without resurrecting first. He tentatively reached out and started sapping from vitality from reality—doing it to the wolf-man was too risky and hostile.

The wolf-man watched Shiv as he slowly drank in life force from the world. A new rupture began to form where Shiv did so, so he crawled to the other side of the cell and repeated his action. Even with him being careful, the three small ruptures began to bleed liquid-infused diamonds into the cell. The wolf-man looked on with narrowed eyes, but he did nothing to stop Shiv. There was some slack to his chains, so he could have definitely tried attacking the Deathless, but he held himself back—waited to see what might happen.

As Shiv took in a final rush of vitality, he resurrected and emerged from his Vitae a whole person once more.

The wolf-man's eyes widened at the Deathless's metamorphosis and let out a snuffle. “Well. The System's ugly hand is heavy on you, my new cellmate. That, or I'm hallucinating things again from loneliness. Are you real? Are the notifications I'm getting true?”

“I hope so,” Shiv grunted. He looked up and saw a small transparent porthole lining the ceiling high above. “Been through too much shit to discover I'm just made up.”

The wolf-man let out a quiet laugh. “Well. You might have landed in more trouble than one can overcome. You're in the Well, now. So if this is a teleportation mishap, you have my condolences, but I fear you won't be leaving this place ever again.”

Shiv ignored the wolf and shot up toward the ceiling. He slammed fist-first against the glass blocking the exit and winced as the blow he delivered was reflected into his knuckles. Instead of slamming more

strikes against the anchor prison, he tried to glance out from the cell to get a better understanding of just where avatars had teleported. As soon as he looked up, a mechanical something fell over the porthole, blocking Shiv's line of sight. A moment later, Shiv found himself staring up at a heavily armored automaton holding a studded mace.

It looked down at Shiv with a single glowing eye and waved at someone unseen. "He is here. I have located him."

"But it doesn't sound like you came here by accident," the wolf-man continued, looking up at Shiv. "It sounds like you were sent here on purpose. So. What did you do?"

Shiv pressed a hand against the glass and tried to rip it out using his gravitic field. The insides of the cell groaned. The wolf-man's Orichalcum chains rattled slightly, but Shiv realized he was an insect trying to uproot a tower. This prison was Orichalcum, which meant that its Toughness could be adjusted, that it couldn't be moved unless you were stronger than it was durable. On top of that, it had a force-reflection enchantment as well.

He wasn't going to be breaking out of here through brute force.

Shiv frowned. I need a moment. I need to think.

With that thought, he manifested his temporal shell to buy himself some more time. The world went still. A dense layer of golden mana flared around his body. But before he could do anything, the insides of the cell flashed with Chronomancy as well, and promptly unleashed a discharge of concentrated Magical Resistance at Shiv.

It would have ripped through his temporal shell in an instant if he hadn't gone out of context. The Magical Resistance consumed the insides of the cell in a swirl of prismatic colors, and the wolf-man let out a cry of misery as he was brutally affected. Shiv winced in shame. Right. He wasn't the only one in here.

While the discharge died down, Shiv focused on coming up with a plan to escape. He wasn't going to break out directly. So, that left him with a few other options. The most direct one was seeing if he could out-tough the cell with his own Pillar of Orichalcum Skill. Maybe Shiv could push through this prison with his pillar after enough time, but that came with several problems. The first was how it would leave him vulnerable to the magic infused within this chamber. He had no means of defending himself while the pillar was active. If he activated his pillar, he would also end up crushing the wolf-man.

That wasn't something Shiv could accept. He didn't want to hurt anyone without a proper reason.

Direct as using his pillar to grind against the cell might be, it was simply impractical and risky.

So what else did he have? Shiv looked at his skills, trying to find a solution. He wasn't going to cook his way out of here. His Creeping Void would just flood the cell in darkness. It wouldn't help him get out.

But that led him down a path toward new possibilities: deception.

He had still had a few corpses left in his cape. And then there was the cape itself—it was a minor dimension; a hideout. He could use that. He just needed to get the people up top to open the cell. Then, he would go out of context and freeze time again to escape.

As the first fingers of coldness brushed against Shiv's soul, he acted. He pulled a body out from his cape before unequipping the cape from himself and wrapping it around the body. He dove into the cape right after, and pulled himself toward the Forest of Alloy. As he tumbled into the pocket dimension, Shiv released both his Outside Context Problem and Strider Skills.

The corpse fell, and Shiv felt gravity lurch up around him. For the first time, Shiv realized just how uncomfortable it was for the people inside the cape. Everything was moving constantly, and as his decoy corpse impacted the ground, the dimension went still, causing Shiv to bounce off an iron tree.

A brief moment of silence followed, and then there came sniffing. The wolf-man let out a sigh from the outside. "Well. Serves me right for wanting to have a conversation after eighty years in solitary. Of course he died immediately. Why wouldn't that happen."

Deception 23 > 25

The sheer sour misery in the wolf-man's voice made Shiv feel a bit bad, but the deception was necessary if he wanted to escape. The Deathless waited at the edge of the pocket dimension with bated breath. He listened carefully. Soon, with luck, the Pathbearers of this place would come down to retrieve his body. The moment they descended to make sure, he would move and make his escape.

Shiv counted the seconds. He could hear the jingling of chains outside, could smell something foul seeping into his nostrils. "Gods, is that the wolf-man? Do they not let him bathe?" Shiv gagged.

"No, Insul. I'm afraid that's me." Shiv spun on his heels and found himself surprised. Propped against a large tree made from bundled wires and branches of plastic was Bonk. His legs were pointing in the wrong direction, and one of his arms was missing. He had a tourniquet tied over the stump, and a half-broken club lay across his lap. He grinned happily at Shiv and waved with his remaining arm.

“Bonk,” Shiv said. “How the hells did you get in my cape.”

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Bonk looked at a notification for a beat but went back to ignoring it just a moment later. Shiv was still suspicious, but the orc was in no condition to fight. Or so he seemed.

“Well. It all started when we got swallowed by the Tarrasque. It clamped down on my legs, and then I got struck by a piece of hull. That didn’t knock me out, but slamming head-first into the roof of the Tarrasque’s mouth and then getting blasted by a psionic attack did the trick.” The orc chuckled, and wheezed in pain. “I suspect I must’ve been launched into your cape at some point while unconscious. How fortunate.”

Shiv wasn’t sure if he believed the orc’s story, but a feeling of relief radiated from him. He wasn’t alone here—even if his only ally was a badly wounded orc, it was better than being completely isolated.

“So,” Bonk said. “What is the situation?”

Shiv was about to reply when there came a sound from the outside.

“I didn’t kill him,” the wolf-man said calmly. “He was alive a moment ago, but he suddenly ended up dead right after. I think he’s a Chronomancer. The cell had to discharge its Resistance into me for a reason. Unless you all are trying to torture me for fun again. I think he struck the ceiling with his head and died. That’s my best guess.”

"I'll tell you in a minute," Shiv said to Bonk. "Right after I get back."

"Get back?" the orc asked.

Shiv sank into his Vitae and froze time in the same instant. He launched himself out from his cape right after and re-entered the cell.

The first thing he did after re-entering the cell was pull the cape off his decoy corpse. The next was launching himself upward, upward toward the previously sealed porthole. Shiv knew it was open now, considering the automaton Pathbearer he'd seen earlier had half of its body within the anchor prison. Unfortunately for Shiv, the automaton was big, and thus blocked the way. Unfortunately for the automaton, Shiv wasn't going to stop. He had no intention of rotting inside a prison cell at the whims of the Ascendants.

He impacted the automaton's body in a rush of speed.

Even so, Shiv refrained from hitting the automaton overly hard. It was just a common guard as far as he knew, and guards didn't deserve to die. Not like orcs, not like the Inquisition. Shiv was going to pull his punches here as much as he could. Escape was still his top priority, but that didn't mean he was going to grease his way with the blood and oil of the innocent.

He thought back to all the slaves that died in Theborn, at all the casualties in Blackedge.

Too much. It's always too much.

Another blast of Magical Resistance churned the inside the prison cell just as Shiv shot free. He flung the automaton aside and made sure the mechanical Pathbearer suffered only a dent to its midsection and nothing more. As the Deathless looked around, he found himself in a wide and alloyed valley. Tall Orichalcum walls flanked him on both sides, and Shiv guessed he had no more than 20 meters of width to work with. What's more, there were dozens of cells lodged in the ground ahead and behind him. They all looked just like the one he'd escaped from, and when gazed down on from above, he saw shuddering layers of near-transparent force serving as lids for each of the prison-anchors.

A rush of color danced in his peripheral vision. As his head snapped to the right, he saw that there were spell patterns spilling down from the valley walls. Dense waves of mana poured along their edges, appearing almost like liquid.

Just what the hell is this place? Shiv thought

Chapter 166 (II) Prison

His stomach tightened with anxiety as he wondered just how far the Ascendants might have teleported him. He needed to get back. He needed to help Adam and the others. The Tarrasque was still alive. He was needed back at Blackedge, not here in some prison. The bastards couldn't even wait for him to help finish killing the Tarrasque before doing this. Those godsdamned—

Psycho-Cartography: You can get angry, but move away from this chain of thought. Remember, it will not help you. You are in whatever kind of prison this is, and now you have to get out. Put your mind to that.

Once more, Shiv's Psycho-Cartography stopped him from spiraling. He looked upward, but hesitated before he spiked his gravity field further. The wolf-man was still down there. Shiv didn't know anything

about him, didn't know how he got to this prison, or what he had done to deserve it. What he did know was that the wolf-man had apparently been here for 80 years.

80 years in solitary. That was a special kind of torture. Shiv had been ostracized and shunned for most of his life, but he still lived in a society. People still acknowledged his existence, if only to express their disgust, or to show him their fear. Something inside should have felt wrong and ashamed about leaving the Wolfman here, but what was he supposed to do? He wasn't even sure if he could escape himself.

Lacking a better option, he relied on instinct. He left an imprint of his temporal echo where he was, and accelerated higher. There was no other direction to go, and if he found the opportunity later, he might just come back. He might just see about setting the wolf-man free once he figured out why he was here.

Shiv was starting to get a feeling that this was a Republic blacksite. A far larger one compared to the torture cell where the Inquisition had kept Heather and Tran in Gate Theborn.

He flung himself upward and used his Farsight at the same time. It seemed that this valley just kept going and going. There was at least a kilometer of distance to travel before he saw a faint sheen. Red-gold. Orichalcum. This entire place seemed to be made from Orichalcum. He had no idea how the Republic had such a large supply, or even how the material itself even really worked.

He just knew that he wasn't going to be breaking out of this place through raw force.

His temporal shell began to fracture, and Shiv knew he was running out of time. And just then there came a large cascading wave. It emanated from the wall to his right, and another followed from his left as well. Both were tinged in gold and also Dimensionality. Temporal and spatial wardings. Powerful ones too. Muscle memory took hold of Shiv as he prepared to parry the magic. He let out a growl of frustration as he remembered his Magebreaker was broken again.

Unwilling to lose his Chronomancy, he dismissed his temporal shell, and time resumed.

This proved to be a mistake, as a deluge of offensive spells crashed into him.

The magic patterns running down the walls flared, and Shiv felt waves of gravity impact him. It wasn't nearly as strong as the Tarrasque, but it was still greater than anything his gravitic wrestler could muster. He pushed back, quivering in the air momentarily, but a spike of force slammed down on his head, and the world spun.

Shiv felt himself get dragged downward until he impacted the Orichalcum floor in a resounding crash. He gritted his teeth and tried to push his way up, but with every passing second, the gravitational force building on him was only getting greater, and it was more than gravity, it was physical weight as well.

His mass was growing to become unbearable, his bones creaked, his flesh and skin screamed, and then came waves of subtle Biomancy that seeped into Shiv's nerves. Soon, he lost control over his motor functions and found himself twitching on the ground. He would have been able to push back using his own Biomancy if the Tarrasque hadn't shredded his field so thoroughly.

Just then, something hit him on the head. It was more annoying than painful, and after the third bash Shiv gritted his teeth and managed to move his eye. He saw the automaton he'd impacted earlier bringing a studded club down on him over and over again. They let out mechanical wails as they let rage take hold.

Shiv decided that he had been a little too nice to the automaton, and that this behavior it was exhibiting was unbecoming of a guard. A pulse of translucence washed over Shiv, and he felt a subtle influence seep into his mind. It was at that point that Shiv activated his contingency plan. He cast himself back in time

and returned to where his echo was. He blinked across space and rematerialized a mere 50 meters away.

The automaton was still swinging its club when Shiv disappeared, and so it impacted the ground with a resounding crash. The club was wrenched free from the automaton's hands. As it bounced across the ground, the mechanical Pathbearer cursed—and then shrieked as Shiv launched himself at it. He tackled the automaton to the ground and immediately drove an elbow into its head. Its optical lens cracked and sparks sprayed out, but a low groan sounding from the machine signaled it was still alive.

"Please," the automaton droned. Shiv could hear the naked fear leaking from its voice. A chain of fear flowed from the automaton to Shiv, and he felt his magic and strength surge. The automaton was a damned fool, but Shiv still didn't have the taste for finishing it off. He wasn't facing a warrior.

Just then, a loud, telepathic broadcast hammered against Shiv's mind as the speaker from earlier returned. "Attention all Pathbearers. Attention all wardens. Priority Zenith has breached containment. All emergency response teams have been activated. Orders are to secure and contain. Non-lethal only. Do not kill. I repeat: do not kill. Anyone who disobeys these orders will answer to Legend Veronica Chandler the moment she returns."

This didn't surprise Shiv. Considering the price the System had placed on his head, it was going to be hard for most greedy Pathbearers to resist the opportunity he presented. 10 Legendary Skills were enough to make anyone a monster in battle. Frankly, the only part that left Shiv astonished was the fact that the Ascendants wanted him alive.

Maybe they were deliberating on who got to kill him.

That's probably it.

Once more, a crushing swell of Dynamancy blasted out from the nearby walls, but Shiv went out of context. The coldness flowed through him. That was fine. He wouldn't stay in this state for long. Instead, he intended to cause a bit more chaos. He was out of ingenious plans, but he did know one thing: The spell patterns flowing down along the valley walls like waterfalls needed to be disrupted. Shiv couldn't break Orichalcum, but he didn't need to do so to destabilize the magic. He just needed to drain a bit of vitality and let a mana storm do his job for him.

As soon as the Dynamancy faded, he returned to the world, surfacing in a burst of red and white as he extended his vitae. His vitae strand splashed on both walls, and Shiv drew in life force from the world. The left wall flashed, and a tide of Biomancy crashed against Shiv. However, his field had recovered just enough that he managed to last a second. A second and no more before his field was torn asunder again.

Aegis of Assimilation 111 > 112

But that second mattered. That second mattered because by the time Shiv felt his nervous system get usurped he managed to open up a rupture, which promptly unleashed a fountain of water.

But it wasn't ordinary water; it moved less like a fluid as it crept across the world, and more like an infection.

And Shiv noticed the faint notes of red within the water. Literal notes. They resembled melodies. Symbols from a musical sheet. And inside the fluid, pulsing tissues emerged and faded. The unnatural flood crashed against the wall and the spellwork cascading down the walls, and it broke apart as conflicting mana swept across its surface.

A groan of laughter came from Shiv as he was released from the crushing magic keeping him pinned. His nerves didn't feel like they were on fire anymore, and the Dynamancy was lessened as well. It took a moment for him to regain control over his body, but by the time he was standing, two groups of Pathbearers teleported in ahead and behind him.

There were six Pathbearers in both teams. Each was led by a Vanguard bearing colossal halberds and mighty shields. One carried a tower shield, while the other had a round shield that covered half their body. Behind them were lancers, Pathbearers bearing spears or lances, and behind them were mages. One Jump Mage at least for each group. And finally there was an Archer of some kind at the back of each team—holding a large, barreled weapon Shiv couldn't identify.

Can Hu probably would know what that is. Shit. Can Hu. I hope it's alright...

More teams teleported in. They appeared to his left and right as well, and Shiv found himself boxed in. The mana storm seeping out from the rupture was promptly sealed by a bubble of Dimensionality, and the strange Biomancy-Hydromancy fusion magic was cut off.

Shiv licked his lips as he eyed his new adversaries. Once more, the System made him pulse, and a notification appeared before his vision. It reminded people who he was every single time, deliberately provoking them.

The tower shield-wielding Pathbearers pointed their halberds at Shiv. "Down on the ground. Hands out at your side—"

And Shiv didn't hear the rest because he promptly discharged his inertial sheath. A blast of force expanded out from him. Two bolts cut through the air. Shiv was long gone. He started pumping out his Creeping Void right after. Everything around him faded into all-consuming blackness.

Two more shots cut past his head, slamming together. Both arrows detonated in midair as they impacted. The Pathbearers who fired those bolts were accurate, dead-on, and equal to each other. That's how their shots met in the air. That's how Shiv realized that they were unleashing payloads of concussive force. They were serious about taking him alive. Tragically, he didn't think they had enough force in those arrows to even tickle him.

The Creeping Void 114 > 116

However, Shiv didn't want to be bogged down fighting these Pathbearers. He needed out. He paused. He observed his adversaries for a moment and realized he didn't even know where out was. No, what he needed were a hostage and a guide.

That way he would be able to navigate this prison. And finally, something caught his attention. From the corner of his eye, he saw a shadow zipping down along the walls. Shiv spiked his field to the left and barely avoided a descending kick. The blow fell like a plunging axe, and as soon as it struck the ground, the Orichalcum surface resonated like a bell.

The attack reminded Shiv of Bonk's Heroic-Tier Physicality, how every time he struck something it made them resonate, made them more vulnerable for the next hit. It also reminded Shiv of Bonk because it didn't inflict a lot of collateral damage. It simply made the ground rattle and nothing more.

Even though the attack was a blindingly fast kick, there was no shockwave, no combustion in the air. There was control and precision.

And something about this new enemy left Shiv feeling uneasy.

The enemy automaton looked at Shiv from a gleaming, vertical slit of violet light. Its head was the shape of a thin pyramid, and Divination mana spilled free from its face. That also explained why it could see him even in this nest of darkness. Shiv studied his new enemy. It had six arms, and its body was designed with the aesthetic of an extremely muscular human. In fact, its torso resembled some very stylized armor designs, those that had pecs and a six-pack. Its legs, meanwhile, were like jointed blades. This automaton was made for running. And something told Shiv to be wary of its speed.

But more than any of these details, what made his hairs stand on it was the ethereal presence hovering above the bot like an apparition.

It pointed its single, massive fist at Shiv in something of a salute.

The automaton Ascendant. Cripple the Strongest. He was facing an Avatar.

Shiv hovered in the air, but his new adversary simply stood on the ground. Another arrow ripped blindly through the darkness, impacting this adversary's shoulder. The bolt bounced off at an angle, and a pulse of kinetic energy sank into the automaton's body.

Force-absorption? Not great, Shiv noted.

Yet, instead of attacking Shiv immediately, this new hostile looked him up and down and held up a placating hand. "Surrender. Councilwoman Veronica Chandler demands that you be interred here. But she said nothing of harm or use of force. I ask you again. Surrender peacefully, and we will make sure you are accommodated properly."

Shiv didn't reply. Instead, he shot upward and froze time, trying to break contact. His odds of surviving in this prison long were poor. His chances of overcoming an Ascendant were practically non-existent.

As soon as he activated his temporal shell, the automaton's Chronomancy flared as well. However, its time magic didn't work like Shiv's. Instead, a golden pathway punched through Shiv's being as time accelerated. Pieces of his temporal shell shattered. Shiv lost four seconds from the impact. But as he cast himself back in time, he avoided the remainder of the beam and began climbing once more.

He whipped out a strand of Vitae and snatched one of the crossbow-wielding Pathbearers. As soon as he started reeling them up, another beam of gold came for him. Shiv cursed and reverted his position to where he was three seconds ago. His temporal armor was on the verge of breaking, and he dismissed his Chronomancy. Too late. A tide of gold struck him. The wardings impacted his body, and he was too distracted by everything to respond. His Chronomancy shattered.

Shiv let out a grunt of frustration, which turned into a choked cry as something hit him in the back. The blow thundered through his body, and he felt the air get driven out from his lungs. Before he could respond, a hand snaked around his neck and began tightening.

A hand that was promptly turned to crushed paste as Shiv seized it. He pressed inward with his gravitic field, and a scream came from behind him as he shredded the arm that dared touch him. Yet before he could do anything else, the six-armed automaton was upon him. Shiv flung the Pathbearer that just choked him at the automaton. Rather than swatting his ally aside, the automaton caught his companion and twirled in the air, draining his momentum.

Shiv spiked his field forward, and he prepared to detonate his sheath again and then move in another direction. Then, an unseen force pulled Shiv in. It felt like the world was collapsing—like left, right, up, down didn't exist. But he had to move ahead. Shiv fought to keep his trajectory, spiking himself over and over. His inertial sheath exploded as he got within a meter of his foe.

The blast flung most of the other Pathbearers off their feet. Only the Vanguard remained standing. The Avatar, meanwhile, walked through Shiv's attack like it was strolling through a rough gale. It somersaulted over Shiv in a blur. He spiked himself backward, driving his shoulder into the automaton.

But it was like water, and Shiv was a stone. It gave ground and sapped his might. With the sudden shift of their hip, Shiv found himself being launched off balance. He tried pulling his field back, but was forced to discharge his inertial sheath again when he realized he was going too fast. As soon as he discharged, the automaton struck. Three hard fists struck Shiv in the solar plexus, the throat, and the temple.

His vision darkened—but Shiv exploded forward in a second wind and tried to headbutt his enemy.

It caught him by the neck with one hand. The speed and force was ripped out of him. He went dead-still. Shiv hissed as he tried to pull back, but he was trapped in a force-drinking grip. And he ultimately found himself helpless. He strained with all his might, but the automaton casually drove its remaining palms into his body.

Gravitic Wrestler 187 > 190

A bomb went off inside Shiv. It was then that Shiv felt the true power of the automaton. It didn't deliver strikes to the body. It didn't even scratch his skin. No, the punch went straight to Shiv's mind. An entire section of his thoughts were rendered blank. Shiv reeled. Drool dripped from his lips as he lost track of where he was, who he was.

Three more punches hit him, followed by a kick.

When a semblance of coherence returned to Shiv, he was twirling through the air. His head bounced off the ground, but instead of feeling any pain, he was just utterly confused. Pure instinct spared him from a low kick that was scything through the air, coming straight for his head.

However, he was tackled back to the ground before he could fully get back to his feet. A blade was rammed into his ribs, and the blade broke against his ribs as Shiv triggered his Pillar of Orichalcum. He swung blindly, and his elbow connected with something. It was a sloppy hit, but he was strong enough now that the target let out a loud cry of pain. Shiv dragged his field and began to slide across the ground. Blood sprayed as Shiv dragged the Pathbearer trying to assassinate him along the floor like a whetstone.

When he got tired of her howls of pain, he flung her at another adversary and tried to rise—

Only for a crossbow bolt to punch through his chest. Shiv realized he'd underestimated those bolts, because it promptly detonated with more than kinetic force. A gravitic chain shot out from the bolt and connected him to the ground. Shiv stopped time—and the war dings immediately shattered his shell. The Avatar—which was suddenly right in front of him again—flicked its leg up. Shiv moved to back off—but its kick went from being a roundhouse to something more akin to a question mark. A blow meant for his body curved and struck his head instead.

Whiteness filled Shiv's vision as the flat side of the bladed leg impacted him. When he returned to himself, he was gasping on the ground.

The automaton stood over him. Its fists were clenched, and it repeated its command. "Surrender. It is never too late." Its voice was serene. Like the rustling of leaves. Like shaking grass.

Shiv was almost lured into a false sense of tranquility when his Psycho-Cartography Skill screamed at him.

More bolts struck his body. New gravity chains kept him pinned to the ground. He tried to struggle and break these chains, but they were too dense, and he was surrounded. His body was—

Wait, to hells with this body. I got enough vitality left to make a play at this.

The automaton said something else—but its peaceful demeanor broke into a shout of alarm as Shiv disemboweled himself with a burst of gravity. “What are you doing!”

Shiv flung his viscera and intestines over the automaton’s body. It swatted his gore aside—but was too late to stop him from killing himself. The rest of Shiv’s body imploded into a wet mess of splattered red. His Vitae slipped free from his corpse, unchained from the crossbow bolts. At the same time, the Avatar was distracted by Shiv’s brutal death and didn’t see a slithering strand of Vitae gliding through the blood and burrowing into its foot.

Pyromancy 15 > 18

Hydromancy 12 > 15

Psychomancy 19 > 26

Aegis of Assimilation 112 > 114

Pillar of Orichalcum 225 > 229

Gravitic Wrestler 190 > 195

Outside Context Problem 82 > 87

Vitaemancy 89 > 93

Vitality drain 89 > 96

As soon as Shiv made contact with the automaton's body, he drained its vitality. He used the very same technique that weakened the Tarrasque against his divinely powered foe. The Orichalcum valley was bathed in a vortex of life force. For the first time, the Avatar cried out in agony. Shiv resurrected in a near instant as an ocean of vitality surged through him.

The Avatar crashed down to its knees, and Shiv felt its inner flame flicker. In another few seconds, it would be nothing more than just ash—

Its hand shot out and seized Shiv's. Its body came aglow with divine incandescence. The Deathless's eyes widened as Cripple infused itself into the lesser automaton. Five of the avatar's arms shattered into shrapnel. One remained, and it absorbed the broken pieces that composed the other limbs to create a colossal slab of fractured alloy.

“Fine, then,” the Avatar said, Cripple’s voice echoing through it. “You wish to seek another end? I will oblige.”

Chapter 166 (III) Prison

Shiv tried to go out of context—but by the time he reacted, he was dead again.

His Vitae burst free from his body, and he was staggered to see the automaton’s fist driven through his chest. His corpse was also charred and melting. But there was no damage anywhere else. None of the other Pathbearers present were even stunned. Every hit the Avatar and Ascendant inflicted was unleashed on Shiv and nothing else.

He envied its control. He envied its power. And he hated the fact that he was so outmatched.

Inertial Overdrive 126 > 130

Gravitic Wrestler 195 > 200 (Skill Evolution Imminent)

Pillar of Orichalcum 229 > 231

Shiv’s corpse dissolved around the Avatar’s fist. But as it drew its arm back, pieces of its body fell away. Cracks spread along its metal shell, and it staggered toward Shiv’s Vitae. Apparently, this power was too much for it as well. Channeling Cripple the Strongest seemed to come at a brutal personal cost.

“I see you now,” Cripple said. The Avatar’s voice was altogether absent. “I see your life-fused spirit. Your ways will not work on me again—”

And then Shiv halted time and went out of context. Everything went still for an instant. Then Shiv speared into the chest of the already brutalized automaton and began sapping what little bit of lifeforce it had left.

Or so he tried. He shot through the air—but the automaton shuddered and vanished with a flash of Divination mana from its eyes. Shiv felt his insides tighten as he cursed the skill. Diviners might not be able to notice his exact existence, but the System still warned them of his proximity—or they had some other way of sensing danger.

Shiv went for one of the Vanguard's instead. As soon as he touched one, he drained the man—but had to stop after a half-second as a Vanguard’s body shriveled and dropped. Shiv resurfaced. He managed to touch a lancer and drink in a trickle of lifeforce. That was enough to bring him back.

And that proved to be his mistake.

Rather than striking him as a mess of Vitae, the Avatar burst back into existence and slammed a twisting fist against the center of Shiv’s forehead.

The world went silent. A ringing noise became the totality of his existence. Fragmented edges of pain lined the insides of his skull, and Shiv felt entirely at peace.

Until his ego snapped back together in a tortuous instant.

Shiv awoke with a cry of pain. He found a cage of Dynamancy being built around him, found Pathbearers standing over him. The Avatar stood over his head, supported by a few other Pathbearers. It threw itself back in surprise as Shiv snarled and ripped someone off their feet. He swung his victim back and forth, using the heavily armored elf to batter and swat at foes he couldn't reach.

He managed to hit two people before the valley walls joined in again and someone snatched the guard out of the air.

A cascade of magics crashed down and flooded over Shiv. Shiv lost control of his body first as a pool of red mana slithered under his flesh. Hostile Biomancy compromised his nervous system. And then new shackles of force were built around his arms and legs, locking him in place. Finally, a lapping tide of Psychomancy coiled around him, pulling tighter and tighter until his consciousness narrowed to a pinprick.

It felt a little bit like getting choked out from the inside, and though Shiv tried to fight it, he was sinking deeper into himself. He reached for a skill that he couldn't remember, but it was futile.

His Chronomancy triggered briefly—and shattered as another wavelength of counter-magic impacted him.

"We asked you to come peacefully," the Avatar wheezed. Its voice came with a crackle. "This was not necessary. We do not intend to harm—"

"Fuck you!" Shiv managed to snarl through bared teeth. "There are people who need me! Blackedge... My friends! The Tarrasque is still alive! I need to go back... I need to go back!"

Shiv thrashed. Shiv struggled. He raged against the magic pinning him in place. Some part of him knew that he was good and chained, but that part of his mind was broken for now. Broken and regenerating.

A Vanguard lifted his leg to stomp down on Shiv's head. For a moment, Shiv saw the War Priest instead of a Vanguard—remembered the wound inflicted on him in his youth. "You insolent—"

"NO!" Cripple roared. The Avatar's torso burst apart from sheer volume, and the Vanguard was launched across the room with a scream. "No," the Ascendant repeated, its voice falling to a thin whistle. "No one harm him. We have done enough to him. We have..." The Avatar limped over to Shiv and looked down. "We had to do this. We must understand why the System is so determined to destroy you. And we needed to take you off the board so that no one would be tempted to claim your life for the reward. We are doing this to protect you. It is for your benefit."

Psycho-Cartography:

Listen to its voice. Neither the Avatar nor Cripple actually believe a single word they're saying. This is bullshit.

Rage exploded inside Shiv. Desperate, impotent rage. He discharged his sheath, pushed as hard as he could with his field. The dense bands of Dynamancy flexed and bent slightly, but they did not break. And Shiv's body wasn't moving right. His arms and legs wouldn't listen. His flesh was a hive of numbness. He tried to think, but there was nothing there. No plans left. Even his memories were scattered.

All he had were his emotions and skills, and they weren't enough.

He wasn't enough.

He was captured. Trapped. Uva and Adam and all the others were on their own.

And Shiv hated that. He hated his weakness, he hated the Ascendants for taking him as a prisoner, he hated the magic keeping him suppressed—

The Avatar let out a mechanical sigh. “For what it is worth, I did not want this. I am dishonored by this. And I will not forgive the injustice we have inflicted on you and your allies. Before everything is over, there will be a reckoning. But not at the cost of our Republic. Right now, I need you to sleep. And when you wake, I must ensure your obedience.”

Incandescent translucence flared around the Avatar, and it reached down to touch Shiv’s mind.

“No!” he snarled in animalistic panic. A cold, metal digit hammered against his skull, and he felt the contents of his will, his consciousness, come apart. “NO!”

He pushed back against the Psychomancy with his own, but it just tore again, drowning him in pain.

There was nothing left of Shiv after that. Nothing but loathing for everything that kept him caged here, kept him—

Skill Gained: Magical Resistance 1 (Initiate)

The Deathless's eyes snapped open once more. He sucked in a breath. The Avatar's influence briefly bounced off his mind. Cripple gasped. Shiv let out a bestial snarl, twisted, and ripped his own body apart in one final attempt to get free. His flesh snapped and tore as he squeezed an arm past the peeling meat of his torso to throw a final blow against the avatar.

He struck its leg—and inflicted no harm at all.

No harm, but enough struggle to begin a transformation.

Gravitic Wrestler 200 > 201 (Skill Evolution Reached)

Skill Evolution: Gravitic Wrestler (Master) > Maelstrom of Stars Unmoving (Heroic)

The Avatar snapped down and gripped his skull in its massive fist. Shiv felt his fledgling Magical Resistance burst apart—

But he willed it not to. He wanted his Magical Resistance strong—impenetrable!

He wanted more strength than the Tarrasque. More durability. He needed more. More, so that he could keep being the master of his fate, so he could defy gods true and false alike.

The Challenger smiles upon you.

He wishes for you to rage.

The Composer is composing a hymn for you.

She yearns to see your safe return.

So he could guard that which he treasured. And so he could bring ruin to what he despised.

The first among which being his own weakness.

A pulse clarity came over Shiv, and he made a wish.

And as he did, as his nascent skill immediately surged to impossible heights, its evolution mingled with another, and Shiv felt himself descend into himself—fall away from his physical body into the depths of his soul.

Skill Evolution: Magical Resistance 1 (Initiate) > Magical Resistance 500 (Legendary)

Skill Fusion: Magical Resistance (Legendary) - Maelstrom of Stars Unmoving (Heroic)

The last thing Shiv heard before he lost his bodily senses entirely was Cripple calling out in astonishment. “Animancer! Get me an Animancer! He’s Delving! He’s going Legendary! Move him to Containment Cell Zenith! Now!”

[Initializing Delve...]

Chapter 167 (I) Enough

You should cultivate a certain madness in your heart. To be a good warrior and a great Pathbearer, one must hold two conflicting desires at the same time. A willingness to be gentle and nurse the wounds of your flesh and mind after battle, to be a creature of boundless love for yourself. Understanding is essential. Understanding and an impossible amount of forgiveness for all failures.

Then, at the same time, you must be merciless. You must drill every last failure out of your body and soul. To push yourself to the brink over and over, to arrive at a place where few others dare to tread. It is not brutality that will prevail here. That is a mistake. Internal brutality is not the adversary of self-affection, but its sibling. It is a maladaptive practice of the same desire to mend yourself—by cruelty or kindness. What will prevail is coldness. It is determination. It is absolute focus.

And you must shift between the two paradoxically so that you can reap every last level from your struggles.

I remember the people I have slain. So many deserving. But too many who were not. I did not mean to shed the blood of the weak; the brittle blood of the lamb. The act has debased me many times. Collateral damage is unavoidable; collateral damage is an unacceptable display of incompetence and weakness.

Both of these statements stand true at the same time.

I was too weak, too inexperienced, too emotional, too unfocused, too unwise, too wounded, too lost to do the right thing. Everyone becomes an unfailing paragon in retrospect, but I have come to learn that many of these mistakes are inevitable. The ones who will not admit this have the softest hearts of all.

But inevitability does not mean they are allowed. So I learned. So I drilled. So I turned these moral failures into lessons and made sure I would never fail the same way again. Until I encounter a new point of defeat. A new unacceptable failure. And I comfort myself. And then I learn. And the process continues.

There is no emotion that will make you a Legend. There is no singular philosophy. There is only you and the struggles you have faced. The ones you failed at. The ones you will fail at. And the ones you might be able to overcome.

Embrace who you are—and lift yourself high. Hatred, sorrow, or joy... They are all meaningless unless what follows is change.

Unless what follows is evolution.

-Legend: Reforged from Ruin, Written by Semper Paragon Caine Hauser of the Descenders Union

Shiv was falling.

The air screamed around him, licked at his aching flesh with a harsh, cold tongue. He didn't know where he was or where he was bound, but the fragments of his mind were coming back together with every meter he dropped. And what followed was fury with no one to vent it on.

His Berserk Skill almost triggered, but another skill interrupted Shiv before he could descend into a blind frenzy.

Psycho-Cartography: We can be pissed off and effective at the same time. There's nothing for you to go Berserk on right now. We're Delving. Whatever the hells that means. By the end of this, we'll have a Legendary Skill. We need to focus on getting that and then breaking out of this felling prison we're in. Spend your rage through your Farsight Skill. Figure out where we are first, and then discover what or who you can break after.

The wounded child in Shiv's heart wanted to ignore his Skill out of spite, to scream and lash out blindly. Yet, his time with the orcs granted him a level of awareness that made him cringe. He spent so much of his focus watching the gray-skins' behaviors that he started studying his own. Impotence disgusted Shiv. Waste made his blood boil. There would be no satisfaction that would come from screaming into the void, and it wouldn't let him help Adam, Uva, or anyone for that matter.

He needed to solve the problem—to push through the shit before he was good enough to make an actual dish.

And so he used his Master of Rage Feat to fuel his Farsight. His vision magnified beyond its previous limits. Dense folds of frigid moisture battered his body, but gradually began to part below. Something came into view. It resembled a place—a place Shiv knew.

The town of Blackedge greeted Shiv as he crashed through the bottom of the clouds.

Shiv tugged back on his gravitic field, and his plummet became a glide. He scanned the town from above and immediately noticed several things that were wrong. The first was the buildings. Some of the structures were not of Blackedge; he could see the mural-carved towers of Weave, and residential blocks from Gate Theborn.

And the many people walking the streets of the warped town were similarly foreign to his home, most numerous among them being the slaves.

A sickening feeling built in the pit of Shiv's stomach as he noticed an emaciated boy huddled against a wall and recognized him as the slave that had suffered under Oldsmith's belt. The one that had met his end between the digits of a sneering orc. Another woman passed by him, and Shiv's recollections stirred. He knew even less about her, but he'd seen her among the dead when the Jealousy crashed down inside its teleportation anchor.

There were non-slaves here as well. On the lawn behind Starhawk's Perch, Shiv saw the automaton Pathbearer that gave its life protecting Georges. He saw Feather, the Arrow Family Guard—the elf who offered his breastplate to Shiv before he passed. There were Umbrals here too. Umbrals that died during the raid at Passage, and those who were recently slain during the Vulteg raid.

Shiv wanted to ask why they were here, but he knew. Inside his bones, he already knew.

Psycho-Cartography: You believe you failed these people because you weren't strong enough. The System took notice. And now they're here to make our lives more difficult. Because—

“Just no end to the fucking strife, is there?” Shiv spoke to his skill. Psycho-Cartography offered no further reply. Nothing needed to be said.

Shiv landed just before Starhawk’s Perch. He slipped past the inner ring of the town and found the parapets unmanned. Truthfully, Blackedge seemed quite barren, aside from the people Shiv thought he’d failed. He hadn’t taken a look inside the buildings, though. He wouldn’t be surprised if there were people in them. Shiv saw the faint glow of vitality signatures all around him—but their life force all flowed back to him.

It’s like they’re created from me. Makes sense, since they’re part of this skill. Well. They’re actually dead. These are just recreations, I guess. But still, these are some really godsdamned accurate recreations. Accurate enough to scare the shit out of me.

He surveyed his surroundings as he began walking toward the Perch itself. He looked up at the top of its central spire and considered launching himself straight up. Shiv wondered if there was a clone of Roland up there. If there was, well, Shiv deserved to have a practice punch in this skill-plane as a pregame to the real deal.

But before he could do anything, a scroll of massive text manifested before his eyes.

Environment finalized.

Simulating critical encounters...

Initializing Skill-Shaping

Delve Quest Gained: Defend Blackedge from major threats. Prevent the town's destruction and keep at least ten percent of its population alive. Deaths from collateral damage will result in an immediate failure.

Success: Finalized Legendary Skill Evolution.

Failure: The simulation is reloaded.

Shiv took in the information. His hands tightened into fists. He saw the System's game here. It didn't just bring the slaves and other victims here to mock him; it was testing him on the basis of his worst failures. He fought too recklessly, too carelessly; his skills were too destructive. That bothered Shiv, and so his failures were carved into the skill as well.

Valor had warned him about this, about how every feat he performed was recorded by his skills. That didn't just mean his triumphs. Considering how often he died, he likely had more defeats than victories stored for the System's use. But he also considered the failure condition. The simulation being reloaded made it sound like he would get to try again. So, if that was the case, why was Valor so worried about him Delving? Was it just a matter of time and difficulty? The way the ancient Pathbearer was speaking earlier made it sound much worse.

Shiv was still missing something here. But he would find out soon enough.

"Alright," he said to himself. "Let's get this done, turn ourselves into a proper Low Legend, and get back to Blackedge. The actual Blackedge." He looked up at the sky and sneered. "Hey. System. If you're conscious at all, eat fucking shit. All I've done is give you more struggle. And all you've ever done is make

things worse. I don't know why you're so determined to do this, but whatever the reason—if there's an actual reason—go fuck yourself.”

Initiating Encounter (1/5)

As soon as the text appeared, Shiv noticed the space around him stutter. An enemy just got added to the Delve. It didn't take long for Shiv to hear screams in the distance. His head snapped to his left, and he saw a beam of fire slash high up into the air.

Shiv stopped time and moved. The world went still as he shot up into the air. As soon as Shiv climbed beyond the parapets once more, he followed the magical beam back to its origin. He recognized the enemy immediately. An elemental golem was attacking a group of slaves. It was the same one he faced inside Passage's teleportation anchor.

A savage grin pulled at the corner of Shiv's lips. Now this brought back fun memories. Well, that and the intense suffering that came from being slowly burned to death inside what basically amounted to a magical incinerator, but no pain, no joy.

The elemental golem looked much the same as it did before. Seemed about as powerful too.

The same couldn't be said about Shiv. Compared to the boy that had been pushed into the teleportation anchor by the fake Metven, present Shiv was practically a demigod. He wasn't just faster, tougher, stronger; he had a whole suite of Magical and Social Skills he could unleash as well.

There was no fight between him and the golem. It remained frozen in place as he slammed into it like a pickaxe descending on brittle stone. He rammed his fist through the golem's chest and crushed the

mana core inside. The entire encounter took less than two seconds. He let time resume, and the golem crumbled around him.

Shiv shrugged the remains of the dimensional aside as he brushed off smears of dirt and dust from his partially bare torso. He noticed that his Voidmantid armor was beginning to regenerate. That brought a flicker of joy to life in his chest. After losing his mask, his knife, and his gauntlet, it was nice to have one piece of equipment that could rebuild itself from the ground up.

Helix really knew what he was doing when he picked out a bribe for me. I need to figure out how to apply the regeneration for my next knife or something. The Skysplitter was good, but I need something with a bit more durability...

Encounter Complete (1/5)

Adjusting Legendary Skill...

The notification appeared before Shiv's eyes, and he frowned. He wasn't sure how his Skill Fusion was being adjusted. So far, it still just felt like he was using Gravitic Wrestler and nothing more. He couldn't even trigger his Magical Resistance in any way. Maybe I need to finish all the encounters before I get anything.

Something moved in the corner of his eye. Shiv instinctively turned to greet the people he'd just saved—and shuddered at the sight of Guardshead Leu.

"Thank you, Pathbearer," Leu said, her voice monotone. "Your aid was most welcome."

It wasn't her. Not really. But even the shadow of a dead Vulteg was enough to remind Shiv of her fate. He grimaced as he regarded her. She and the nearby slaves took on neutral postures now that the golem was dead. He saved them here, but he'd failed to do it in life. He'd had no chance to save Leu. Not from the Recollector. Maybe not even as he was right now.

"I'm sorry," Shiv whispered. The words were wasted on this imitation. But they weren't for her. It was one thing to logically know he had limits, that he couldn't save everyone. Feeling it was a different matter. Accepting it was impossible. Shiv didn't blame himself. Not really. But he did hate the System, hate the world, and hate his lack of power.

The last thing he hated the most. Because in a reality molded from conflict, only the hardest fist and the strongest will prevailed—so long as they were supported by worthy allies.

Initiating Encounter (2/5)

The Delve shuddered again. There came a loud, rumbling laugh. A vicious laugh he would never forget. Shiv's features twisted into a snarl as he blasted skyward once more. He was a hundred meters up in the air when he noticed the slaughter happening on the patio behind Starhawk's Perch. Blood glistened along fresh blades of grass, and Shiv flinched as he watched 811 rip Feather in half.

"Godsdamned fucking bastard," Shiv snarled to himself. He surged forward through the air with a crack of force, and 811 turned to greet him. The massive orc offered a jubilant smile to Shiv as he held a crystalline fist high.

He opened his mouth to say something.

Shiv drove a boot through his jaw instead. The orc's chin shattered into pulped flesh and skipping shards of bone. His head snapped back—but Shiv seized him before he could be launched anywhere. As soon as the Deathless touched the orc, a rush of electricity blasted through Shiv. He let out a hiss of discomfort and pushed through the orc's Aeromancy. Shiv yanked 811 off-balance by the orc's wrist; slammed the gray bastard against the ground through a hip-toss.

As the orc bounced, Shiv brought his foot down on 811's chest. Flesh tore. Cartilage and bone snapped. Hot blood welled around Shiv's ankles as he drove his foot down against the orc's spine. 811 gagged and choked on his blood as the ruined flaps of tissue constituting his chin flapped before Shiv's eyes. He was trying to say something, but Shiv didn't give a shit. He wanted this orc dead more than most others, and he wasn't going to lift his foot until 811's body was completely—

Something else let out a loud crunch beneath 811. The orc gave a gargling laugh—and twisted his body. Shiv caught sight of a goblin strapped to the orc's back. A dismembered goblin being worn like a backpack. Their face was nonexistent. Completely caked against the ground. And that was Shiv's doing.

The Deathless let out a snarl of pure frustration. "YOU PIECE OF FUCKING—"

Encounter Failed

Resetting Delve

Adjusting Legendary Skill...

The Delve shuddered violently. Shiv found himself falling once again. He blinked in surprise, and the snarl returned to him. “Motherfucking orc! Godsdamned—”

Psycho-Cartography: There is a social lesson in this Skill Evolution too. You’re rushing blindly. You need to get in the habit of watching and observing. Use your Awareness. You’re not bad at thinking. You have the capacity and the instinct for deception, so develop more patience. You can afford to let 811 kill a few people. He can’t destroy Blackedge on his own in a short amount of—

Applying Partial Skill Evolution: Maelstrom of Stars Unmoving (Heroic)

Shiv let out a gasp as power exploded out from his muscles. His marrow and sinews trembled with building pressure, and a wave of gravitic force exploded out from him. But it was more than gravity. It was more than a manipulation of mass around him. It was a projection of building force that crashed inward toward his body. Waves of kinetic energy collapsed toward him as he writhed. Shiv didn’t get any bigger, but his muscles did get denser. Every fiber of his being was infused with so much strength that Shiv felt his bones creak from the build-up.

By the time he recovered, he struck Blackedge like a falling hammer and tore through the battlements surrounding Starhawk’s Perch. Shiv fought to catch his breath as he tried to shrug the debris aside.

Yet the rubble clung to Shiv’s body even as he pawed at it—tried to push it away. The dust in the air was wrenched inward, pressing against his skin and revealing billowing waves of unseen force. The waves crashed against him, akin to water kissing the shoreline, and with each cascade of kinetic force, Shiv felt his physique grow stronger, felt the pressure around him go from magnetic to crushing. The rubble pressed against his body began to crack and turn to dissolving particulates.

The cobblestones lining the ground and other bits of masonry composing battlements he was partially embedded in came asunder as well. Even Shiv's own body creaked underneath the force closing tight around him. He focused on increasing his Toughness to compensate. His pillar formed, emerging as a faint rod that spiked high up in the sky.

Unlike before, Shiv found himself capable of moving with ease. Right then, he was stronger than he was tough, and with every wave, his strength climbed further still.

Shiv noted how similar the penalties for Inertial Overdrive and Maelstrom of Stars Unmoving were. Both inflicted severe damage on his body once they exceeded a certain level. But they were also skills that constantly grew, that allowed him to reach new heights of power so long as he could offset their costs.

The fundamental weakness of both his Physicality and Reflexes now was Toughness. The integrity of his body was the bottleneck. He could move as fast as he wanted, he could take in as much strength as he wanted, but there would come a point where his toughness was outpaced, and wounds would come thereafter. Meanwhile, if his toughness was too high, he wouldn't be able to move at all.

"Dynamics and tradeoffs," Shiv muttered to himself. He relaxed his muscles for a moment, and the crashing waves of kinetic force died. All the strength that had been building up inside him faded, and a brief feeling of lethargy washed through Shiv. His legs shook, and he barely noticed the notification informing him that the first encounter had begun in his temporarily weakened state.

Once more, a beam slashed through the air, but this time Shiv was in no hurry. He waited for himself to recover fully, and then took to the sky.

Flying with Maelstrom was different from Gravitic Wrestler. Previously, he just flung himself like a projectile. Now, as he pulled on the kinetic tides washing over him, the crashing waves that originally

shifted Shiv flattened the other way and blasted him upward. He spent some of the strength he'd gathered to do that, but he had more in reserve.

Every inbound wave of kinetic energy fueled him more and became a resource for him, something he could continue cultivating or spend to achieve certain feats. As such, when Shiv sailed through the air, he found himself capable of modulating his force better than before. He didn't need to fling himself that hard; in fact, he could spend only a little, just enough to nudge himself through the air.

It also allowed him to counteract his inertial sheath to some extent. Inertial Overdrive fed off the momentum acting on his body, and made him go faster and faster. But right now, Shiv was stronger than he was fast, and he managed to wrench the vector of his movement aside until he was pointed in the desired direction.

Shiv considered the details of this partial evolution further.

Right, so I can build up more force, then spend it to fly around or exert my strength on something pretty good. The penalties are a feeling of fatigue when it ends, which seems to last around five seconds or so. It might be longer if I focus on drawing in more force across an extended period of time. That, and if I get too strong, the space around me effectively becomes dangerous for everyone else.

He descended on the elemental golem with caution and precision. The golem turned its flaming sphere of a head and unleashed a stream of Pyromancy. The stream splashed harmlessly around him, and the deathless came to a sudden halt directly over the golem. He focused on gathering more strength. Waves of force crested against his body with increased frequency, and Shiv felt himself tremble with might.

He spent a fourth of that might and pointed his waves downward. The bottom of his pillar greeted the golem's body as if a steel tower being dropped on an insect. There came a loud crack as the golem all

but dissolved beneath Shiv's feet. A blast of dust spread out underneath the Deathless, and the golem's lightning-infused limbs of lashing water burst apart into parting puddles.

A final flicker of electricity danced across the spreading waters, and the golem was no more.

Encounter Complete (1/5)

Adjusting Legendary Skill...

"Alright," Shiv breathed, "and that was something else." His Heroic-Tier Physicality Evolution was worth more than mithril on its own, and it was only a partial Skill Evolution granted to him after his failure with 811.

Despite everything, despite the direness of his circumstances, the flames of anticipation were kindled inside Shiv as he yearned to see what form his Legendary skill would finally take. He thought about Marikos swinging his Pillar of Orichalcum like it weighed nothing, and he recalled Hawgrave, how she could grow to titanic sizes, or shrink down to the dimensions of an insect.

I also have Magical Resistance, Shiv remembered. That's the skill I chose to make Legendary, but how the hell is that going to come together with Physicality? What does that even look like?

He didn't know, but he would soon. Maybe after he crushed 811 properly.

When the orc spawned, Shiv was ready for him. He didn't go after him directly, not like last time. Instead, he triggered his temporal shell right as the notification appeared. The world was still when 811 was loaded in. Shiv plucked the orc off the ground before he had a chance to do anything and launched them both upward, high into the sky. For a beat, he considered crushing the orc using his collapsing waves of kinetic energy. But he wanted to see 811's face before the orc finally expired.

Shiv let time resume. 811 shuddered in his grasp. And then his features were drawn back in a surprised growl. "Well, that is just impolite."

Whatever else he had to say came out as a croak of pain. Shiv tightened his muscles. A wave of crushing power slammed into him, and by extension, 811. The orc's body began to fold and deform in several places. His bones shattered first, turning to shrapnel, then powder within his own flattening flesh. 811's organs squeezed out from his mouth, from his prolapsed anus, from the lacerations and ruptures lining his torso. He couldn't even produce a sound of his own volition anymore, and Shiv simply glared his hate at the dying creature.

Another wave swept toward Shiv. He pulled the orc hard against the pillar, and a series of satisfying cracks were accompanied by delightful puffs of blood.

"This is what I'm going to do to you when we actually meet each other again," Shiv promised, and he ground 811's skull to a mangled mess against his pillar. The orc gave a final gurgle. Shiv squeezed. His kinetic waves imploded around the orc's head, and his skull transformed into a dense marble of red. Instead of smearing Shiv with gore, the blood, giblets, and other fluids spilled down the face of Shiv's pillar before spilling like foul rain onto the grass below.

The Deathless let out a satisfied breath as he tossed 811 aside. The orc's corpse resembled a pancaked piece of bloodied meat, and Shiv spat after it, intending every bit of disrespect. He wasn't lying. When he met Hawgrave again, he would take her blade from her, and then he would go inside to visit the actual 812. After that, well, Shiv didn't feel like having an orc nemesis anymore, so he would just solve that problem. Besides, he had bigger prey to contend with.

He wasn't interested in fighting individual orcs for the rest of time. No. In the end, his target was and would always be the Challenger. He wasn't going to do any of this halfway.

811's body struck the ground and came apart like soup. Nearby, Feather and the automaton that had protected Georges looked up before flatly proclaiming their thanks to Shiv. They said the exact same words Leu spoke to him earlier. That confirmed something for Shiv. This was merely a simulation, facsimiles of those that were lost. It didn't truly capture their spirit.

Encounter Complete (2/5)

Adjusting Legendary Skill...

They were gone. Everything here was an act of psychological warfare conducted on him, on the part of the System.

But something didn't seem entirely right about that. After all, there were people with Legendary social skills. You couldn't possibly test a Social Skill against someone that was merely a mannequin, someone who only spat stock phrases. Maybe Social Skills or social functions are withheld inside a Delve that stressed my Physicality and Magical Resistance?

Chapter 167 (II) Enough

Shiv was just guessing here, but maybe he was right. After all, these evolutions were happening inside him, and different skills contained different snippets of his personal history.

In the brief calm that followed, Shiv experimented with his Maelstrom some more. As the 60th wave rolled in, the area of effect for his kinetic waves extended up to 100 meters. 100 meters of bone-powdering pressure. Shiv guessed that being in his vicinity probably felt like swimming at the bottom of an ocean. Well. Maybe. He wasn't sure how much pressure was at the bottom of the ocean. That sounded like something Adam would learn in one of his classes. At the thought of the Gate Lord,

Shiv bit back a snarl. "Hang on, I'll make it back. Just don't be fucking dead, don't be dead godsdammit."

He tried not to think about the worst possibility, but he'd been gone for a while now, and the Tarrasque was still alive when he left. The Ascendants and their Avatars were there, but considering how callously they acted as they teleported Shiv away, his hopes weren't high that they would prioritize Adam's and his other companions' safety and safeguard Blackedge.

But Shiv still hoped the Ascendants had contained the Tarrasque—that Adam managed to get away and help the other escape right after.

Psycho-Cartography: Push these thoughts out of your mind. Focus on something else. Prepare for your next adversary. We know that the System is drawing on your previous encounters to populate this Delve. Considering your hardest fights, what's coming next is likely the Jealousy.

Shiv winced. He remembered facing the Greater Demon. It had killed him more than a few times, and now, with both his Mask of False Paths and his Magebreaker broken, he had no way of countering its magic.

So far, his Magical Resistance skill was still at level one, even with it being chosen for the Legendary Skill Evolution. He suspected he may need to lose to or prevail against the Jealousy before another partial

skill evolution was applied to him. Its Psychomancy was one thing, but its ability to regenerate, along with its Hydromancy, was another layer of trouble. Shiv couldn't let it dictate the fight.

He needed to move in close, tear through its body, and discharge his Inertial Overdrive while still inside it. He needed to blow it apart in an instant. That was the easiest way to win. He felt reasonably confident regarding his odds, thanks to all his skills, on top of his Chronomancy.

And it really was Chronomancy that might turn this into a slaughter. He refused to let down his guard, though. And he wasn't going to make the same mistakes as he did with 811. Shiv intended to drag the Jealousy off and away from the Blackedge. He would kill it past the edge of the town. That way, when he blew it apart, none of the corpse's debris would slam down on any unfortunate victims, forcing Shiv to restart the Delve.

Initiating Encounter (2/5)

Yet, as the notification blinked into view, the Jealousy itself was nowhere to be seen. The skies were calm, and the streets were placid. Shiv directed his kinetic waves higher, and he exploded skyward, as if a red-gold javelin. Looking down, using his foresight, he scanned all corners of Blackedge, waiting patiently. A creeping thought passed through him, and he realized the Jealousy might have spawned into the scenario in the worst way possible. It was hiding inside someone's mind.

Yeah, that seemed like something the System might do. "Alright, new plan," Shiv said to himself. He brought himself lower, dangling his pillar-encased form over various crowds. He knew he was faster than the Jealousy by now. Knew that it wasn't very good in close quarters. The moment it unleashed its magic on him, he would stop time or go out of context, and then he would try to counter the creature. But as he considered his plan, a problem came up.

Previously, he could knock it out using his Magebreaker. The Inertium was invaluable. Now, if the Jealousy was still hiding in someone's mind, how was he going to free them? If he projected his own psychomancy inside while time was frozen, he might be able to do some damage, but Shiv doubted it. His Psychomancy was still lacking. It would be like trying to chisel through a steel wall.

The Deathless glowered, but he adapted once more. He wasn't thinking hard enough. His Psycho- Cartography had shown him the way earlier. Spend more time thinking. There would always be setbacks, but there was a solution somewhere. At least, that's what he thought. He immediately began pumping out his Creeping Void. The world was encased by a sweeping tide of blackness, and Shiv glided over to the people.

He observed the slaves and common Pathbearers he encountered, studying their vitality for any fluctuations this time. If the Jealousy was inside them, he suspected that there would be a dense knot of red in someone's skull. He kept an eye open for that, but remained alert in the meantime. He used waves of force to pull himself across the land. His Orichalcum pillar wasn't nearly as solid as it could be, but he valued speed over Toughness right now.

When the Jealousy struck, he would show it true speed.

So Shiv waited. Shiv stalked the streets and skies through a dense cloud of darkness.

And the Jealousy simply didn't appear.

Seconds ticked to minutes. Shiv felt his patience begin to fray. He decided to get a little bit more reckless. He stopped using his Creeping Void and exposed himself entirely. No attacks came. By this point, Shiv's paranoia was in full swing.

Maybe he wasn't facing the Jealousy, maybe he was facing an unseen foe. Whisper, perhaps, but that didn't make any sense. He never had a physical confrontation with Whisper. He wouldn't consider the orc an essential foe at all.

No, everything that happened inside this Delve seemed to be sourced from a formative moment for Shiv. The Jealousy was when he got his Gravitic Wrestler skill. That mattered more for his Physicality than Might of Mass. If this Delve was following his personal development at all, it needed to be the Jealousy.

So then, where is it?

Shiv decided to get to a higher altitude. Something told him it wasn't hiding the clouds, but maybe he could get a better lay of the land and see if something was unusual. Rolling waves of force flung his pillar upward. The winds screamed around him, and his inertial sheath thundered in delight. Shiv swept his gaze across Blackedge—and immediately noticed something wrong atop the apex of Starhawk's Perch.

A faint stretch of soft blue stained the world there. That was the color of Animancy, and as Shiv used his Farsight Skill to study the Animancy mana, his earlier rage returned to him. He saw the Jealousy frozen within that patch of Animancy. Four hundred meters of Greater Demon was coiled in on itself and held in stasis.

Shiv had a pretty good guess as to why.

He remembered Cripple calling out for an Animancy to suppress Shiv. This was probably their doing. They were scheming to keep him trapped in his own Delve, unable to evolve. Red began to spread in from the corners of Shiv's vision. A near primal rage took hold of him as Berserk almost triggered. The kinetic tides being drawn into Shiv grew ever more turbulent. Faint cracks spread along his pillar, and lacerations opened across his skin.

Not yet, the Deathless thought to himself. He halted time and left context. At once, everything went dark. The Delve vanished, and Shiv found himself trapped in a cold abyss. But the patch of blue was gone too, and when Shiv surfaced, he found the Jealousy swimming through the air—liberated from its entrapment.

“I... I don’t know what just happened,” the Animancer said, as he looked up from the cell. The elven Pathbearer was kneeling beside Priority Zenith. His eyes were wide with shock as he regarded the enchained Deathless. Beside him, six other Animancers were still lost within the Deathless’s soul. Most of them looked withered and spent. A few had perished earlier when they accidentally reached into the wrong place and found their life force ripped out of their bodies.

The guards had stripped the Deathless of all equipment, left him bare and bound to dense bands of Orichalcum. The restraints would use the Deathless’s own willpower to fuel the chains. Hence, when he struggled, it would harden accordingly, leaving him unable to break free. Additionally, the walls of the Zenith Anchor were choked with spellwork—most of them inscribed through a joint effort by the Ascendants. There was a ceiling to just how much mana they could channel on Earth, but it was still enough to cage anyone. Even a Legend, in theory.

Yet, as Cripple stared down through the porthole at the Animancer, it felt a sense of wrongness. Though the Deathless was in a technical coma right now, he somehow triggered a skill that made even Cripple forget his existence briefly. Cripple had never faced such a skill before. Not even when doing battle against a rival god. The Deathless was an anomaly, an enigma, and worst of all, a product of Udraal Thann.

But he was also a boy. A boy that had been fighting for Blackedge, supposedly. One that warred on behalf of the citizens.

What they were doing to him was—

It's for his own good as well,

Cripple told itself. If we did not cage him, someone would slay him for the quest rewards. This is best for him and us.

But Cripple only believed that in part. It knew why Veronica wanted to keep the boy alive. She had something of a history with his father. Harlon Lowe wasn't a weak Pathbearer, but he had been nowhere near a Legend either. Yet, Veronica had always inquired after him. Cripple suspected there might be familial relations there. Maybe Harlon was an illegitimate child. But unlikely.

Veronica wasn't the type to indulge in her baser instincts. She was near celibate compared to Katherine, her grandmother—and Cripple's fellow Ascendant. But there was definitely a connection. Cripple just didn't know what. And neither did anyone else on the council, for that matter.

So, the Deathless was to be held here at her orders. Held until they resolved the matter of the Tarrasque through containment or displacement into some other nation's territory. After that was dealt with, she wanted to conduct a personal interview with the boy.

But it just feels like a mistake. Cripple looked down at the boy again. His fists were clenched tight. Though his eyes were closed, his expression was locked in a bestial snarl. Rage practically radiated from his every pore, and again, Cripple didn't blame him. Cripple remembered its own fury during its days as a slave. It remembered its life in service—forced to serve the Dust King as a common gladiatorial bot. And then suffering the same degradation down in the Abyss by the Lords of Law and their people.

And here I am, scarring my own spirit. But more than shame, there was worry. The boy had a Vitality Drain Skill. Cripple's Avatar nearly perished during the earlier encounter. The Deathless knew the world-mending technique. And now he'd achieved a Magical Resistance and Physicality Skill Fusion. It was madness. It was too much power too fast. Cripple hadn't known many with Magical Resistance and Physicality fusions. A few Farwalkers, perhaps, and they kept their Skill Evolutions well hidden.

Thus, Cripple didn't know what kind of skill the boy was about to evolve. And that made him something closer to an unstable mana bomb than a prisoner in a cage.

I cannot take my eyes off him, Cripple decided. Everything he does, I will watch. I will make sure he never breaks free. Until we decide he is no longer a threat. Or we... offer him a final mercy.

Cripple didn't care that much about the reward. It was already a god—a divinity of terrible power. Its Avatars were also martyrs. None could bear his might without suffering grievous wounds. What use did they have for Legendary Skills if channeling Cripple was more terminal illness than blessing?

But one of the other Ascendants might wish to empower their Avatar. Halsur. Kathereine. Blind. Maiden. Youthful. All of them would find great benefit in an unmatched Avatar. And then there was Veronica herself. She was virtuous in most regards, but one didn't become a member of the Council if one did not crave power.

He wouldn't put it past her to take the boy's life herself if she couldn't control him.

It wasn't anything she hadn't done before.

It wasn't anything anyone on the Council or among the Ascendants hadn't done before.

The truth was that someone with ten Legendary Skills was worth more than twelve armies combined—was worth more than most of the Republic. The moment someone reached that level of power, even gods would find them a difficult cockroach to stomp.

And if said cockroach was a conduit for gods? Then, Integrated Earth might as well belong to the Yellowstone Republic.

“Reach into the skill again,”

Cripple commanded. “Do what you can to keep him from evolving.”

“As you command, my Ascendant,” the Head Animancer replied. But though the elf’s voice was high with determination, he couldn’t hide his fear either. Cripple heard just how terrified he was of this endeavor. How weird he found the Deathless.

“If you find something going awry, release your magic and call out to me,” Cripple added. “Do not waste your life.”

“Your wisdom and mercy is grand, Ascendant Cripple,” the Head Animancer replied. He regarded the Deathless once more and held out a shaking hand. Again, the color of a bruise seeped out from the Head Animancer as it mingled with the mana of his companions. His Animancy field shifted through the cell and washed into the Deathless once more.

The Head Animancer let out a breath as he entered a focus trance—

Only to shriek in absolute agony as a bramble of white-red tore out from his insides. He burst apart into bloody pieces, and the other Animancers shared the same fate before Cripple even realized what was happening.

The Ascendant took a single step and manifested within the prison. Distance was no limit for Cripple. Neither were matter or magic. Yet, Cripple's Avatar paid the price for this great power. Its legs turned to scrap, and it collapsed at the Deathless's feet. Cripple found itself commanding the Avatar to rise as it lifted its head from a pool of blood.

And as it gazed upon the Deathless's face, it realized he was no longer snarling, but grinning viciously.

Somehow, he had killed the Animancers. And he did it without Cripple's comprehension.

The Ascendant's battle-honed instincts screamed for it to do one of two things. The first was to kill the boy and be done with it. It was pragmatic, but it would cause problems. More importantly, Cripple didn't want to do it. The moral choice was to release the Deathless, but that came with its own host of risks as well.

And Cripple still belonged to Kathereine by right of oath and soul-contract. She didn't use Cripple as a weapon or a slave, usually. Not when she had Halsur willing to do all her bloody work for her, but she would debase Cripple if it offended her. It knew because she had.

Of all the Ascendants, she was the only one Cripple the Strongest truly feared.

Even so, Cripple let out a reverberating sigh and looked upon Shiv. “Something tells me keeping you here will become a mistake either way. Maybe the mistake has already been made. Maybe capturing you was the mistake.”

The Deathless didn’t reply. The Animancers were dead. Above, sirens began to wail, the prison’s dimensional monitors and other elite wardens noticing the massacre within Anchor-Cell Zenith far too late.

“What are you?” Cripple asked the Deathless. The boy was silent. His eyes were moving beneath closed lids. “Do you even know?”

Chapter 167 (III) Enough

Encounter Complete (3/5)

Adjusting Legendary Skill...

Applying Partial Skill Evolution: Magical Resistance 100 (Master)

Vitaemancy 93 > 95

Outside Context Problem 87 > 88

Killing a surprised and confused Jealousy was far easier than facing down a hidden one. When the Animancy field vanished, Shiv slammed his pillar against the Jealousy's body and tore it wide open. An application of Chronomancy followed by an inertial discharge later, the Greater Demon was carried away from the limits of Blackedge as bloody mist and falling chunks of tissue.

As soon as he finished killing the creature, he felt a dense field of multi-hued mana combust into existence just under his skin.

Magical Resistance was a strange skill. It didn't seem to evolve in most cases—aside from becoming dischargeable, perhaps from a type of skill fusion, considering the Tarrasque and Hawgrave. It felt more like a layer of bone rather than a limb. It was a weight fused inside Shiv, but a supportive weight. One that made him feel stronger. More durable than ever before. But even if it hadn't evolved into a more sophisticated skill, it was fusing with his Physicality, and so it was going to change eventually.

Before he had a chance to ponder that question further, another flash of Animancy flared in the corner of his eye. It originated at the apex of the Perch again, and Shiv was on it in a second. Instead of using Outside Context Problem, he approached the Animancy mana in a rush of kinetic energy and extended a mess of Vitae toward it. He wasn't sure how his Vitaemancy and Animancy would interact, but by this point, Shiv would have flung himself into a pool of Necromancy if it meant setting his entire prison ablaze.

To his surprise, he found his Vitaemancy utterly unaffected by the Animancy. Moreover, it felt like a shallow pool to him. Waters he could navigate. He took a chance and let his Vitaemancy dig deeper through the faint blue mana, and he felt several Animated Skill Infusions pass through him at once. His breath hitched as he realized he was rooting around the inside of several Animancers.

The ones that were trying to stop him from evolving.

Shiv's rage exploded. He infused that anger into his Vitaemancy Skill and shredded his foes apart from within. They died one after another, none knowing how they went or why. By the end, the blue mana winked out, and Shiv found himself blissfully alone again. Alone in his Delve with another notification as a reward.

Initiating Encounter (4/5)

"Let's see you assholes reach into me now—" A portion of Blackedge disappeared. A colossal entity shaped like a massive palm and dotted with countless eyes tore down Minhall Avenue, leading from the edge of the city to Starhawk's Perch itself. "Motherfucker, not you again," Shiv snarled.

But of course it was the damned Recollector. It hadn't even shown up in its initial form—the shape it took possessing Confriga. Instead, it came forth like a natural disaster, and before Shiv could respond, its past selves scattered in different directions, ripping the town asunder.

Buildings were obliterated. People were vaporized. Shiv let out a cry of frustration as he spent half the force condensed by Maelstrom to accelerate himself.

This proved to be a mistake, as the uncontrolled blast that exploded out from him obliterated the middle of the town and turned Starhawk's Perch into a spray of smoke and rubble. To make matters worse and final, one of the Recollectors plunged downward and shattered the very foundations of the town.

Blackedge cracked in three parts and began to fall from the sky. Shiv's stomach went with the collapsing town.

Encounter Failed

Resetting Delve

Adjusting Legendary Skill...

Shiv found himself falling again and let out a growl of frustration. "Felling eldritch bullshit."

Of all the enemies he'd faced, the Recollector stood among the worst. Sullain was far more powerful, but Shiv didn't fight the Vicar alone. He had thousands of orcs helping him, and the Legendary Mage was an emotional and psychological ruin that practically helped Shiv win out of sheer foolishness.

Even now, Shiv didn't know if he could give himself great odds against the Recollector in a direct fight. It had taken him, Adam, Uva, and a desperate plan with an Animancy bomb for them to win. But Shiv did have far more speed, durability, and strength than before. That, and the Recollector was connected to its past selves by a singular source of vitality as well.

"I changed my mind," Shiv said as the first challenge triggered once more. "I think my odds are pretty good after all."

He tore through the golem, the orc, and the Jealousy in quick succession right after. Then, before the Recollector arrived, he positioned himself in its path and spent time building up his speed, his strength, but most of all, his durability.

When the Outsider spawned, it noticed him immediately. A high and discordant cry lashed Shiv's sanity as the Recollector slammed against him. The Deathless gritted his teeth as he felt the staggering might of the eldritch nightmare. His pillar groaned—it even bent a little. But it didn't break. And soon it stopped curving as Shiv gathered even more Toughness within himself.

"How? Why not-break?" the Recollector screamed in confusion. Its screeches grew higher when Shiv spent most of his condensed might and launched his pillar forward into the Recollector's face. A kinetic tsunami drove Shiv deep into the Recollector's flesh. As it was a kilometer wide, he found himself embedded deep in its eldritch tissue. It tried to scream, but was interrupted by Shiv detonating himself inside it.

A pocket of absence expanded within the Recollector. Every last self it had lurched back in agony, and Shiv drew upon more force with his Maelstrom. Waves crashed into Shiv and peeled the inner flesh of the eldritch behemoth from its frame. With the Pillar of Orichalcum stuck inside its body, the Recollector's couldn't move either.

"Well," Shiv said, licking his lips as a feeling of primal triumph took hold. "Somehow, I remembered you to be a lot stronger."

"Let go!" it screamed. It lashed against him with its power, but rather than its Chronomancy damaging his temporal shell directly, he grunted in discomfort as he felt himself take the blow with his Magical Resistance for the first time. It didn't feel good; a bit like letting someone swing a hammer against his body. His soul felt bruised, but the Recollector's Chronomancy didn't take hold. Not immediately.

This was how Shiv realized why most people with Magical Resistance flinched so much. It still sucked all kinds of shit to take a magical attack. It was just much more survivable, like finally wearing a layer of plate armor while someone swung a warhammer at your skull.

Before another explosion of golden mana could impact him, Shiv touched the Recollector and ripped the vitality out of its body, and it escaped the eldritch entity like clouds of hissing steam. One after another, its past selves flickered out of existence. It tried doing that mind-rending scream a few more times, but Shiv slammed his Maelstrom down on its head. Bits of its body were pulped as it was driven against Shiv's pillar.

"Please... Don't want to stop being... Don't want to..."

"No one does," Shiv replied, wondering why the Delve rendered the Recollector's personality so well while screwing up with most of the slaves and normal people. Probably a skill and memory thing. "But you didn't care about the little people. And I don't much care about you. I just wish I could have ripped you apart this easily when we first faced each other. More people could have lived."

And that was the main reason why this Delve Quest took the shape that it did. Everywhere Shiv went, people died. It wasn't always his fault. But he was never fully enough. And someone else always paid for that.

I want that to change, Shiv thought as the Recollector faded from existence and flowed into Shiv like a fading stream. I want to be more than just a brute. A brute that can't deal with magic easily. Who can't control the amount of force he uses. I want power and control. And I want to bend magic as easily as I can bend bodies.

Encounter Complete (4/5)

Adjusting Legendary Skill...

Shiv felt his Magical Resistance rattle inside him. He let out a grunt of pain as it slowly began pushing its way out from his insides. “What the hells are you doing now, skill?”

He didn’t get the answer to that question, as a notification appeared.

Final Encounter Initiated

Shiv cast himself back in time as he felt his insides continue to change. He looked around, searching for his foe, but a shadow drew his attention skyward.

And there, up in the air, was someone he didn’t expect to see at all.

Himself.

Hovering just above the central spire of Starhawk’s Perch, Shiv saw a perfect copy of himself glaring down at him. The mutilated remains of his clone’s Voidmantid armor hung from his body just like Shiv’s, barely protecting his modesty. The Deathless scoffed. “Really, System? We’re doing this shit—”

The clone spread his arms wide, and a wave of raw force exploded out from him. The top of the perch was ripped apart. The rest of the structure was crushed down to its foundations.

“Alright, let’s do this,” Shiv spat. He froze time and launched himself skyward—

Only to be tackled by a Vitae golem that started draining his vitality. Shiv cried out as a sudden weakness took hold of him. He grappled with the golem and tried to fling it off him. As he pulled, a kinetic tide slammed into the back of the golem—and was countered by a kinetic tide of its own.

The center of the town was flattered.

It has my skills too. Even the partial—

Encounter Failed

Resetting Delve

Adjusting Legendary Skill...

Shiv found himself falling again. He narrowed his eyes. “System. You’re kind of a cheap, cheating shit, you know that?”

It didn’t give him a reply.

Shiv ripped through the four challenges again and blasted up into the air to intercept his clone. This time, he had his own golem prepared beforehand and used it to intercept his clone's. As the constructs battled, Shiv eyed his other self with a slight sneer. "So. How does it feel to be a clone?"

"How does it feel to have the smaller cock?" his clone asked in turn.

Shiv blinked. "It's the same—" The clone vanished in a burst of Chronomancy. "—size. Godsdammit." Then, he saw a blanket of pitch-black miasma spread across the town. This fucking asshole had all his skills. "Double godsdamm—"

Shiv felt his Chronomancy shudder, and he manifested his temporal shell. Time stopped, but he was still too slow to react. A jetstream of flames was left in his clone's wake as he impacted Blackedge and unleashed all the force built up within his Maelstrom and his sheath.

A good third of the town was reduced to nothing but a crater. The clone launched himself back a second and repeated the act two more times. Shiv almost intercepted him by the end, but was stunned as the clone struck him with his Biomancy.

With a final resounding crack, the town shattered into pieces, and the Delve shuddered.

Encounter Failed

Resetting Delve

Adjusting Legendary Skill...

Shiv was falling. For a few seconds, he just let himself fall. And then, he decided to voice his frustration. “MOTHERFUC—”

Five tries followed. He tore through everyone up till his clone over and over again. Every time Shiv floated across from his evil twin, he made adjustments. He tried being aggressive—but that was useless on its own as he had no good counter to Creeping Void. It seemed that merely possessing the skill didn't let you see through that of someone else, and the moment he lost track of his clone was when he lost.

He adjusted by focusing on tracking his clone's lifeforce. That helped—but then the clone began jumping to different points across his past and he got to the town first again.

Shiv tried running an offense. He laid down his own Creeping Void and attempted to kill his cloned self in a split second. He adjusted to Shiv by shifting across time and destroying random parts of the town.

Defeat after defeat followed. Not once did the clone directly engage Shiv. No. He did things Shiv might while running an offense. He chunked decoy corpses. He moved in one direction, shifted across time, and then moved in another. And then there was the problem of his Maelstrom.

Shiv didn't have a counter for that. Not enough of a counter to protect all the people in the town, or even the town itself. For too long, he had been focused on directness and brutality. But that came at a cost. What he needed to deal with someone like him was overwhelming control. Or ridiculous precision.

I'd have better odds of beating me if I were Adam instead of myself, Shiv thought.

He had good odds against Adam if he got close, but that was just the thing—Adam wouldn't let him get close. Adam would hit him with a flood of Divination-guided Necromancy arrows from well over the horizon, and that would be that unless Shiv spent the whole time fleeing.

But the clone's on the offense. And I don't have any easy way to keep him off balance. Not when I'm the one who needs to defend the town and all these lives. For once, Shiv wished he had gotten less destructive skills. That would've made this easier to manage.

Ten more attempts followed. Each one ended in abject failure. He just couldn't keep himself pinned long enough. Turn eleven followed, and he didn't even see himself. The clone just smashed into Blackedge from below and blew the town apart while one of his golems lured Shiv off.

If I could just control his force too. Or grab his magic and hold him in place by having my Magical Resistance be expressed through my Maelstrom somehow.

And that thought triggered another change. Shiv let out a ragged cry as he fell from the sky. His Magical Resistance was ripped free of his insides, and it began to turn fluid. It sank into Shiv's muscles, his bones, his skin, and even into the kinetic energy around him. At the same time, his force waves collapsed into him—and stayed there. Instead of drawing force inside him, Shiv felt a building pressure thunder deep inside.

Initializing Unconfirmed Legendary Skill Evolution: Leviathan of the Shapeless Tides

Chapter 168 (I) Legend

There is a kind of peace one attains through self-murder. At the end of your Delve, the final enemy so often is a replica of yourself. A mirror image that stands before you, capable of all your skills, and unfettered by your ethical or mental burdens.

It takes more than martial mastery to slay oneself in combat. All you know will be given unto your replica as well. Every blow you strike will be known to them. There will be no technique you can create that is beyond them. There is no knowledge you hold that can be masked from their understanding.

And so when you first face yourself, you will fail. Because the Delve seeks to sharpen you. It seeks to place you at a severe disadvantage. Think of how skilled you are. Now think of facing your absolute equal while still having to protect someone else. What are your odds of victory?

Here is the finest lesson of becoming Legendary. It is the despair in facing an unburdened version of yourself. You must be flawless. You must remain unshaken, failure after failure. And you must adjust your skill until you reach a point where it is perfected for the Quest, and use it to overcome your replica.

This is where most fail. The battle against the mirror. The duel against a mockery of your being. Everything before is simulated from previous triumphs or defeats. But what retrospect can one truly wield against themselves? That is something you must answer.

And in seeking that answer, your true Legendary Skill will take form.

Or, your mind and spirit will break, and you will forever be trapped in the Delve, facing yourself for all eternity, suffering a purgatory worse than hell, knowing that the best of you was never enough. That you couldn't overcome your limitations. That you cannot defeat yourself.

Thus, I remind you again that death is not so severe. The deepest sleep inflicts no pain. But there is no medicine for one broken by the self.

For how will you flee from your own heart?

-Legend: Reforged from Ruin, Written by Semper Paragon Caine Hauser of the Descenders Union

Applying Partial Skill Evolution: Leviathan of the Shapeless Tides 500 (Legendary)

Shiv listened to his insides roar with a surge of building force as he fell through cloud after cloud. The next thing he noticed was how the wind and air friction traced waves of dense, vector-shaped mana across his body. Cascading tides of kinetic energy flowed across Shiv in the opposite direction of the forces acting on him. The pointed ripples were nested below his inertial sheath, but his Physicality and Reflexes affected each other in ways grander than the sum of their parts.

The sheath shuddered to life in seconds. It leached off the sheer amount of power spilling out from Shiv's core. He felt heavier than ever, and the amount of kinetic energy flowing through his marrow only grew by the second. The force waves that crashed in from the outside were nowhere to be seen. Instead of being the eye of a collapsing maelstrom, Shiv felt like he was the heart of a bomb. A bomb that just kept detonating inside him without end.

"I guess I did ask for more control," Shiv said, observing his hands. The way his skill expressed itself was just strange. Pointed currents of force danced across him, crashing against each other. With every impact, Shiv felt another thunderclap go off inside him. Yet, the power was entirely contained. There were no waves of uncontrollable destruction overflowing from him. Nothing at all. "Alright. So you're subtle now. But how do I use you?"

He ignored how the cobblestone path leading up to the main entrance of Starhawk's Perch was fast approaching him. Falling wasn't going to kill him, and he didn't see anyone in the vicinity. Shiv was going to spend his time figuring out his new ability instead of wasting it on pointless worries. He pushed lightly on the dense bands of mana washing over his body. As soon as he did, a trickle of force manifested in the real world. Kinetic energy rushed along the pointed vector, and Shiv found himself dragged through the air at low speeds.

Okay. That's a lot more control over my movement already, Shiv thought. His previous Skill Evolution allowed him to constantly build his force, but the bone-grinding pressures that emanated out of him in a wide radius and the destructive shockwaves he left in his wake were still issues. Right now, it seemed like all the force circulating through him remained dormant until he deliberately drew upon the waves.

Just as Shiv was going to do something else, he promptly impacted the ground. To his surprise, he felt a rush of kinetic energy spike into him at the moment of landing. He circulated that flow of force across his body—and the ground didn't break. It didn't even crack. Not even the dust in the air was unsettled. Shiv's jaw dropped wide open as he just kept guiding the seized tide of kinetic energy around himself.

But it washed through him differently from the other ripples of force—the ripples that originated from his body. This foreign-origin ripple glided across him with striped lines, while the others remained solid. What's more, the moment he took his focus away from it, a thunderclap escaped him. The nearby grass rustled, and the ground shook beneath his feet. He regained control of the stripped ripple once more and prevented the rest from leaving his body like a bomb.

By now, his Inertial Overdrive was humming. It made the solid tides wash through him faster and with higher frequency. Shiv ignored that for a beat and looked at his hands. He concentrated the force he stole from his rendezvous with the ground in his fists, at the tips of his fingers. Then, slowly, he released it. It left his hands as popping bursts that sounded like cannon fire.

Shiv blinked at his hands as his lips twitched. A smile soon spread across his face, and he nodded. "Alright. I constantly generate my own kinetic ripples and circulate outside forces within my body and reuse them. Not bad. Not felling bad at all."

Initiating Encounter (1/5)

His eyes squinted at the notification. A thick stream of Pyromancy sliced up into the clouds once more. The elemental golem was back, and it was about to become Shiv's first test subject for his new Skill Evolution. "Let's see how launching myself around feels like now." Shiv focused on the solid waves of dormant force circulating along his body. He noticed how the currents of force spread out from his chest and abdomen before they rolled along his limbs. A frown usurped his smile as he also realized the bursts of dormant force weren't being retained indefinitely. Every time the waves got to his fingers and toes, they would cease to be.

Shiv tried holding onto them. He flexed his muscles and focused on circulating the tides of force washing over him. To his delight, the dormant forces continued flowing, and Shiv felt his kinetic tides merge and build to new levels of power. However, the moment he started circulating his internal forces, they went from solid to striped in definition.

Screams sounded from the distance, but Shiv spent a while longer examining himself. "Okay. So, it's probably not an internal-external thing. There's probably a standard amount of force I generate with each series of dormant tides, and everything else is listed as excess. Which makes them striped."

That was his best guess as to his current system, and he soon found himself more mentally taxed by how many striped tides he was cycling through his body. The moment he lost track of a tide, it accelerated out of him in a spike of force along the direction it was pointed. That caused Shiv to be torn from his feet and speared through the walls of Starhawk's Perch. He then promptly slammed head-first into a slave child who was just staring at the wall.

Instead of the small boy turning to a bloody smear, Shiv pulled a new overflow-tide of force into himself. He went still in an instant. The slave child remained unharmed. The Deathless let out a tense breath as he pushed himself off the ground. "Shit. Could've ended up restarting the whole Quest right here."

The slave boy turned and smiled at Shiv. "Thanks for saving me, Pathbearer. I love your food."

Shiv just stared at the slave child, trying to figure out why he'd said those words.

Psycho-Cartography: Because they're the ones you want to hear. You want to matter. You want to feel strong after a lifetime of being little more than vermin in the eyes of most people. And you want to feel like more than a monster, so the cooking matters to you. Everything about his praise is pretty predictable. And so are you.

"Why do I get the feeling that you're judging me?" Shiv asked his Psychology Skill. When it didn't reply, he just let out a scoff. A loud boom sounded outside, and Shiv ruffled the slave boy's hair. "Alright. Find someplace safe to hide, fake kid who's actually dead because of me. I'm gonna go and shove this elemental golem's core up 811's ass."

"Thanks for saving me, Pathbearer. I love your food." The slave boy smiled. Burped as if he was full. And then smiled again.

Shiv tried not to shudder at how creepy the reaction was.

He left through the hole he'd made in the castle and used up some of his overflow-tides. He pointed their direction toward the sky just as he stepped outside, and he blasted off into the air. The world zoomed. He let out a grunt of surprise and realized he could convert some of the air currents dragging

against him for more overflow-tides. As he did just that, he caught sight of the elemental golem as it rampaged down a narrow alley. Behind it were dozens of unmoving bodies. Some were burned, little more than blackened lumps of meat. Others were twitching and wet—deaths by electrocution. The real unfortunates were the ones that the golem pulverized with its body. They were pasted against the walls in ugly displays of gore.

The Deathless knew they weren't real, but something about their deaths bothered him. Probably the fact that he'd already failed them once.

Psycho-Cartography: Maybe it is because their ends were often even uglier. The people the golem pulped still looked better than the poor kid 811 killed. Or all the unlucky slaves that the Jealousy fell on.

Shiv was beginning to wonder if the Psychology Skill was faulty. It was pretty useful earlier when he needed to figure out how someone was thinking and what to say if he wanted to provoke them. Now, it seemed the skill was doing its best to turn all the discomfort on Shiv. "I need to find another target for you to focus on."

Psycho-Cartography: Evading discomfort doesn't solve it. It just makes you a pussy. This world hates pussies. You know that.

As Shiv descended on the elemental golem, he tried not to be annoyed by his Psychology Skill. "Are you deliberately trying to provoke me?"

Psycho-Cartography: You are, dumbshit. I am you. I am a part of you. Stop getting offended by yourself and realize that I am the closest thing to a semi-rational mind you have. If I didn't bother you would probably just ignore what I said and keep making the same mistakes.

“I—” Shiv wanted to reject that claim, but he couldn’t. He knew the skill was right, but it was hard not to be bothered by it in some ways.

Psycho-Cartography: Yes. Being imperfect in an extremely hostile world that wants to felling kill you all the time should make you feel that way. You more than anyone else. The System hates us, and with every weakness I uncover in you, we realize that our odds of survival are worse than we assumed. Ignorance is a tasty nipple, but we’ve always been a motherless godsdamned outcast. Deal with it. Or don’t. And suffer. Remember you’re still going to need to fight yourself later. We can’t afford weaknesses with evil you. Not even one.

A bitter taste crawled up the back of Shiv’s throat as he spiked himself down. He used up all his overflow-tides and discovered another wonderful thing about his current skill: the force leaving his body would only flow in the direction he moved it. That meant no uncontrolled shockwaves exploding out from his person unless he allowed it. It also meant he had perfect force economy. Not a single bit of energy wasted.

Unfortunately, Shiv underestimated just how much kinetic energy he was cycling through himself. He struck the golem just as it prepared to unleash its Pyromancy at a group of Pathbearers cornered at the end of the alley. The golem wasn’t just crushed by Shiv’s stomp—it was outright disintegrated. But then Shiv kept going. He tunneled through the ground and ripped through a few kilometers of stone and mana-conducting crystal that constituted Blackedge’s foundations.

“Shitshitshitshit!” Shiv snarled. Crashing waves of overflowing force rushed up toward his head as he continued burrowing through Blackedge. He seized these overflow-tides and went still in an instant. By this point, the lower half of his body was sticking out from the bottom of Blackedge. Looking up, Shiv’s eyes widened as he realized he left a clean tunnel in his wake. “Broken Felling Moon... That was a bit more kick than I was expecting.”

And so he discovered the first downside of his Legendary Skill. He needed to get good at judging how much force he was unleashing. The overflow-tides still thundered like the innate pulses of force Shiv generated, but he needed to focus on them for a moment to guess just how much dormant kinetic energy each ripple possessed.

But still, no shockwaves. No unstable explosions or fireballs destroying everything around him. Blackedge remained relatively unharmed.

“Legendary Skills are pretty godsdamned awesome,” Shiv noted.

Encounter Complete (1/5)

Adjusting Legendary Skill...

When he launched himself back up the tunnel, he let out a hiss of pain. A few muscle tears radiated with searing heat from his lower back and hamstrings. Shiv fed those injuries to his Aegis of Assimilation and tried to figure out how he'd hurt himself. It didn't take long.

It's the sudden stopping. All that force is being converted into me, but I still have Inertial Overdrive active. Any bit of momentum that I don't manage to cycle through my body will end up hurting me. Shiv shook his head in disbelief. This damned skill is going to be straining my Awareness and Multi-Tasking too. That, or I need to start moving with the pillar active all the time. That should blunt some damage.

Shiv erupted out of the tunnel just in time for the next encounter. He grimaced as he realized his mistake: He didn't rip the golem's mana core out. Now what was he going to shove up 811's ass?

“His own mace will do,” Shiv grunted in resignation.

But that didn’t go well either. The following “battle” between Shiv and 811 happened in three parts. The orc took a swing at him. Shiv converted 811’s attack into an overflow-tide before ripping the orc’s mace out of his hand. Then, Shiv tried to position himself mace-to-ass and missed. The resulting hit turned the orc into a faint cloud of red. One that painted Shiv’s body.

He glared blankly at the sky as he resolved to work more on his dexterity.

Then, it came time to face the Jealousy again, and Shiv did so with renewed vigor. Of all his foes, the Jealousy was the one Shiv looked forward to the most. It wasn’t because it was fun or easy to fight the Greater Demon, but more that he wished to find out just how his current Legendary Skill would handle magic. So far, this skill seemed more Physicality than Magical Resistance, but considering how the force-tides expressed themselves as unattuned mana, Shiv knew his Magical Resistance was still there in some form.

The Jealousy materialized atop the spire, and Shiv rose through the air to greet it.

“Daring morsel!” The Jealousy cackled with glee. “Come. Offer mind. Easy feed. Good day!”

It pointed its large, purple eye at him. He could feel its mana field twisted around him, and to his astonishment, feel it dragging against his body. Shiv’s vectors flared brighter. The unattuned mana turned translucent. Oh, fuck yeah! He tried to reach out and grab the field itself, but found it kind of like pinching firm skin. There wasn’t much he could find purchase on.

But I can touch it! Shiv thought. I can physically feel the Psychomancy field.

A hundred-meter-long psionic spear burst free from the Jealousy's eye. It tore through the air and struck Shiv dead on. He didn't pause time. He didn't try to dodge. The innate tides of force washing over his body remained unattuned until he caught the spell with his bare hands. Then his tides all went translucent once more.

The shapes and spell patterns that constituted the spell felt concrete; something Shiv could hold on to and manipulate. Yet, he also felt no overflowing tide of force spill into him from the spell. Instead, it crashed against his innate tides in a cataclysmic clash. Shiv growled with exertion as he was physically pushed back through the air. He directed all the innate tides rippling out from his body toward the spell. With the first ripple, he stalemated the spell; after the second, he overpowered it entirely.

"What is this?" the Jealousy hissed in surprise. Just as the spell's lack of convertible force caught Shiv off guard, his ability to wrestle with its mana like it was a physical object left the Jealousy reeling.

But Shiv didn't let go of the spell or swat it aside. Instead, he growled as another series of waves swept through his body. He infused his tides into his arms and pulled them in opposite directions. Shiv's body was consumed by Psychomancy mana as he ripped the Jealousy's spell in half.

The Greater Demon wailed a note of deafening agony as its mana field was lacerated. "HURTS! PAIN! NO! NO! RUN! LET ME GO! PAIN—" Its thoughts turned to screams as Shiv flung himself into its eye.

Blood splattered around him. He didn't care. Whips of lashing Hydromanacy mana crashed against him. Shiv caught and snapped them with his hands as well. It took a bit less effort to break the Jealousy's Hydromancy compared to its Psychomancy, but it was still much more of a struggle than dealing with physical force.

But Shiv realized something—both his Magical Resistance and Physicality were intertwined. He could use the overflow-tides he cycled to overcome any kind of mana. Right now, he was operating at a baseline state, and that left him limited. He wasn't actually weaker in terms of Magical Resistance; he just didn't understand his skill well enough yet.

In fact, this was much better than having an adaptive mana field that absorbed mana damage but could do nothing else.

“PLEASE! NO! NOT PREY! VOID LEVIATHAN! KNOW YOUR SKILL! KNOW THIS POWER! MERCY!”

“Void Leviathan?” Shiv asked. But then his attention was stolen by another detail. As he sank his fingers into the Jealousy's mangled eye, his tides of force spilled out from him into the Jealousy as well, reminding him that this wasn't just a mix between his Physicality and Magical Resistance—it was a Legendary Grappling Skill too.

And that made him realize that he was still a bit too messy in terms of combat. He needed to stop hitting things all the time. With this skill, he could hold them, control them, and break them without smashing through anything or risking any collateral damage at all.

Shiv tested his new grappling by pressing his hands together and compressing the Jealousy. The Greater Demon cried out. Shiv gritted his teeth as he found a cracking barrier he needed to break through before he finally started squeezing the Jealousy into pulp. He blinked as he guessed the barrier to be the Jealousy's Magical Resistance.

Right. That's something else I have to deal with now. My strength affects both matter and magic now

The Jealousy tried to swing its massive, barbed tentacles at Shiv in a last-ditch effort at staying alive. He slammed his palms together inside its collapsing eye. The Jealousy gave a keening wail as wave after wave of force swirled through its body before they all rushed to its epicenter. The four-hundred-meter-wide Greater Demon turned to red paste as it was compressed down to a fifty-meter sphere of solid viscera and powdered bone.

Shiv let out a euphoric laugh at this overwhelming display of power and decided to celebrate by punting the Jealousy into the distance. That didn't go quite as expected, though, as Shiv found his foot buried inside the Jealousy flesh-ball instead.

The Deathless winced as the mangled remains slipped from his right foot and impaled itself atop the tip of Starhawk's Perch like a giant meatball. "Yeah, alright. I'm kind of just bending force unnaturally now, instead of directing gravity or something. I probably should've channeled a wave of force through the Jealousy instead of my foot if I wanted to kick it like that."

Physics 1 > 2

Encounter Complete (3/5)

Adjusting Legendary Skill...

Initiating Encounter (4/5)

And then it was time to face the Recollector again. Unlike the last few times, Shiv was looking forward to this showdown quite a bit. He knew he could reliably beat the Recollector now, thanks to his improved skills and Vitality Drain.

But the eldritch being was a dangerous foe, one that he couldn't let his guard down against, even now. If he gave it a single opening, one of its past selves could slam into Blackedge and cause enough damage for the Delve to be reset. So Shiv's strategy remained the same: he was going to intercept it, hold it in place, and drain it. But on top of that, he was going to find out just how much external force he could convert. He didn't suffer any strain cycling forces that had acted upon him previously, so he wondered if there was truly a limit. And if not, well, that would really make things interesting.

As the Recollector spawned in at the edge of town, Shiv met it head-on before the eldritch being could spew any nonsense statements or unleash that annoying scream. Shiv smashed his palm against one of its eyes and directed a wave of force through its body. A tide of kinetic energy slashed across the Recollector and suddenly twisted downward at an angle as Shiv unleashed its full might. One of the ten fingers extending from the Recollector's hand-shaped head snapped backward at the base. The eldritch being let out a cry of alarm more than pain. That cry made Shiv's vision spin.

"Hate your goddamn noises," he snarled under his breath. He recovered just in time to see every last one of the Recollector's eyes glaring at him.

Beams of magic smashed against his person. Concurrently, the Recollector launched itself forward, slashing channels of Chronomancy impacting Shiv. But he wrestled them aside with brute force. His muscles strained as he struggled to hold the golden mana back. But then the strain vanished altogether as the Recollector drove itself against him. Overflowing tides of striped force flooded Shiv. They turned gold as Shiv converted them for his own use. Instead of being a danger, the Recollector's own physical attacks became an additional resource Shiv could use to counter its magic, to deliver brutal blows against its body.

But Shiv did have a limit. The limit was his focus. Shiv was a generator and conduit for forces now. But that meant he needed to circulate every bit of kinetic energy and momentum that greeted him. And for

the first time, his mind failed his body. A blast of force swept out across Shiv's torso, three ribs snapped as a chorus, and throbbing spots of pain tightened into knots within his abdomen.

Shiv ignored his injuries and retaliated against the Recollector before it could continue pressing its advantage. It was unleashing too much force against him, too much for his mind to accommodate all at once, so he decided to deliver everything it gifted him right back. All his overflowing force, along with a pulse of innate energy, was unleashed in the form of a closing hand.

Shiv's tides washed down from him, splashing over the Recollector. Its past selves tried to break apart, tried to flee, but Shiv's grip clutched its magic in a vice. The past selves of the Recollector screamed as the golden mana lining their form cracked underneath the pressure. Its present self writhed and struggled. More magic was unleashed through its eyes. Magic then hammered against Shiv, briefly driving him back.

He almost felt himself get launched forward into the future, but then another flood of innate force was generated, and he parried the Chronomancy spell, swatting it aside with the palm of his hand. Frictionless Vector triggered. It diffracted off at an angle, cleaving up into the sky, and then Shiv was on the Recollector again. It tried to escape. He wouldn't allow it.

He tore its flesh wide open, tore its magical fields open too. One after another, its past selves screamed as a wailing symphony, and though Shiv felt his mind suffer damage, he fought on using instinct alone.

He nested himself inside the Recollector, and he materialized his Pillar of Orichalcum. Afterward, he discharged his inertial sheath that had been building all this time. When the blast left him, Shiv felt an overwhelming series of force ripples crash against his body. Theoretically, he might be able to absorb his own inertial discharge as well, using that as more fuel for his strength, but for now, he let them go.

The insides of the Recollector splattered apart, but the inertial discharge was not enough to deal fatal damage. It was a brutal wound, but one that the eldritch creature could survive. What it couldn't survive was the Vitality Drain that followed thereafter, coupled with Shiv's unseen tides. He held it in a vice-like grip, but it struggled against him, and as it did, he turned its strength back on itself.

Shiv was beginning to notice something about Legendary Skills now. It was more than just the baseline application of the skill. At the start, his Physicality gave him more mass because that's what he needed to survive the golem, and then allowed him tactile control over gravity, because he needed that to wrestle and dominate beasts far larger than him.

The Heroic-Tier Physicality and Grappling Fusion Skill he would have gotten thereafter was about cultivating more strength and making it punishing for anyone to advance near him. It would have given him greater control against nearby enemies, and eventually, it would have allowed him to contend with threats he wouldn't be able to overpower with Gravitic Wrestler alone.

Now, at Legendary, it seemed that he wasn't manipulating force, but rather the very idea of force itself. Force became a resource for him, a resource that he could generate, a resource that he could reuse. With every skill evolution, he wasn't just getting more powerful; he was getting closer to the root of the skill, gaining more control over the fundamental idea of the skill itself. And now, he spent and wielded his strength in ways he couldn't imagine even a few minutes prior.

"This was something else," Shiv muttered to himself as the Recollector dissolved into faint streams of life force that gave a final cry, but died during its feeble lamentations as it settled inside Shiv like mist sinking into a swamp. This time, Blackedge remained totally undamaged. The ground wasn't cracked. Not even the clouds were disturbed. The Recollector was an overwhelmingly strong force. It had destroyed Gate Theborn in a short period during its battle against Shiv.

And despite everything, despite the agitation nested deep in his heart, despite his anxiety, his worry for Adam, for Uva, for everyone he was supposed to save, despite being trapped in a cage built specifically to hold something like him, and despite the problem of the Ascendants looming on the horizon, Shiv felt joy, true joy, true pleasure, at reaching Legendary. But it wasn't enough. He wasn't satisfied, and it

wasn't enough. He'd come a long way. He'd learned a great many things, and he still had so much left to learn. He still had so much left to experience.

I need to evolve further, Shiv thought, but it wasn't a desperate want anymore. It wasn't a blind, gluttonous desire. There was a sublime beauty to be gained in overcoming struggles that once left you broken, and even more so to crushing them with casual ease. Shiv looked toward the sky and clenched his jaw.

He felt ready this time. Maybe he wouldn't win immediately. Maybe he would need a few more tries until he figured out how to overcome his own clone. But he had a plan, a fairly direct one at that.

Previously, his clone had too many options. He would attack or distract him using a golem. He would assault Blackedge from numerous different directions. Directions that Shiv simply couldn't prepare for. The space was too wide, too large for him to cover, and his clone was just as fast, just as strong, just as destructive as him. Shiv knew his clone would probably also have his Legendary Skill this time, but that just made this fight entirely even.

He needed to get his hands on his clone and just grapple with him; force this into a close-quarters duel and kill him by breaking his neck or something. As his own deaths counted as true deaths in the eyes of the System, he heavily doubted that the Delve wouldn't count his clone perishing once as a win on his part. If not, he would see about it when he got there.

Before his clone arrived, he began making his own Vitae Golem. This time, Shiv added something special to the Golem. He infused it with the Animancy skills he took from his most recent real-life victims. After that, he sent a simple command: "Disable the other Golem with whatever means you can." He didn't know how to use Animancy, and he didn't know what his Golem was going to do, but that was fine.

The skill infusion used the feats and stories stored within the skill itself, and so the golem would do as the Animancers might while they were alive. Shiv granted his golem Leviathan, Inertial Overdrive, Strider, and Pillar as well. Putting this all together took a considerable amount of vitality out of Shiv. He found himself weakened, but if his golem could prevail against his clone, then it wouldn't be just a one-on-one brawl; it would be a two-on-one. And Shiv really liked his odds in that case.

Initiating Encounter (5/5)

A final notification appeared in Shiv's eyes, and his clone descended. He sank down from the clouds, and Shiv studied his mirror self once more. Just as he thought, the clone had his Legendary Skill as well. Pointed ripples of unattuned mana spread out from the clone's core and circulated down the length of his limbs. The clone's Biomancy was also alive with anticipation. His twelve mana hydras were reared back, prepared to strike. Shiv cracked his neck and stretched his own Aegis out, accepting his other self's challenge.

"So, back here again," his clone called out. He didn't attack immediately this time, which made Shiv narrow his eyes. His clone had all his skills, and that meant that he had Psycho-Cartography as well.

"Yeah, I'm back again," Shiv said. "And I'll keep coming back until—"

"You finally break me or some other bullshit," the clone said, rolling his eyes. "Holy hell, hearing myself talk makes me want to puke. You know what you sound like? You sound like one of those drunkards who used to start fights at the Swan-Eating Toad."

Shiv wanted to say he didn't, but a lot of his threats and his declarations of bravado were a bit like belligerent drunkards. "I don't really slur my words that much," Shiv shot back.

"You don't," his clone conceded with a slight nod, "but you're about as stupid. At least the way you act is."

Shiv just frowned at the clone. "You know that applies to you as well, right? If you're calling me an idiot..."

"I'm an idiot too," the clone said without any hesitation. "But whose fault is that? I'm not the one that's real here. I'm just a figment of this Delve. You're the fuck-up I'm based on."

"Fuck-up?" Shiv growled. Something inside his stomach tightened as his Psycho-Cartography skill warned him to focus to stay calm. The clone was obviously trying to provoke him. Unfortunately, calm wasn't something Shiv spent a lot of time being, especially not in recent days.

"Yeah, fuck-up," the clone said, gesturing broadly at the false Blackedge. "This place is based on your fuck-ups. Look at all the dead people down there. All those Pathbearers, those Umbrals, those slaves. How many of them do you think you killed? How many of them do you think died when you let off a discharge or when you smashed through a building, without thinking about what you were doing?"

"Most," Shiv said, swallowing his discomfort. "Maybe all. I know that. That's why I'm here. That's probably why this Delve Quest exists."

"Oh, yeah, that's why this Delve Quest exists," his clone agreed, but there was a hint of sarcasm in his voice. "It exists because you're sloppy. What was it you said again? Collateral damage is inevitable?"

The clone actually sounded disgusted by the sentence. "It's bullshit," he continued. "Or at least, collateral could have been massively reduced if we had just thought things through, if we had done more planning. And before you go on about not being trained, what would it have cost to do a little bit more thinking? You had

time. You were in Weave for days upon days, but you spent it prancing around with Uva and Adam, 'trying to take your mind off things.' And then, when it came time to act, you ran right into the fire, instead of spending even a moment building out a better plan or relying on the expertise of people a thousand times more experienced than you. You just had to act. You just had to rely on yourself."

He gestured down at Blackedge once again, at the hundreds of people who'd died due to his negligence. The clone's voice was dripping with sarcasm by now. "But, I suppose none of that's your fault either. You just didn't know any better, right? The awful, awful people of Blackedge are the ones to blame for your behavior, for being oh so mean to you all your life."

Psycho-Cartography: It's best not to flinch at these accusations. The clone is not wrong, for the most part. That's why he is provoking your ire. Accept it. Deal with the frustration to move on.

"Yeah, you're right," Shiv said, even though saying those words made him want to slam his head into a wall. "But again, that's why we're here, isn't it? So I can finally get that lesson through my head. So I can finally learn."

"You're here because you want more power," the clone said with a sigh. "I'm sure you'll try to learn these lessons. You try to do everything. Trying is not your problem. Your problem is that you forget. Your problem is that the System wants to kill you. And because it does, because you're going to have the whole world hunting you, you can't even afford to be yourself. Because you're not enough. You were never enough."

Shiv almost began arguing, but the clone's final words brought him to silence. He waited for the clone to keep talking, to hear more of what this replica of him had to say.

"Look at us. Look at us, really. We came this far because of our Path. Yeah, what other qualities do we have? We're real focused when we do things. Our attention borders on obsession when we practice our trade. That's why we're such a reliable cook. That's why Georges wanted to give us the Path in the first place. I guess we're brave too, but maybe it's just recklessness. After all, what did we have to lose before?"

"Our lives," Shiv said.

"Our lives." The clone laughed. "What life? We were despised. We were barely more than a cockroach to the people in Blackedge. Yeah, I guess we wanted to live, but how badly did we really want to live?"

And that made Shiv a bit uncomfortable. But there was something wrong with the clone's logic. "I was trying to gain a Path because I didn't just want to be alive, I wanted to live," Shiv said. "I wanted to be a full person. I wanted to decide my own fate. I just thought that risking my life was a worthwhile trade. I never wanted to die."

And now the clone went silent. He acknowledged Shiv's point with an inclination of his head and didn't fight it further.

Psycho-Cartography: Yeah, he has a version of me too. He's not going to bother fighting this. This angle of attack is dead. Nice work.

And that might have been the first time his Psychology Skill complimented him.

"But it is not as if those are our only issues," the clone said. "We were devoted in the kitchen. We are fearless when it comes to battle. But look at the rest of us. We're untrained. We have no knowledge. I see your hands are shaking, probably because you want to ram your thumbs through my eyes and rip my head in half rather than talking."

Shiv directed his Farsight at his clone's hands and noticed that his hands were shaking just the same. "Well, how else is this Quest supposed to end?" Shiv asked, a little bit of annoyance leaking into his voice. "I need to kill you so that I can finally get this damn skill. So I can break out of prison and..."

"And what?" the clone interrupted again. He sounded pissed now. He pointed his finger at Shiv. "And what? You think that after getting a Legendary Skill, you're going to just casually break out? Hey, dumb shit. There are signs out there. Cripple is still watching us. You know? The Ascendant? We might have killed a few of his Animancers, but that just means that he's going to be on our ass every second of every day until the rest of them come back. And then, they'll probably decide whether they want to kill us or do something else to us."

"Yeah, well, I won't make it easy on them," Shiv said.

"Oh, you're not going to make it easy on them. How cute. Well, what's the plan? How are you going to escape? Let me guess, you're going to try to use your new skill to build up enough strength to finally break whatever bonds they have you in. You're going to surprise them by overpowering their magic using your new skill as well, and then you'll go outside context for a few moments to evade them. And after that, what? Do you know the layout of the prison? Do you have any idea how big it even is, or what kind of nightmarish protections they have in place?"

Shiv didn't answer.

"Okay, you don't know that. So, then we're going to do the usual thing, in which we kidnap someone and try to make them tell us. Or try to force them into being a guide. Except, you remember how Theborn went, right?"

"Yeah," Shiv said, trying to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

"You only succeeded at Theborn," the clone continued, "because Leu's goals miraculously aligned with yours and she intervened on your behalf. I'm not going to mock you for being a bad spy, and that was a clusterfuck to begin with. Frankly, your inability to spy is probably the least of your problems. But this isn't Theborn. You're not dealing with an emotional idiot like Confriga. You're not even dealing with a mentally compromised Legend like Sullain. The Ascendants are going to break you. They are going to keep you in your cage, like you're a good little pet."

A simmer of anger crept up from Shiv's stomach. He kept it repressed.

"But you know what? Maybe we won't die. Maybe they'll decide to make us an Avatar." The clone laughed. "Or at least a weapon they can wield. They'll finally manage to push through our Legendary skill. And after that, they'll keep their fingers buried deep within our minds." The clone licked his lips and looked into the distance, scowling at something that wasn't there. "You know, that Kathereine woman, you remember the way she looked at us?"

Shiv did, and he didn't want to go down that train of thought. But the clone did. "You know that's more than just professional interest. What do you think she wants from us? What do you think she's going to make us do?"

"She's not going to make me do anything," Shiv said quietly. "I won't let her."

"Oh, you think it's going to be up to you," the clone drawled. "Oh, she sings a fun song, messes up your mind. Remember, she's basically running a divine Social Skill torture session on you. And right now, all you have is Psychology and Intimidation. She's not afraid of you, and her Psychology is better than yours. You want to know what I think?" the clone asked. Shiv didn't respond. The clone didn't care. "I think she's going to sing a real pretty song. And maybe during that song you'll end up seeing her as, I don't know, Uva. And after that, wow, who knows what might happen."

At the mention of Uva, the tendons in Shiv's neck tightened. He tried not to snarl at his clone. And the clone noticed. The clone smirked. "Speaking of Uva," he continued. "You think she's still alive? Because I don't. I don't think Adam's alive either. Or Valor, or Dad, or anyone in Blackedge. After all, we haven't gotten the rewards for that Tarrasque Quest yet."

"They're alive," Shiv forced out. The words escaped him like a desperate plea more than a confident statement.

His clone lifted an eyebrow and snorted. "Oh, they're alive. How would you know? You're not there." The clone's words struck Shiv like a dagger across the abdomen.

"I'll get back to them!" Shiv snapped. "I need to get back."

"That's why you're going to try to rush through me. You're going to try to kill me as fast as possible. And then you're going to try to make a quick escape. And then you're going to try to quickly fly back to where Blackedge is." The clone's sneering mockery grew more sickening with every syllable. "Let's be honest with ourselves. Your friends were fried the moment you got teleported. And if the Tarrasque didn't get them, they're probably scattered across a few different Republic black sites. Now, Adam, Roland, and Rose might be kept alive for a while. The Ascendants are likely not in agreement about what to do with them, and neither are their Avatars, judging by how that Veronica woman just teleported you while Stormhalt kept trying to kill you."

Then this clone's face twisted in a cruel smile. "But what do you think they're going to do to dear Sister Uva?"

Shiv didn't think about that. He did everything he could to not think about that. An Umbral Psychomancer, a loyal daughter of Weave, a Seeker of the Eldritch, and now a temporary Avatar of their greatest enemy. "I don't think they'll kill her immediately, actually. I think they'll vivisect her, push their minds into hers, have their Animancers reach deeeep into her soul to discover just how her Outsider-infested skills really function."

Veins of red crept in from the corner of Shiv's vision. He forced them back. He controlled his breathing, but he could hear his heart thundering in the backdrop. Thundering along with each ripple of force his Legendary Skill generated.

"You remember how she screamed when the Recollector took her apart?" the Clone asked, and Shiv did. He would never forget her screams. He would never forget how Adam's head was forced in the wrong direction. How he gasped and struggled. "Yeah, you do," the clone said, leaning back against nothing and grinning happily. "Well, I'll tell you what, I think she's going to scream a lot worse like that when they slowly and methodically rip her apart. Adam too, probably, considering he has some Unique Skills. But, when thinking of how they'll scream, I have another thought tickling my mind."

Psycho-Cartography: Do not let him goad you! Burst your ears if you have to. Do not—

"I'm thinking," the Clone whispered, "that they might be calling out for you. And you won't be there for them, just like you weren't there for any of these strangers, and just like you're not there for your friends right now. I'm wondering how it might feel for them to die, being tortured to death by Republic Animancers, Biomancers, and Psychomancers, with their last words being your name on their lips, and your absence clawing at their hearts."

A haze of red consumed Shiv's vision. Every fiber of his being screamed for violence, screamed for him to throw himself at his clone. He barely managed to restrain himself. The clone tilted his head, and he nodded approvingly.

"Well, I guess you are maturing a bit, but let me give you the real clincher." The clone leaned in and sneered one more time, his lips trembling with glee, or perhaps something else. "I'm not going away. I'm not going down without a long and ugly fight, and I don't think you can beat me. I don't think you can ever stop me, because I'm not real, and I hate that fact. I hate the fact that I'm nothing more than a skill slave for you to overcome. So, I'm going to do to you what you intended to do to the Ascendants: be a pain in your ass. I'm going to delay you time and time and time again until you are certain that your friends are dead. Until you are certain that you weren't there in time, that they've perished alone, without you by their side. Because that's the only power I have over you. And I'm going to fucking enjoy it."

Something inside Shiv snapped.

Chapter 168 (II) Legend

"You motherfucker!" Shiv roared. He blasted through the air, and all semblance of calm or rationality was lost in him. Waves of force rushed out from him in uncontrolled tides. The air combusted in an instant. His Berserk Skill triggered, his muscles tightened, and the amount of force rippling through him was amplified fivefold. His Vitae golem followed just behind, and the clone laughed with glee as he held his arms open, embracing Shiv before their inevitable clash.

Berserk 18 > 21

A second before Shiv got close, the clone's body flashed with gold. Shiv stopped time as well, but as a temporal shell emerged over the Deathless, the clone cast himself back in time and vanished from Shiv's

sight. And that brought him to new heights of anger. Between what the Ascendants had done, with how they kidnapped him, taking him away from those who needed him at the direst moment, and the clone's words, whatever self-control Shiv had was broken. The noises that escaped him were more like a wild dog than a person.

He blasted high in the air, caring nothing for destruction, caring nothing for subtlety. He followed his instincts and used his Vitamancy to track the clone down. Shiv found the enemy in seconds. A patch of blackness was spilling down through the bottom of the stratosphere, and there was a single red-gleaming dot amidst the impenetrable miasma.

Shiv's Psycho-Cartography was trying to get him to stop, but he couldn't. He refused. He needed to kill his clone. He needed to find whatever satisfaction he could. Shiv screamed across the sky like a missile, and his Vitae golem followed a moment thereafter. As he plunged into the Creeping Void, he zeroed in on the small presence of life force in a second and slammed an open palm against the target's head. His blow inflicted no damage. His force left him as a splash of rippling waves that outlined the clone's arm in cascading vectors.

A humanoid form stared back at him, taunting him with an open-armed gesture. He snarled as he tackled his clone through the air. As he pushed, his clone cycled his force and slammed it back into Shiv. So, consumed by rage, Shiv didn't even bother converting the force back. He just took it dead-on against his pillar, and it cracked. The amount of energy discharged by this Legendary Skill was obscene. It simply didn't seem so, considering how controlled and contained it was.

It was focused damage, focused strength, targeted on a specific entity that the user wished to break. At that moment, the entity in question was Shiv. His chest collapsed inward, but he responded with a feral cry. He consumed his wounds using his Aegis, and he slammed his Biomancy against his adversary.

The clone expended some of the overflow-tides he'd stolen from Shiv to blunt the Deathless's magic. Then he started twisting Shiv's mana hydra. He reached out and seized it by the heads, and he began to rip. A strain built within Shiv's Biomancy. He caught the clone by the wrist and drove his own force against his. Twin tides clashed against each other, but the clone still had a bit of overflow reserve left.

Even with Shiv's Berserk state, that was enough to tip the balance.

Shiv found himself swatted across the sky. His Orichalcum pillar fractured along the middle, and blood filled Shiv's mouth, but he flung himself back at his enemy, back to continue the fight. He wouldn't stop until—

A deafening noise drew his attention downward.

The clone didn't attack him, didn't use that opportunity to finish Shiv off. Instead, he simply pointed a finger down, and the Creeping Void parted.

Shiv found himself staring, not at a clone, but at his Vitae Golem. Another thunderous sound followed, and Shiv's anger gave way to confusion, which in turn gave way to disgrace and incredulity.

Pulsing waves of force spread through Blackedge, pulsing waves that pulled in different directions. Sections of the town collapsed inward, buildings were flattened, and its very foundations fractured. The town was cloven asunder, ripped in half in a final burst of force, and it fell from the sky. It fell as a single entity remained, hovering there, dangling as if on a string.

As Shiv's focus snapped back to his clone, he bowed deeply toward Shiv with a flourish of his arms.

And Shiv knew he'd failed again, knew he had lost, that he needed to repeat this entire process once more. Knew that he'd lost because he had been bested emotionally and psychologically by a fucking clone of himself dreamed up by the System.

That sent his fury to the stratosphere. An animalistic cry left Shiv. He launched himself at the clone, determined to punish him before this whole scenario was reset. The Delve shuddered as he was a hand's breadth away from his throat, and Shiv was falling from the sky alone. As he fell, he screamed, he screamed with such anger that blood vessels in his eyes burst and his vocal cords tore.

His Psycho-Cartography tried to get him to stop, but Shiv ignored it. Every thought he had was of violence and destruction. He wanted to batter the clone's defenses aside. He wanted to break him. He wanted to become an overwhelming force. He wanted to become unstoppable.

Initializing Unconfirmed Legendary Skill Evolution: Nexus of Implacable Destruction

The following encounters turned into a haze. Rather than being able to convert external types of force into overflowing waves, Shiv simply became a battery. A battery of pure and unfettered destruction. Things broke around him. He constantly got stronger with every feat of strength he performed. And his strength fell when he stopped straining himself. But that was fine with him. He was mad now. Maddier than the clone was. And that would be his edge. He would use his Berserk and his Master of Rage feat to overwhelm the clone, to tear him in half. Using this new skill, he could do it. The last one was too complicated anyway.

His Psycho-Cartography cried out to him once more, but Shiv ignored it as before. He obliterated the elemental golem. Tore the Jealousy in half. And ripped every single finger the Recollector had off before draining it of all life force.

When the clone returned, Shiv went for him immediately. He didn't even remember to make a Vitae golem this time. He slammed against the clone and found him smirking.

The clone didn't try any tricks this time. He simply grappled with Shiv and was pushed back. The amount of force he generated per struggle was far inferior to an enraged Shiv's. He'd used his Feat, but the rage had roared back to life immediately. And soon the clone would die. He would wet Shiv's skin with his blood and viscera.

"I do wonder," the clone said through gritted teeth, "what they'd think if any of them saw you. If they could see you now, they might understand why the people of Blackedge hated you so much."

Shiv didn't have a proper reply. He tried biting the clone's nose off. But before he could ever get close, something hit him in the midsection. And then a Vitae Golem, made by the clone, grasped Shiv. And the two of them drained the Deathless at once. For the first time, Shiv was overwhelmed utterly and completely. He was stronger than the clone, but he wasn't that much stronger. Not enough to instantly win. And so, as Shiv tried to counter-drain, as he tried to stay alive, he found himself fighting a hopeless battle.

As every last bit of him was reduced to streams of hissing red, he experienced something truly new, vanishing into nonexistence with a final touch of harrowing coldness.

And then he was falling again, and Shiv exploded in a haze of rage. He lost track of time then, as he lost track of himself. Instead of even attempting the encounters, he just slammed down on Blackedge with his fists, shattering it in a cataclysmic impact. He discharged his inertia, and he killed everyone he could see.

The Delve reset over and over and over again.

When he calmed, he tried the encounters once more. He got to the clone, and all it took was seeing his contemptuous sneer to set him off again.

Feral with rage, he went after his doppelganger once more, and by the time he got to him, he lost the encounter. A Vitae Golem detonated itself at the center of Blackedge, and the town was shattered into pieces.

The Delve reset, and Shiv felt something in his mind give.

He was physically shaking from sheer frustration and fury. He was so angry that he didn't even react when he smashed the battlements, when he crushed some child or another underfoot.

The Delve reset.

Shiv continued his breakdown in a blur of aimless violence and destruction.

He didn't know how many cycles passed before he finally regained some control of himself. But when he came back to his senses, he was lying on the soft lawn behind Starhawk's Perch, where he'd died his first death and gained his Path on the day of the eclipse. He was lying there, shaking, shuddering, trying to control his rapid breathing.

"Are you calm now?" he whispered to himself. He blinked. He didn't know why he said that. "Are you calm now?" he repeated.

Psycho-Cartography: Are you calm now? Are you finally spent of anger?

It took a moment for Shiv to respond. He had used his Master of Rage Feat over and over again. But with everything that had happened, his rage was practically boundless, constantly surging back to its apex, no matter how often he used it up. And there was more than just rage in him by now, things the Feat could not digest. Every time he faced the clone, the other version of him knew just what to say to make things hurt.

"No," Shiv admitted. "No, I'm not calm, and I'm not fucking fine." He seethed, wiping at his face. There was one thing more pathetic than being this mad. It was being bullied until tears of anger and frustration spilled out from his eyes.

This hadn't happened since he was five.

Stop. Stop that.

"I'm fucking trying!" Shiv snarled. A beam cut into the air, and screams sounded. Shiv realized the first encounter had begun, but he ignored the golem. He needed a moment. He rubbed at his eyes hard and tried to suppress all the bitterness, all the desperation, all the fear swelling inside him.

Psycho-Cartography: Take a moment and compose yourself.

"Stop doing that! I'm trying!" Shiv shouted. "I'm trying. I'm godsdamn trying..." He slammed his fist against the ground, and a massive crater formed. Blackedge tipped slightly. Shiv was surprised by the

overwhelming power, but he realized his Legendary Skill had changed, not for the better. Waves of rippling devastation pulsed out from him with every heartbeat. With each second, the soil around him was rent asunder, and he sank down, down, down.

I'm not telling you to stop being angry. I'm not telling you to stop crying. I'm saying, stop being rough with yourself. You can't do that anymore. There should be a lesson for you.

Shiv paused. "A lesson?" he choked out. "What kind of lesson?"

The lesson that you're mentally vulnerable and easy to provoke if your enemy knows your mind, Psycho-Cartography declared, speaking directly into his mind, barely different from his own internal monologue. That's fine. Everyone's a little messed up. Some, a lot worse than this. But you need to get a handle on your problems right now, because the clone is going to use it against you over and over again. Of course, he knows how to. He is you. He knows what hurts. And you have to know what hurts better than he does.

Shiv nodded as he let out a shuddering breath. "Okay. Okay, yeah. I understand."

Do you? Psycho-Cartography replied. Because from how you are right now, you're just trying to get through this, and get back to fighting the clone, so that he can mentally torture you into another breakdown, and we can waste another encounter.

"And what the hells am I supposed to do?"

The skill stayed silent.

"What do I have that I can use against him? I have nothing!" Shiv shouted. He immediately regretted his final words. He'd always been his own pillar, but right now, he didn't feel like any kind of pillar at all. He felt... He felt...

He didn't want to say that he was broken. He wouldn't admit it, even if he was. But he felt tired. Like it was all too much. He was alone. He didn't know if his friends were alive or dead. The System was trying to kill him. Everything was crashing down on him at once. And he had to process it all at the same time, without even a moment of rest.

And that's a mistake, Psycho-Cartography said. You didn't deal with some of these problems beforehand, and so you're going to need to deal with them all at once.

"I never had to deal with this before," Shiv said, trying not to hiccup.

Because you've always avoided it before. You were probably going to be mentally tough enough forever. We're going to regenerate from this. It's not truly going to leave any marks; our fucked up mind will make sure of that. But right now, the clone knows the exact right combination of words to send you into a rage.

"And what am I supposed to do about that?" Shiv whispered.

Well, you can start by reverting your Legendary Skill to the original, because this one is for dumb brutes. We're done with that. Another wave of devastation pulsed out from him. Blackedge was coming apart around him. That's not what you need.

"It's more powerful," Shiv said. "I don't need to think about anything when I use it. It's always building in the background. When I strain myself..."

When you strain yourself, you turn into a bomb, Psycho-Cartography interrupted him. And it isn't more powerful. It works differently. It's easier. You don't need to think or focus on it, so it can just build up in the background. But you want to know what else it does? It detonates outside of you. It's like a discharge every other second. And it amplifies the damage you do. You're going to kill more people than the clone if you keep operating on this. And how are you going to fight near Adam or Uva?

"I don't even know if they're alive," Shiv choked out.

The skill paused, letting Shiv's words linger. And what if they're dead? it finally asked.

Shiv flinched at that. He didn't want to think about that. He never even wanted to consider it.

But you need to. You need to face the pain. You can survive it. You know you can.

"I don't want to," Shiv said through gritted teeth. His breathing was speeding up again, and he gripped his chest. "I don't want to." And something inside him ached. It hurt so bad that he would rather be tortured by the Recollector again than feel this pain.

Yeah, that's called emotional agony, Psycho-Cartography said. No one deals with it very well. Tell yourself why it hurts.

"Because I'll be alone again," Shiv admitted. "Because I'll lose the only people who've ever cared about me." He covered his face as he let out a shuddering breath.

"I don't want to go back," he whispered. "I don't want to go back to being who I was on Blackedge. Every day, every single day, they treated me like I was less than human. Every day, I pretended I didn't care. I dealt with it. Every day, for all my life."

And they were pieces of shit for doing so, Psycho-Cartography said gently. Fuck Roland Arrow, and fuck the people of Blackedge.

Shiv nodded, and he swallowed and swallowed again. He got his breathing fully under control and slowly drew his hands away from his face. The cool air washed against him, and he was beyond the soil now. The constant blast of force had cut so deep that he found himself sitting in a trench. His ass was pressing against stone.

"You know what, you're probably right," Shiv said. "The last skill was better."

I know. And you would have known that too if you weren't so consumed by anger.

"Well, what the hell am I going to do?" Shiv asked again, more calm this time. "Every time I run into the clone, I just..." His hands shook. "Even if I get the old skill back, I'm not... It's not strength that's the problem anymore. It's not the skill, it's..."

You?

“Yeah,” Shiv said, “it's me. It's me and all the shit I didn't deal with so far. You're right.”

A sigh came from the skill. Look, knock that off. I'm going to give you this opportunity and not press you on it because you're emotionally compromised. But we're not a child. You think I'm not helping because I am, you dumbass. I want you to get better. I want you to get through this so that we can stop being trapped here and deal with our next nightmare problem: the Ascendants and their prison. But this is important. This is an opportunity. Because if we can handle our weaknesses here, then we'll be better prepared for the outside.

Shiv wasn't sure if that was just his psychology coping with him being trapped in the Delve for so long. But he let it go. He wanted to cope anyway. He wanted to get out.

You won't get out unless you do this well. Unless you finally figure out how to overcome jackass you, Psycho-Cartography said. And you know what I'm thinking? I think you already have the tools.

Shiv was surprised at that. But as he slowed down to think about every line of dialogue he'd exchanged with his clone, he suspected the skill was right. The clone wasn't exactly calm in the encounter, either. He was mocking. He was vicious in his sneering. He hit every single sore spot inside Shiv by the end of their earlier encounter. But the clone also raged. He was upset. Upset that he was just that. A clone. Upset that he was generated specifically for this Delve to be used as a challenge for Shiv. Nothing more.

That's right. He hates that. Because we would hate that. We would hate that more than anything else in the world. You were wondering why he's a jackass. Well, that's why: Imagine yourself being generated by the System to serve as nothing more than a temporary challenge for another, realer version of you. After that, you go back to the darkness, never having existed, never being real.

A faint shudder ran through Shiv as he considered that line of thought. The cold tendrils of existential horror gripped him. "You really think he's self-aware?"

He certainly believes it. We don't know because we can't glance into his mind without overpowering him. But I suspect that the truth is about as ugly as we guess. It's the System we're dealing with here, after all. The System is a fucker. And it never fucks halfway. But don't consider that for now. Consider what you might say to yourself. And before you're doing that, just breathe. Take a minute off. Take a few minutes off. Hell, take an hour.

"But the others..." Shiv choked out, his nose clogging up again.

They're Pathbearers too, the skill said, voice stern but gentle. Remember what Valor told you. You're going to take wounds at some point. But, at the same time, I don't think Adam's that easy to kill. And neither is Uva. Have a little faith in them. And if you're wrong, you will have time to mourn, and you will have retribution to inflict. But that's a problem you have to deal with seriously as well. Right now, you are not dealing with it seriously. You're just using it to self-mutilate.

"I know," Shiv whispered. "I know. But it's hard."

Silence followed for a moment. Then, Psycho-Cartography spoke once more. I know it's hard. I'm sorry that it's hard. You deserved better. We deserved better. We have to be honest with ourselves right now. Our life has mostly been a bitter horror show. It wasn't the worst life in existence. You've seen the slaves out there, you know how their lives were. But no one enjoys coming in second place in this shit-sucking competition that is life. Because we are all still sucking shit in the end.

Shiv managed a humorless laugh. "Thanks, skill."

Thank yourself, and be softer with yourself. Maybe not when you're fighting, maybe not when you're training, but right now. Right now, deal with your problems. This, too, is a Skill Evolution. It might not feel like it, but you're dealing with something. You're building your health up. Stop breaking yourself. Start building. Treat yourself like... The skill paused. Like a meal. Like a dish. You can be your own masterpiece.

Psycho-Cartography 53 > 61

And that opened something in Shiv's mind. Suddenly, the world didn't feel quite so miserable anymore. A rush of energy filled him.

"Make myself into my own masterpiece," Shiv said. "Because who else is going to do it, right?"

Yes, Psycho-Cartography replied. Who else is going to do it?

Shiv nodded, and he spent a few minutes just waiting. Waiting for his mind to calm down. And when he was done, he reverted the simulation by walking up to a slave. They disintegrated into a bloody smear. The Delve reset. And as it did, Shiv demanded his previous Legendary Skill back.

Initializing Unconfirmed Legendary Skill Evolution: Leviathan of the Shapeless Tides

When it was returned, Shiv began running the gauntlet once more. Instead of lashing out recklessly and brutally, he took his time learning more about the nuances of his Legendary Skill. Previously, the Jealousy claimed that this was a Void Leviathan skill. Shiv didn't know much about the void, but he did

know there were creatures up there. He'd even seen some when the Tarrasque teleported him up into space a few hours ago; the strange, dancing beings moving west.

Based on how his Legendary Skill worked, Shiv suspected that the creature the Greater Demon had mentioned wasn't just overwhelmingly powerful. It was likely very intelligent as well, and probably highly competent in the use of physics.

Right now, he could convert any physical force used on him and have it serve his own means. Or he could continue cycling his generated pulses to build up his force reserve. Yet, that was only scratching the surface. He'd seen how his clone had managed to tear Blackedge apart using the skill. Clearly, he'd built up quite a surplus of force before he did.

But the main part there was grappling. He was a grappler. He needed to fight like a grappler using the skill. It meant less striking, less reckless blows, less violent discharges, and more channels, more control, more crushing, snapping, twisting. And that was ultimately the word, control. The skill was all about concentration and control.

The other Legendary Skill he'd adjusted to was simple. It was something he didn't even need to think about. If he had to guess, it was a Tarrasque skill, because all it did was break the world around him. But if someone with that skill fought him right now, he liked his odds. He liked his odds because he was a shaper of forces, instead of just being a hammer or a bomb that constantly set itself off.

And it was in pursuing this line of thought that he came up with a new plan to deal with his clone. A plan that replicated what the clone did to him earlier. I need him to be mad, Shiv thought. So mad he loses control and comes right at me. I can't beat him on the defensive, and I can't outplot him; he has too much room to operate compared to me. And he moves too fast with this skill and with a golem of his own. He can attack Blackedge in any number of ways. So I need him to focus on me and only me.

And he would do that by attacking the only thing the clone really cared about. His sense of self.

"What do you think of many?" Shiv asked the Recollector. The eldritch entity answered by screaming as Shiv unleashed his full might. Every overflowing tide and innately generated pulse of physical power surged out from Shiv's hand into the Recollector's body and spiked in five directions at the same time.

The abomination didn't even get to scream as it was ripped apart. It was strong, it was fast, it was tough. But now, it was just a victim to Shiv. And when he next faced an eldritch enemy, he might fall again, but it wouldn't be for a lack of might.

As soon as the Recollector died, Shiv let out a breath. He acknowledged that the clone made him unnerved. That he even felt a little sympathetic toward him now. But he also focused on the fact that the clone was just that. A clone, nothing more. He would never be real. He would never be the actual Shiv. And that bothered him. So, Shiv decided to do something drastically different when he made his golem this time.

Shiv gave the golem Psycho-Cartography.

"Time for a little psychological offensive," Shiv said to himself.

The clone descended once more. He yawned, his arms folded. He looked down at Shiv with a hint of derision in his eyes. "Oh, so you're finally done throwing fits. Gotta say, that was pretty pathetic. In the last few attempts, you weren't even trying. Hells, you broke Blackedge yourself half the time. I just needed to sit by and watch."

"Yeah," Shiv admitted, swallowing the shame. "Not my best moment, but at least I'll get to live with it."

The clone went still. He cocked his head. "'You'll get to live with it.' Is that what you're telling yourself now?"

"That's what I'm telling myself," Shiv said, nodding. "Because, well, you know, there's no point in telling you. You're not real."

"You're not real," the Vitae golem suddenly said.

Shiv's Farsight was concentrated on the clone's face. And for a moment, there was no expression. No expression until Shiv noticed the tightening of tendons in the clone's neck and the soft snarl that passed from his lips.

"Okay," the clone breathed, nodding, "I see what this is."

"It doesn't matter what you see," the Vitae Golem continued.

"It doesn't matter what you think," Shiv added. "You're not real, you're never going to be real. You think just because you have a Psycho-Cartography skill, or you have any of my skills, that you're going to, what, break out of this prison? Escape the Delve that created you?"

The clone was silent, but the way he was glaring at Shiv told the Deathless his hit was working. "So, how long do you think you can make this last? Another hour? Another day? You know, I just need to win once, right?"

"You're not going to win once," the clone said with a slight hiss. "I won't let you."

"And now who's lying to themselves?" Shiv pressed. "Now, who's the drunk? I'm going to inevitably win once. You know that. You are me. Well, a pale shadow of me. Maybe just a simulated interpretation of me, but still. You are me enough to know that I won't give up. And you're going to screw up once. You're going to get unlucky once. And after that..." Shiv shrugged. "Well, I guess I'll leave. And I guess you won't exist anymore. I'll try to think of you sometimes, but... I suspect there will be other versions of you, in other Delves I'll have to deal with later. I'm guessing that whatever the Psychology Delve will throw at me will be a lot more painful for me than you are. Maybe I should view you as a warm-up for the actual challenge. But that would probably be giving you too much weight. There's no point in getting mad at a fucking mannequin, after all."

The clone wasn't moving at all, but his mana hydras were coiling tighter and tighter around his body.

"Adam and Uva were never your friends," the Vitae golem said to the clone. "They will never be your friends. You will never meet them. They don't know you. And even if they die screaming our names, they will always be calling for us, not you."

"Your jealousy has been noticed," Shiv said, clicking his tongue

"And," the Vitae golem gestured to Shiv, "he got to meet the girl. He got to have friends. He got to be loved, feared, and respected. You... It's such a pity you'll never get any of this."

A loud snarl escaped from the clone as he blasted toward Shiv and the golem. The clone's own golem punched down from the sky, aiming for Blackedge. Focus took hold inside Shiv. He activated both his Blessings as he went into battle against a darker version of himself.

"Go get the other golem," Shiv told his own. It responded by casting itself back in time. The other golem predictably pivoted and went for Shiv.

Four bodies came together in the skies above Blackedge, but there were no shockwaves. There was no destruction. Instead, Shiv greeted his clone with a massive amount of kinetic energy stored. But he didn't unleash it on the clone directly. Instead, he counter-grappled against his other self.

The clone pushed his tides against Shiv, and Shiv sent tides back. They fought to control wrists, to hook their arms underneath the other's armpits to maintain a dominant hold. With every passing second of struggle, the clone grew larger, his muscles grew tenser, the force he generated exceeding Shiv's fivefold. He was growing with Berserk, but he didn't quite have Shiv's surplus, and that proved to be his mistake. He wasn't thinking. The clone had the same faults as Shiv.

And so, as the Deathless began to batter him using his mana hydras, the clone was taken by surprise. He spent his strength fighting off Shiv's magical skill. As he went to rip the head off a hydra, Shiv seized him by the arm and slammed a pulse of force against him. He had to spend strength to shrug off Shiv's grasp, but then came two more mana hydras. Both collided with the clone's body. Both were flung back in desperation as the clone channeled surging vectors of force against them. The clone's body was alight with solid stripes of red mana, but the stripes were constantly being spent to keep Shiv's own strength and Biomancy at bay.

The clone was fighting a defensive struggle. And you couldn't defend forever, though you could technically attempt to spend forever trying to smash through a foe that had a proper surplus—and kept building on it.

Meanwhile, Shiv kept building up, kept gathering more force, while he alternated between his mana hydras and his brute force. By the time the clone responded using his own magic, he was running so much of a strength deficit that he barely kept Shiv off of him, and so he failed to protect his Biomancy field. Shiv slammed one of his hydras against his clone's, and as the two magical serpents wrestled with each other, he reached out, seized the clone's mana hydra, and ripped it in half.

A scream of pain came out from the clone, but as he was like Shiv, he didn't let that stop him. While the clone's Biomancy mana bled into the world, he fought on, swinging haymakers with brutal force, trying to overwhelm the Deathless. Shiv intercepted a blow and locked his foe's shoulder. With a sudden twist, Shiv dislocated his arm. The clone snarled. Shiv held him in place and kept channeling waves of force into him.

The clone regressed, becoming feral and sloppy. He slammed awkward hooks against Shiv's abdomen, but those punches just circulated within Shiv, and he returned the kinetic energy. But not against the clone's body. Instead, he targeted the clone's mana fields.

Shiv knew his weaknesses now, could think about them. While the clone was consumed with the urge to rip Shiv limb from limb, Shiv wrapped his hydras around the clone and forced the clone to waste another innately generated tide of force. While the clone struggled to push Shiv's hydras back, he drove his fingers into the clone's chest, and he tore, not at the clone's Biomancy, but his Psychomancy. The clone screamed. Shiv twisted again—and deboned the clone's right arm. Then, he shredded the clone's Pyromancy as well. His Hydromancy followed suit a moment after.

As the clone doubled over, Shiv wrapped an arm around his neck, and he suddenly plunged down. He didn't plunge down just with his Shapeless Tides. He used his Biomancy as well, and it was that coordination, that combined synergy of skills that finally overwhelmed the clone.

The clone spent what remained of his strength to counter Shiv's just to make sure his neck wasn't broken, but then the hydras were inside him, and his Biomancy was already shredded. At once, Shiv burst the clone's heart and lacerated his brain.

The clone let out a violent gasp, and with a ragged jerk, a final exhale escaped from him.

But as the clone dangled there, Shiv didn't mutilate him further, didn't break his body or crush his skull. Instead, Shiv pulled the clone tight against himself, offering him a proper embrace. He brought the clone's left ear close, not sure if he could somehow hear him, not sure if he was ever real. If he was, however, if he was more than just a simulation...

"I'm sorry," Shiv whispered. "We deserved better. We... we deserved more than being treated like shit, being used and hurt over and over again."

The clone didn't say anything. He was dead. Dead in Shiv's grasp. This fight was over. This Delve was over. But instead of feeling relief, Shiv enjoyed a subtle triumph and a feeling of bittersweet understanding.

Slowly, awkwardly, Shiv patted the clone on the side of the head. "I'll try to do right by you. I'll try to make it all worth it. I'll get better. I'll be better. I'll become a real Pathbearer. One that no clone will ever stop. One that you might be able to be proud of. One that's better than all the godsdamned cowards, hypocrites, and assholes we had to deal with all our life."

He sighed. "We live in a pretty pathetic fucking world, man. But I'm not going to add to that. I'm gonna stand. I'm gonna stand."

Maybe the clone couldn't hear, but the words felt like a balm for Shiv himself. And as he bit his lip, he felt a sense of peace replace some of the latent rage that always resided deep inside himself. A sense of peace that came from knowing he was more than just his own pillar. He was his own friend. He knew he could push himself to incredible heights. He knew he could drive himself to the very limits and beyond, to the point where most would break.

And now, he knew he had kindness to offer as well. Kindness, love, and decency.

He was becoming a full person.

Imagine that, Shiv thought to himself.

Encounter Complete (5/5)

All encounters complete

Do you wish to evolve to your current Legendary Skill?

After everything Shiv experienced, he had no doubt. The first choice was the right one. "Yeah."

Skill Evolution: Leviathan of the Shapeless Tides 500 (Legendary)

Feats (3/4)

As the Delve Quest came to a close, Shiv felt the Legendary Skill cement inside him. Power flooded him. Power washed over him with every heartbeat. And power kissed his flesh as the wind brushed him, as force itself became his clay.

Shiv let out a breath of relief. Psycho-Cartography, thank you. You really saved my ass.

Psycho-Cartography: You saved your own ass. Now, learn to use your Shapeless Tides Skill a whole lot better. Considering how the brute force version of you is such a social nightmare, I hope you get really good at fighting, because you're probably going to need to beat your Legendary Psychology clone to death with your fists.

Shiv let out a muted laugh. "Yeah, I suspect that's the case. Well, I think we'll have a little time until then. Enough for us to get healthier. Enough for us to get better."

You know that will make the clone better too, right? Psycho-Cartography replied.

Shiv snorted. "Then he just becomes very good practice."

And for the first time, Shiv thought he heard the skill laugh.

Finally, the clone disappeared. The Delve collapsed. But this time it didn't restart. He got a final chance to look down at Blackedge, and a rush of pride went through him as he saw it as pristine as it was at the start of the battle. Not a single blade of grass was out of place.

This was the true flavor of victory.

Shiv felt himself ascend. Felt himself ascend and felt light and color return to his senses. His vision was blurred. The sounds around him were muted. But as he tried to move, he heard the jingling of chains and felt the cold touch of metal press against his bare skin. Shiv blinked. He looked down and realized he was utterly undressed.

And as he looked up, he found a badly damaged automaton kneeling before him. The ground was slick with blood, and the automaton was knee-deep in the gore, meditating. Shiv guessed that was where the Animancers used to be. No Animancers now. Just one jacked-up Avatar.

A flare of rage passed through the Deathless, but he controlled himself. He kept it contained until he needed it.

He learned more than one lesson in his Delve.

"So," Shiv began, "where are my clothes? If you touched my ass or cock while I was out, I'm going to do things to you."

Slowly, the automaton lifted its head. Lines of color ignited upon its triangular skull, and it offered Shiv a slight nod. "You return. You are a Legend now."

That was Cripple's voice. Shiv couldn't hear the Avatar at all.

Shiv shrugged. "Took a while. I could've done better."

The Ascendant let out a low drone of discomfort. "Have you Delved before?"

"Nah," Shiv said. Part of him wanted to lie. But he didn't see the point, and he wanted to know how good other people usually did. "First time."

Cripple looked down and nodded. "You are a martial talent, then. Many spend weeks to months trapped inside themselves, struggling against their inner Quest, falling to their own shadow time and time again."

Shiv frowned. "How long was I in there?"

"A day and no more." The automaton rose and stared Shiv straight in the eye.

The Deathless clenched his jaw and flexed his fingers, ripples of force splashing across his body. Shiv began to circulate the force he generated. He started building up an overflow. "You gonna ask what my Legendary Skill does now?" Shiv asked, trying to provoke a response from the automaton.

"I know what it does," Cripple answered. "I have faced a pod of Void Leviathans and suffered defeat at their hands. As a god." The Ascendant's admission caught Shiv off guard. "And so, I must ask... How did you attain such an evolution? It is not for Individual Pathbearers. How is this possible?"

The Deathless leaned back and looked the Ascendant up and down. And an idea tickled his mind. "How about a question for a question. I'll tell you something. You tell me something."

The automaton considered his request and nodded. "Acceptable. What do you wish to know?"

Shiv clenched his fists and started letting his shapeless tides flow along the Orichalcum chains holding him in place. "Blackedge and its survivors. Where are they right now? What is their condition?"

Chapter 169 (I) Cell

In my experience, everyone seeks to betray themselves in some way. It is cathartic to confess your sins. It is cathartic to release all burdens lingering in your mind, like extracting an arrow. It hurts, but you yearn to feel an absence where your flesh was filled.

And the one that wished to admit something will make it known. They will talk overmuch. They will display sentimentality, display offerings of truth from within themselves. These truths can be failures of their past, or, potentially, shortcomings.

We are creatures of ego and vulnerability. After all, it is our sense of self that shapes so many of our skills. An admission of shame usually scars us. And when someone gives that to you, it is best for you to offer something back. Give your own admission, but do not give a truthful one. Make false shame. Trade false shame for their genuine articles. And soon you will gain a flood of truth from your adversary, while you yourself will remain as guarded as ever before.

-Lady Eileen Harkness

“Ah. This matter.” The Ascendant looked down as it considered Shiv’s question. The Deathless wasn’t very good at telling what automata were feeling, but the body language of the machines screamed of discomfort. Or maybe that was just how badly the Avatar was damaged. Most of its chassis was cracked from the battle earlier. It only had one arm left, and wires were sparking free from its joints. Considering the coolant leaking out from the Avatar, Shiv guessed it suffered considerable internal damage as well.

Kind of a shit deal being Cripple’s Avatar, Shiv thought. A lot of power. But guaranteed to kill you. It occurred to him that he might make an ideal Avatar for Cripple, but considering how the Ascendant had only used automata so far, Shiv had a suspicion humans weren’t so easy for Cripple to access. It also didn’t matter, because Shiv had no intention of serving as a vessel for a god, false or otherwise.

“The matter of Blackedge is still in the process of being resolved,” Cripple said at last.

Shiv scowled. “Great. Thanks. What does that mean? Are the people inside the Perch still alive? Is Adam Arrow still alive? Is the Tarrasque dead?”

The automaton’s vertical optics flickered. “There were many casualties in the town itself. Adam Arrow is currently in our custody—in a medical coma. He sustained severe wounds against the Tarrasque.”

Every fiber of Shiv’s being tensed. The fires of anger roared to life inside him, and he poured his anger into Psycho-Cartography before he could be overwhelmed. “He wouldn’t have been anywhere near the

elling Tarrasque if you assholes didn't teleport me out of there. I was draining its vitality. We were going to win."

"Or you would have been struck down by the Tarrasque for good and granted it ten Legendary Skills," Cripple retorted.

"Yeah. And why should a monster get that, right? Better an Ascendant or an Avatar." Shiv aimed his glare at the automaton, but found it looking away from him.

Psycho-Cartography: It is ashamed. Think. We remember something about Cripple the Strongest. The Starhawk called it the only other Ascendant that cares about honor or justice as much as he does. We might be able to use that.

"I would prefer that you live instead," Cripple said softly. "I have no urge to see you slain for cheap rewards."

"Cheap? Ten Legendary Skills are enough to trade a kingdom for. Pardon me if I think you're just passing shit out of your mouth."

"You are pardoned," Cripple said with absolute seriousness. "I care nothing for so many Legendary Skills." The Avatar placed his single hand against its chest. "All who serve me spend themselves utterly and completely. They are martyred in the process of becoming my vessel, and in destruction, they gain great power. Greater than any Legend."

"But it costs them their lives," Shiv said.

“Yes,”

Cripple replied honestly. “More than just their lives. It costs them their very spirits. They are worn down until little is left. And they finally perish. It is a dark thing to become my Avatar. I have mourned one hundred and two million Pathbearers since the Republic’s inception. One hundred and two million who have given more than I in poignance and magnitudes.”

Whatever acidic retort was resting on Shiv’s tongue rolled back down his throat as he found himself utterly frozen of thought. “One hundred and two million? Broken Moon. That’s...”

“You never get used to feeling another person die. Feeling them perish entirely, dissolving on the level of their soul.” Cripple let out a quiet sigh, and even in this cramped Orichalcum cage, the winds rustled with susurrations of sadness. “The Avatar whom I embody right now was named Westerly-8. It was an Aeronaut in the Republic’s Prismatic Navy. After decades of service, it encountered a terrible techplague while fighting over the Vast Atlantic. The Carrier-Automaton it served aboard was downed, and the enemy unleashed Binaric Sicknesses into the waters.

The Avatar’s glowing “eyes” grew dim. “Its fate was sealed, then. For it, and for countless other brave Pathbearers fighting for our Republic. While it was recovered, many drifted to the depths, seized by Hive-Kingdom Atlantis for their own fell purposes. Yet, even when Westerly-8 was offered grand rewards and peaceful tenure at Phoenix Academy to live out its final days before the Techplague finally corrupted its source codes, it decided to serve still, and offered itself to me. As did all the Avatars before it.”

An awkward feeling of pity came over Shiv. He still despised the Ascendants for kidnapping and imprisoning him, but the Avatar—

Psycho-Cartography: Notice Cripple's words. Our Republic. In defense. He is using a Social Skill on us. The amount of sympathy we feel is exaggerated.

Psycho-Cartography 61 > 62

Farsight 52 > 53

The moment Shiv noticed that, he sneered at the Ascendant once more. "Hey. You do this shit to all your prisoners?"

The Avatar lifted its head slightly. "Ah. You speak of my Empathic Seeding Skill. I apologize. It is not something that can be controlled. It also would not work if my words were lies."

"I'm not doubting your Avatar was brave. Pathbearers are brave." Shiv scoffed, and he remembered Tarlow, the kukri-wielding Dragon-Knight he'd slain to fulfil a Quest and retake Valor's right arm. "Our enemies are brave too. Plenty of them go down fighting. It's the way of our world. I would have given you sympathy if you didn't try to pull it out of me."

"I state this again: It is a thing beyond my control."

"Broken Moon. Beyond your control. What kind of god is so impotent?"

The Avatar's remaining hand balled into a fist. Shiv got the impression that he'd struck a nerve.

“One beset on all sides by enemies,” Cripple declared with conviction. “One that strains itself to the limit to preserve this Republic. One that is desperately trying to get its battle-siblings to cease their squabbles and come back together. For only together can we stand against the threats coming from all sides.”

“So, what? Your excuse for all the bullshit you Ascendants have done so far is that we’re under threat? That’s called living in the Integration, Cripple.” Shiv bit back a snarl and leaned in closer. The chains around him rattled and shook. The red-gold bands of Orichalcum grew brighter and denser, responding to Shiv’s anger—drawing from his willpower to increase its durability. A rush of overflow-tides slipped out of Shiv and curved around his bindings. The Orichalcum held, but he felt it tremble and shudder as he channeled more force into it.

It could keep getting tougher, but he could cultivate strength faster—and eventually, he would break it.

Despite this, the chains were only a distraction. As the Avatar blurred forward—pointing the cold tip of its metallic finger at Shiv’s throat—Shiv’s innate force glided along the Orichalcum chains holding him in place and circulated the walls. There, they briefly crashed against a few spell patterns, and Shiv saw the intricate mana works flicker and rip.

Target that first. Remove the magic. And then we kill ourselves and use Outside Context Problem. Don’t think Cripple understands that skill yet. If it did, it should have kept me sedated.

“I implore you to cease your struggles,” Cripple said with a somber tone. “I understand your yearning for freedom. But do not misunderstand my sympathy for hesitation. I will slay you if it means protecting the Republic.”

“How often have you said that to a prisoner?” Shiv asked.

“Thrice. I meant it more with the two before you. Now. Please. Peace. I do not wish to kill you. I wish only to speak, and to reach a proper understanding.”

“Understanding?” Shiv rasped. A thunderclap of kinetic energy slashed out from his body along cleaving vectors. The Orichalcum binds holding Shiv shook and began to scream as the mystical alloy struggled against his Legendary Skill. Then, Shiv began cycling force once more, gathering more overflow as he waited and watched.

Keep him off-balance. But wait. Patience. Opportunity. That’s what the Delve taught. We’re sticking to the lesson.

“Fine,” Shiv spat. “I’ll give you understanding. I’ll tell you what I know about myself—how and why I think I got this evolution.”

“You do not know for certain?” Cripple asked, surprised.

“Not even a little,” Shiv chuckled darkly. “Up until a few months ago, I didn’t even have a Path. You knew that?”

“Yes,” Cripple said. It shook its head in dismay. “For what it was worth, I was disappointed in the Starhawk for letting such a travesty transpire. I understand Roland Arrow’s feelings, but the crimes of your parents did not give him the legal or ethical right to entrap another citizen of our Republic. It might have been best for you to be placed in Inquisitorial custody. You would have been trained and given purpose there.”

Instead of being flattered, Shiv struggled not to bare his teeth. The Ascendant was saying all the wrong things to him. "I came across an Inquisition black site in a gate. You knew that?"

Cripple fell quiet. Its Avatar started looking at the ground again.

"Oh good, you did know that. Well, you wanna know what else I found at the black site? I found them torturing citizens of the Republic. The Republic you keep bringing up, like it's some kind of shield or slogan for something you want to sell me."

Shiv thought about Heather and Tran, thought about how brutally they had been mutilated, how scarred they were of mind and body in the aftermath. "I despise Roland Arrow for everything he did to me. The man just couldn't make up his mind, and I paid for it. But I will tell you this much: no matter how much I hate Roland Arrow, if I had woken up one day and found myself an inquisitor, I would have slit my own throat."

The Avatar's posture sagged. "It is known that the Inquisition has to conduct certain operations that stretch boundaries."

"What the fuck does that even mean?" Shiv actually laughed out loud. The bitterness in his voice rang out, filling the Orichalcum cell. As he directed his gaze upward, he frowned as he noticed another layer of magic lining the porthole. More magic than with the Wolf-Man's cell, Shiv thought to himself. They're putting in extra precautions here. There are also a hell of a lot more spell patterns circulating around the walls too. And he didn't recognize some of the colors. Those were probably new Magical Skills, or specialized blends of mana he hadn't faced before.

It didn't matter. He had Leviathan of the Shapeless Tides. And when it came time, he would use his might to rip every mote of spellstuff around him apart.

When Cripple didn't respond, Shiv pressed the Ascendant, digging into the automaton's weakness. "You know, I don't really get you. You talk to me like you're some kind of honorable warrior, yet here we are in a cell most citizens of the Republic most likely don't know about. And you're trying to justify torture sessions conducted on citizens. Citizens you seem to care about, or so you claim. And then you stand before me, feeling bad?" Shiv leaned back and relaxed. He went slack in his chains and snorted. "You don't make much sense to me, Cripple. You don't want to be here. That's the only thing I'm sure about. Because I don't want to be here either."

"It makes little difference what we want," Cripple said. Its words were somber and heavy.

That made Shiv narrow his eyes. "Alright, before we get to anything else, I have to understand this. You keep saying can't. Not up to us. This is the kind of shit I would expect to hear from a slave. You're an Ascendant. Literally a god. Or at least a Pathbearer who stole a god's powers." Cripple lifted its head and regarded Shiv with surprise. But the Deathless just kept going. "So what's with all the defeatism? What's with you always surrendering over and over?"

"I am not surrendering," Cripple said. Shiv thought he caught a hint of heat in the Ascendant's voice. "I am facing reality. There are many realities. Many limitations. Even for an Ascendant. Even for a god. You do not understand, you lack perspective and experience. You are but a child."

"I'm also a Legend," Shiv snapped back. "Let me tell you something about my experience. My experience is that, up until a few months ago, I spent my life hunting vampires and cooking. The former because I wanted a Path, the latter because it was the only other thing I found meaning in. After that, after things at Blackedge went to hell, I was flung down in the Abyss. And guess what? My life got a lot better. I died a lot, but everything got better. Because it was up to me now. And I kept going. That's my experience."

As soon as Shiv mentioned getting flung down in the Abyss, the Avatar shook. "How far?" Cripple asked.

Shiv tilted his head. "What? How far did I fall?"

"Yes," Cripple confirmed. "How far?"

Shiv considered that for a moment. "The... Umbral Wilderness? Penumbra? Something like that. The first landing killed me. Wasn't nearly as tough as I was now. Hell, I was Pathless an hour before. I splattered apart, drained vitality out of a cave biter, got killed by said cave biter over and over again, finally got strong enough to kill it, and things continued on from there."

Shiv watched the Ascendant as he spoke. The Avatar was looking down, its glowing optics pointed at Shiv's chest rather than his face, and he knew it was thinking. About what? He wasn't sure. But before he could continue speaking, the Avatar lifted his head once more. "You know about our history," the Ascendant asked. "Our true history."

"I know a bit," Shiv admitted. There was no point in lying when he didn't have the full picture, and frankly, he was curious. "I know that the Dust King or whatever cast you and the other Ascendants down." Shiv paused as he licked his lips. "I know that you weren't the only Ascendants, that there were more than thirteen."

Revealing that bit of knowledge was a gambit, but it was a gambit Shiv might be able to take somewhere. The Educator was in the back of Shiv's mind, and though it had been a while since he ran into her, he didn't doubt that the Forgotten God would eventually show up again at some terribly inopportune moment. But Shiv decided to apply some preventative measures to make a bit of trouble for the Forgotten God. After all, it seemed that they were not aligned with Starhawk or even the rest of the Ascendants. They were doing their own thing, pursuing their own interests. It saw them aligned with Udraal Thann, Shiv's... What the hell was Udraal?

Creator might be the wrong word, Shiv thought to himself, but I don't know how else to refer to him. I don't even know what he did to me. Only that he probably has a hand in me being Omenborn and getting my Path.

"Then you know enough," Cripple finally responded. "When we were sent down into the Abyss, all those years ago, the world wasn't as it is now, peaceful and soft."

Shiv's nostrils flared. "Hey, Cripple," The Ascendant looked upon him. "Fuckyou. What are you talking about, peaceful and soft? I haven't tasted any peaceful and soft."

"And that is the fault of Roland Arrow," Cripple said.

"No, even past Roland Arrow. I didn't taste peaceful and soft. And I don't care about peaceful and soft." Shiv pointed some of his innately generated force vectors forward. He leaned toward the Ascendant, and his Orichalcum cage shook from the sudden flood of strength flowing out of Shiv. The bolts that held the chains to the walls began to creak.

"I'm System-favored," Shiv started. "You know what that means, right? I'm probably sure you're System-favored too, considering everything you lived through. Well, there's probably one major difference between me and you. I died over and over. In every way possible, I suffered all kinds of deaths. Miserable ones, peaceful ones, painful ones, quick ones. But I died, and I came back. And the System, well, it doesn't seem to know what to do with me. That's why it keeps making things harder and harder and harder."

Shiv thought back to everything he'd suffered, every enemy he killed, every challenge he surmounted. One fight after another, one problem after another. It never stopped. And even now, it was still growing in intensity. "That's why I'm talking to you now. Just weeks after I got my Path. How long did it take you to become a Legend? Actually, to hells with that. How long did it take you to become a Master? And did you have to die to do it?"

Cripple didn't say. Shiv stopped leaning on the chains. A wolfish grin spread across his face. "Or did you ever even become a master? Did you walk your Path much at all before you drank the divinity out from the Great One? Like one of the vampires?"

Before Shiv could say anything more, steel fingers were wrapped around his throat. The Avatar clenched, but Shiv directed his tides back. He warred against the Avatar's skill-fused mix of Physicality and Psychomancy. They were powerful and backed by an Ascendant. They had more might at their disposal compared to Shiv. But that didn't mean he was easy prey now. A current of Psychomancy flowed out from the Avatar's fingers, but it met Shiv's shapeless tides in a sudden crash.

The Ascendant's mana was stalemated. Shiv had been building up overflow exactly to prevent something like this as well. He wasn't pushing the Ascendant back, but he kept the Avatar's Psychomancy outside his mind.

That was triumph enough, considering how easy it was for the Ascendant to beat him down a day before.

"Do not compare me to them," Cripple hissed. And now it was openly angry.

Shiv's mind whirled with possibilities. He knew the Abyss was a dangerous and fantastic place. In retrospect, he had gotten extremely lucky running into that group of Umbrals. If he'd encountered the First Blood or Compact, his life could have turned out a whole lot different. Maybe he'd be more like

Cripple in some ways. As the Ascendant and the newly Legendary-tiered Deathless matched their magically-charged Physicalities against each other, Shiv let out a breath.

"Fine, I don't blame you for reacting like that. I don't much like the bloodsuckers either." He remembered what the First Blood did to Angelo's village. Shiv might not suffer trauma like most people, but the sheer depravity and atrocity he witnessed marked him regardless.

Suddenly, Cripple drew back its arm and shook its head. "I apologize for losing control. I should be more composed." A few pieces fell away from its body, and more coolant spilled down its legs, mingling with the puddles of blood. "I faced a great many nightmares in the Abyss." Cripple looked down. "You might have noticed already. But what I display now, I am not ashamed to admit. I am traumatized. I was separated from my comrades early on in our exile. I was taken by Compact, traded to the vampires, then traded back to them again."

Understanding bloomed inside Shiv as he made the connection. "You were a slave."

Chapter 169 (II) Cell

"I was one of their warrior puppets in the Bloodworks; their arenas," Cripple said. Its voice was thick with disgust. "My Path was already set, so they couldn't make a true slave of me. But still, I was bound. I was pressed to entertain them. Initially, they treated me as a surfacer attraction. A surfacer automaton they would use to cut down criminals, dissidents, and unfortunates." Cripple's hands shook. "I did not wish to shed their blood, but it wasn't up to me. I tried to resist. I tried." Cripple's words sounded like a plea now, and Shiv was practically enraptured. "You will discover something about being tortured." Cripple continued regarding Shiv, but then, after a moment, it unclenched its fist. "But I suspect you already know something about that, don't you?"

Shiv nodded. "Had a run-in with an eldritch entity," he admitted. "Tried to convert me, tried to change me. Didn't quite take, but it's not a thing I would recommend."

Cripple chuckled at Shiv's understatement. "Torture breaks all, eventually. There are Pathbearers that can endure for months, years, perhaps even centuries, but eventually, they will be worn down. Though my martial capabilities were considerable, though my Toughness was without question, my strength capable of contending even against Pathbearers a Tier above my own, there has always been a flaw in my source code."

"A flaw?" Shiv asked.

"A vulnerability in my will," Cripple explained. "It was conditioned into me from the moment of my creation. As I told you before, this world right now is soft and good. I understand why you were offended by my words, but I know it to be true. In the time of the Dusk King, before the Republic, before the Legendary-Tier Incursion finally concluded, Earth was a slaughterhouse. Pathbearers fought and died, desperate to carve a place for themselves in this uncaring world. The mana was weaker, and so were we, but that just amplified our brutality. Many city-states and nations sought whatever means they could to gain an edge over their adversaries."

Somehow, Shiv understood intuitively. "Felling shit, you were a slave even before you went to the Abyss."

"Somewhat," Cripple said, but there was no anger in his voice, just exhaustion. "I didn't understand what a slave was at that point, and neither did my owners."

"Owners?" Shiv asked.

"I was regarded as a thing. Not a person. Not even close. Before the Republic, the organics and the machines had a different relationship. As you might have noticed, an automaton's skill evolutions are far different in many ways. We are not susceptible to Psychomancy, and our bodies are more malleable."

Shiv took that opportunity to dig for some information. "The Inquisition came in on this large ship. Hawgrave referred to that ship as if it were a person. That was an automaton, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Cripple replied. "That was an automaton, a Heroic-Tier automaton dedicated to bearing the weight of its fellow Pathbearers. We have skills that you cannot access, functions left over from the pre-Integration. In those times, we did not evolve. We were simply rebuilt or modified. Our chassis could be changed on a whim. Our source codes could be updated."

"But the System doesn't want that," Shiv said. "The System wants you to only change through struggle."

"Correct,"

Cripple said, nodding once. "And so, some of us gain evolutions that drastically alter our morphologies. Automata who find themselves serving as couriers often gain skill evolutions titled Humpback Mark 13."

Shiv blinked as he tried to process what that skill name could possibly mean.

"It is related to vessels from the old world," Cripple explained. "Vehicular models that we can remake our material bodies into. And that was why we were considered invaluable. The old ways of technology had been lost, but through us, some semblance of the ancients lived on. The ways they wielded electricity and silicon to create wonders. We were those wonders, and thus we became weapons."

Cripple's words made Shiv think of Can Hu. Forbidden Africa seemed to still operate the same way to this very day.

"I did not have a name during those times. But I did have a sense of self, as did many of my fellow automata. Though they did not question the commands of our owners, I often found myself wondering why we were raiding a certain village. Why we were murdering certain people. Why we had to bomb a stretch of defenseless farmland. And why so many of my siblings had to die. None of it made sense to me. And in time, incomprehension grew to resentment."

"So you rebelled," Shiv said.

"I rebelled. And my rebellion was brutal." The Deathless waited for the Ascendant to continue with his story. Ultimately, it didn't. "I have spoken enough about myself," it said with a weary weight in its voice. "I would rather hear from you now. I have given far, far more than I think is reasonable." The Ascendant hummed. "Be glad it is me you speak with and not Kathereine."

"Yeah, I'm definitely glad," Shiv said with a shudder. "I want nothing to do with her. And if she comes near me, I'm going to kill her and myself. Maybe not in that exact order."

"You have already had an encounter with her, I see," Cripple noted with a faint note of derision.

"Yeah, she was at Blackedge just a bit before you. Her and Halsur."

"Ridiculous," Cripple spat. "As if we were not divided enough. As if we were not on the verge of shattering ourselves for her petty grievance against the Starhawk."

Shiv squinted at the Ascendant and decided to press his luck. "You know, the Starhawk said something about you. He said you were the closest to him in terms of morality."

Shiv's words made Cripple flinch. "He sees too much in other people, as usual. Thaen is a fool."

"And I'm a brute," Shiv said. "And you're kind of a pussy. We all got our problems."

The Avatar angled its head at him. And Shiv got the feeling the Ascendant was glaring through its mortal vessel. "Regardless, continue. Do not speak of Ascendants in Blackedge for now. Tell me how you gained your skill. We have gone too far off course."

"The Delve was..." Shiv frowned, trying to find the words. "Well, it was pretty straightforward. I had to do a Quest and overcome five encounters. The first four were adversaries I faced during prior evolutions, or what I regarded as essential moments."

"You faced yourself at the end," Cripple said, more a statement than a question.

"Yep," Shiv replied. "Faced myself. Found it kind of a pain in the ass, to be honest. I had to defend Blackedge and the people on it." Shiv neglected to mention that they were victims of his sloppiness, who perished because of the collateral damage he inflicted. "Anyway, as I went through the encounters, the Legendary skill adjusted itself. And eventually I got Leviathan of the Shapeless Tides."

"And that was all?" Cripple asked, sounding as if he didn't believe Shiv. "You didn't gain a Blessing to manifest a monstrous form? A special transformation given to you by another god or through a skill?"

"Just like that," Shiv said, without a moment's hesitation. He tried to shrug, but the chains and metal bands holding his body in place made it hard. A grunt of annoyance escaped Shiv. "But I do have a guess as to why it's so easy. Main reason is, I'm plenty monster already."

Cripple held out a finger and spun, urging Shiv to continue. The Deathless held back a smirk. He wanted to see how the Ascendant responded to his following statement. "So, there's a good chance that my soul and mind might have parts from a Tarrasque," Shiv paused, "or maybe parts that were inspired by a Tarasque. Not sure, you'll have to ask Udraal Thann."

"Udraal!" Cripple nearly choked. He stared at Shiv. The Ascendant stared at Shiv for a long moment and finally looked away. "Then, Veronica's suspicions were true. Damnation. Udraal Thann... Using our Pathbearers for his twisted experiments..."

Shiv waited for Cripple to say something else, maybe make a comment on how they confirmed things with Valor, but when it didn't, a faint flame of hope ignited inside Shiv. If they had Valor, he suspected Cripple would have told him. Especially considering Valor's relationship with Udraal and how he was in Starhawk's Perch. And that made Shiv remember something.

When he asked the Ascendant about Starhawk's Perch, it told him the town suffered many casualties. It told him that Adam was in a medical coma, but it said nothing about the Perch itself. And it said nothing about the Tarasque, either. This is either really, really good or really, really fucking bad, Shiv thought to himself. Good? Uva and the others might have escaped down into the Abyss. Bad? The Tarrasque killed them all. And the latter thought made his stomach tumble with nausea. Let's go with good for now.

"Has he made contact with you?" Cripple asked. There was more than a hint of urgency in the Ascendant's voice. And when Shiv shook his head, a sigh of relief escaped the Avatar. "Then it is not as dire as I feared. He is still exiled."

"Exiled?" Shiv echoed, raising an eyebrow.

"You do not know?" Cripple asked, sounding surprised.

"About what?" Shiv said. His insides tightened. He wondered if he had made a mistake.

Cripple elaborated. "The main reason behind the Abyss War was the death of an Ascendant." Shiv's eyes widened, and got even wider when Cripple continued. "You were right. Before there were thirteen, there were twenty. And among our number were Pathbearers of all skills and talents. One of them was named... Maia. The Artist."

It took everything Shiv had not to burst out laughing. Suddenly, Shiv knew something Cripple didn't. It was like they both had pieces to a larger puzzle, but only one of them was putting it all together.

"She was a powerful mage, and an incredible artist, as evidenced by her name," Cripple explained. There was a tone of wistfulness to its voice, as if it missed Maia greatly. "She was one of my fellow gladiators for a time, but the Lords of Law noticed her talents in artistry and her beauty, and so she was elevated from the Bloodworks, becoming something more akin to a celebrity."

The Ascendant fell quiet for a beat. "It is only because of her that I managed to escape my fate, that I made that final pilgrimage with the other Ascendants, took hold of our own destiny, and brought a new shape to this world."

Shiv fought the urge to tell Cripple that the one he knew as Maia was still alive, or at least still alive in some fashion. Shiv knew her now as the Forgotten Artist, if judged by the burnt tome she'd left behind. Not yet, Shiv told himself.

Not unless we can get something out of it, Psycho-Cartography added. We know she's working with Udraal, but if we tell Cripple that directly, it's probably not even going to believe us, and perhaps even react aggressively.

The truth was often ignored when reality got too uncomfortable.

"We do not know how he did it," Cripple said, a growl of anger entering its voice. "But Udraal descended into the Great One, and somehow..."

The Ascendant's fist clenched again, the meal groaning, and Cripple's voice shuddered as it spoke. "Somehow, he found a way to slay one of us. She vanished in an instant; all of her dissolved. There was nothing I—we could do. Her presence was taken from this world. And retribution needed to be met."

"So you mustered your forces and decided to go down." Shiv thought about that for a moment, and he bit his lip. "Roland and the Eclipsebreakers, their descent into the Abyss to slay an Abyssal Lord. Was all of that real?"

"Indeed," Cripple answered. "Despite everything, there was no propaganda there. Udraal knew that his actions would have repercussions, and so he forced a preemptive attack, distracting us to wound us badly enough that our own campaign would be delayed."

"But thanks to Roland, it wasn't," Shiv said.

"Indeed." The Ascendant let out a little humph of displeasure. "Whatever Roland's flaws, he was an exemplary Pathbearer."

Shiv's mind ground to a halt. Something twisted inside him, and he started to feel sick. "Was?"

Cripple paused and regarded Shiv. "Blackedge is secured," the Ascendant began. But there was an uneasiness in his tone. Starhawk's Perch itself was..."

No, no, no! Shiv screamed internally. Faces flashed before him. Of Georges, of Uva, of Valor. Of Rose, even. He wasn't there. He wasn't there when they needed him then. He wasn't there, and it was because of the Ascendants. I'm going to kill them. I'm going to crush the entire fucking Republic beneath my—

"Starhawk's Perch was swallowed by the Outside."

And suddenly, his rising anger popped like a bubble. "What?" Shiv squeaked.

Chapter 169 (III) Cell

"You are surprised as well," Cripple noted. "You did not know this would happen? That this was the Starhawk's plan?"

"The Starhawk's plan?" Shiv spat out before he could process anything. Frankly, none of this sounded like the Starhawk. This was probably caused by Uva, or more likely, one of the eldritch gods hidden inside her. He couldn't imagine Uva deciding it was wise to fling the perch into the Outside. So he could only guess that things got absolutely desperate.

Once more, a cord of anxiety tightened inside Shiv. But he wasn't as worried as a moment ago. The Tarrasque was a problem of problems. Even now, with his Legendary Skill, Shiv wasn't sure if he could beat the Tarrasque in a direct showdown without a lot of help. Especially considering how easily it had managed to overwhelm both Marikos and Hawgrave.

While the Ascendants were trying to deal with it, Shiv thought.

Cripple studied Shiv's surprise for a few seconds longer and took a step back. "If you did not know, then you were at Blackedge purely to save the town. To repel the Tarrasque."

"I didn't know about the Tarrasque," Shiv admitted. "I just had a Quest for that whole town-saving thing. It's the reason why I'm Legendary right now. Also, it was meant for me to stop a war from happening between the surface and the Abyss. Look, by the time you got there, things were already halfway to hell. But before you arrived, there were Necrotechs there. Rogue Necrotechs led by Vicar Sullain."

The Avatar's finger twitched. "Sullain. The City Lord of Submission?"

Shiv nodded. "He rose up to take revenge on Roland for burning his city." Shiv ran his tongue along the inside of his cheek. "And he had help. Help from your inquisition."

"What?" Cripple breathed. A mechanical reverberation left its Avatar's body like a crackle. "Say more. Tell me more."

And Shiv couldn't hide his smirk any longer. "The Tarrasque was supposed to be a backup plan," Shiv began. "Something used to delay a Legendary Pathbearer like Marikos. Of course, it wasn't an Undying Tarasque at that point. Until Sullain took a little something from me." Shiv didn't say anything specific about his Vitae. The less the Ascendant knew about that, the better. But this increased the tension between them and gave Shiv another edge. "Before the Tarrasque, though, an Animancy Core was supposed to pass through a Compact gate and be delivered to Sullain. So he could finally crack Blackedge's defenses."

"No, no," Cripple said. "That is madness. The Animancy Cores... They can ruin entire dimensions if used poorly, devastate regions of existence—"

"Well, one was going to Sullain," Shiv interrupted, spitting his words through gritted teeth. "I don't care if you don't want to believe me. It was heading in that direction until it was intercepted. Intercepted by me and Adam Arrow, along with our allies in the Abyss." Shiv didn't want to reveal Uva's presence, especially considering she was the Starhawk's current Avatar. If they found out about that, well, no telling what kind of trouble would follow.

"We intercepted the Animancy Core. We disabled it and made sure it never got used on Blackedge." Shiv looked off to the side, trying to project his displeasure. "Listen, Cripple, you seem to care a lot about your fellow Ascendants. But some of the others, well, they really want the Starhawk dead. Because the Inquisition was in contact with Sullain the whole time. Through an automaton stationed in the Compact gate, one Master-Advisor Oldsmith."

The Avatar was trembling. Part of Shiv considered if the Ascendant was acting surprised. But something told him Cripple wasn't that good at performing. "And right now, in a cell, Master-Inquisitor Sijik is being interrogated by Vullegs for trying to raid Gate Theborn." And that was a bit bullshit. He was interrogated by Uva. But Cripple didn't need to know that.

"And how do you know this?" Cripple demanded.

"Because I was there during the interrogation," Shiv snapped. "Who do you think helped the Vultegs stop the Animancy Core from going off inside their Gate? How do you think I got back to the surface so fast? How do you think me and Adam were capable of challenging the rogue Necrotechs? Did you think we were just doing that on our own? That we didn't have support?"

Cripple was speechless, but it didn't refute any of Shiv's points.

"No!" Shiv kept going. "We weren't alone. And there are people in the Abyss who want this peace to continue as much as you do. Now, I don't much care about the Lords of Law or Compact or whoever they work with. I know you have bad history with them. But they intercepted a good amount of things from your Inquisition. They have sync-letters between Oldsmith and Sijik talking about all sorts of things. Things that have to do with Vicar Sullain. Things that revealed a bit of a double-cross happening at the end there, because the Inquisition wanted to take charge of the Animancy Core so the good Vicar didn't just use it to blast everything out of existence."

The Deathless snorted. "You ever see an Animancy Core go off, Ascendant? There's nothing quite like it. It's a real faint patch of blue that swallows the world. But then it seems to sear whatever it touches into reality. And when you're near that seared patch, you can hear screaming. You can hear the Pathbearer trapped there forever. I've done some pretty mean things to people. I've killed people in ugly ways. But that I would never do to someone."

And Shiv was kind of bullshitting right now again. He loved the fact that the Recollector was seared into reality. He loved it because the Recollector tortured seven shades of shit out of him beforehand. And Shiv was, despite trying to improve his maturity, a spiteful bastard.

"If what you're saying is true..." Cripple began.

"Then, then, then what?" Shiv cut the Ascendant off. "Are you going to tell me that there's nothing you can do again? That it's just the way the world is?"

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"No!" Cripple shouted. And finally, its rage was radiating, pure and true. For the first time, Shiv felt the complete and unfettered might of Cripple, and it slammed against him. It was only because of his Legendary Skill Evolution that he survived. Shiv pushed back with Leviathan of the Shapeless Tides. His vectors of force, both overflow and innately generated, smashed against the incandescent mana detonating free from the Avatar's body. Bits of the Avatar broke away, dissolving into particles of ash. It was no longer humanoid. Rather, it was a cracking husk birthing the power of a god.

"If what you say is true," Cripple's voice echoed, making the Orichalcum cage shake and whine with strain, "then the Inquisition will experience a new purge. A proper cleansing to fix these ill seeds festering inside its structure."

"Well, what I am saying is true," Shiv growled as he struggled to hold the god's power back. "And you just need to go ask City Lord Stormhalt, because Sijik was working under him. Stormhalt had more than one thing going on, too, by the way. There was a Jealousy at the gate. It was meant to guard the Abyssal Gateway, but it was contracted to help steal the Animancy Core by Stormhalt. I can prove it. He underwent a skill contract with the Jealousy. If you have someone examine his skill statuses, one of them should be broken."

Shiv pulled on his red-gold chains in discomfort. His Legendary Skill was working hard. His overflow was practically spent—enough strength to crush Blackedge down to powder, barely holding a god's incandescent presence at bay. Divinity was a crushing weight.

Shiv could carry a mountain with ease now, perhaps. But this was a mountain that constantly built more and more. A mountain that was beyond the concept of weight itself. That was above this reality. That hurt him. That strained him. That brought more than his body to the brink. His mind wailed as well. But as he pushed back, Shiv finally understood the true beauty of being a Legend. It allowed you to contend with the power of a God. Because you reached into the very foundations of a skill.

Shiv was a manipulator of force. A source of force. But he was not force absolute. A god felt like force absolute. Yet, he could survive a god. If he were clever, if he was prepared, if he had force to spend, he could survive long enough to escape. But if he wasn't, and in a prolonged confrontation, death was still inevitable.

Five seconds passed. Shiv knew by the heartbeats thundering inside his chest. Then, finally, all of a sudden, the Avatar crashed down to the ground, smoke rising from its ruined body, and a little distorted note rattled out of its skull. "I apologize once more," Cripple said, sounding more tired than anything else. "I... I do not wish to believe you. I do not wish to believe that the Inquisition has betrayed its purpose so much. That it has fallen to making deals with Greater Demons and enemies of our nation. Stormhalt... what have you done..."

Shiv didn't much like Stormhalt, so he decided to twist a knife. "Yeah, and also ask him about all the food he promised the Jealousy." Shiv grinned. "You know what a Jealousy eats, right?"

"I do. And if your words ring true, then I will see him executed. Slowly. Publically."

And with every syllable delivered, the Avatar's body came back together. The pieces it lost weren't replaced. Rather, a fire was spilling out of it. A fire that revealed new components to his body. And Shiv guessed that those components were from Cripple itself. From what Shiv could make of Cripple, his body was jagged and angular. More like a collection of blades locked together than a humanoid shell. His legs were spider-like in some sense, and also digitigrade at the feet.

The Avatar's fist turned into a dense column of slatted metal. More than just being slatted, it also had many vents running along the arm. Incandescent mana bled out from the vents, and the interior of the Orichalcum cell grew uncomfortable once more.

"Not sure if this is entirely wise, Cripple," Shiv said, deliberately trying to provoke the Ascended. "Stormhalt is Halsur's guy, isn't he?" Shiv clicked his tongue. "That seems to be a bit of a problem. Might affect your harmony with the other Ascendants."

"What harmony?" Cripple growled. "What harmony comes with the sacrifice of our citizens? What was the point of our sacrifice if we are seeing the very people we need to protect sacrificed?"

The automaton Ascendant was almost stuttering from sheer anger now. It was genuinely outraged. And despite everything, Shiv found the slightest bit of appreciation burgeoning inside himself. Cripple was full of shit. Cripple was kind of a coward. Cripple had a lot of problems. A lot of trauma. But Cripple wasn't a complete liar. Cripple still loved Yellowstone. And what Stormholt did? Well, that might just get the City Lord killed.

"Well, go ask him," Shiv finally said.

"When he returns," Cripple declared. "When the Tarrasque is finally driven southward."

"Southward?" Shiv replied. He was surprised by the Ascendant's statement. "You're gonna dump the Tarrasque on Lone Star? Aren't we kinda sorta allies with them? Or at least neutral?"

"No, further than that," Cripple elaborated. "We are going to push it into the land of the Obsidian Serpent, where the Hegemony always waits to drive its fangs into our veins. May they break them off on the beast instead."

Shiv blinked as he tried to figure out what Cripple was talking about. But geography wasn't his strong suit. Neither was writing, reading things that weren't set lists, math...

Psycho-Cartography: When we break out of this place, and we manage to get Blackedge back after saving Adam, we're going to go back to the gate, we're going to build up our defenses, and we're going to sit in a nice spot for a long while and just study. Whoever comes our way, we kill, and we go back to studying. Because this isn't going to work out forever.

"Maybe you should go out and seek your friends. Go help them," Shiv said. His suggestion was glib. He knew Cripple wasn't going to leave him in the cell, but there was no harm in trying. "The Tarrasque is a real godsdamned issue, considering it has 12 Ascendants on its ass and still hasn't died. You punched a pretty good hole through it earlier. Maybe you can do that again."

"Unlikely," Cripple said. "The Tarrasque has adapted to most things. It is no longer resistant to most forms of damage; it is outright immune. At least up to the ceiling of this world's power limits. It will take a concentrated effort to overwhelm its many skills now. Armies of Pathbearers or multiple gods working in tandem through their Avatars."

"More than the Republic?" Shiv asked.

"More than the Republic," Cripple confirmed. "But before we slay it, we can make use of it. Our enemies should share in our misfortune."

And once more, Shiv's admiration for Cripple, as small as it was, died in a moment. The Deathless chuckled humorlessly. "You rat bastard. I guess I thought too much of you too."

"It is nothing the Southerners and their gods would not do to us."

"Oh, I'm sure. I'm sure they're pieces of shit too. I'm sure everyone's world is somewhat of a piece of shit. Frankly, I think we can justify anything with someone else being a piece of shit. Maybe the next time New Albion says something we don't like, we should drop the Tarrasque on them too. Actually, do you mind loaning it to me? Because I need to give the First Blood a compensation gift for all the vampires I've killed."

"As appealing as that sounds, and as understandable as your mockery is, this is simply what must be done," Cripple replied, no hint of shame in its voice. "There is no room for mercy or weakness in a struggle between nations. The Yellowstone Republic is stable because we make it so. Because we, the Ascendants, guard this land against all corners, against all adversaries. Through our power and our Prismatic Guard, this nation is maintained. Prosperity rises, and there is a future, rather than an eternal struggle for base survival."

Shiv wanted to argue, but he decided to consider Cripple's points. The Ascendants were the glue that kept the Republic together. Of that, he was sure. Without them... Well, without them, Shiv wasn't sure what would happen to the Republic. Some cities might break off, but if he had to make a guess, he suspected that the larger ones, such as Fortress-City Diego, might just actually start annexing territory. And soon there would be another Republic, Empire, or Faith where Yellowstone was. Ruled by a Legend or a god, or someone stronger than all the others. Because that's the way it worked everywhere.

Even in Weave, where life was truly gentle, and there was a sense of innocence and stability in the atmosphere thanks to the Composer's presence, there were problems. And the Composer was the one with the final say.

That realization made Shiv frown a bit. The System loved the individual. It empowered those who triumphed against impossible odds. But there was something wrong with that. Just because someone was an incredible warrior or an overwhelming mage, it didn't make them a good leader.

Shiv thought about Sullain.

The Vicar was an Omnimancer. He was easily the single greatest mage Shiv had ever faced. Yet he betrayed himself. He let himself be killed by Shiv and a small army of orcs when he could have just used his workings from afar or simply left the battlefield, even assisted the Tarrasque. If Sullain continued working with the Tarrasque, then perhaps everyone would be dead. But he was blind, and he was wounded at the heart. And so he fell.

At that, Shiv's mind trailed off. How the hells did Sullain get to Legendary? he thought to himself. How the hells did he beat himself in the Delve? But then, as Shiv considered it more, he came up with a theory. If Sullain was this emotional, then perhaps his clone was equally emotional. Maybe they traded barbs, and the clone broke down first, and after a few or a lot of tries, Sullain eventually won. That sounds pretty stupid, Shiv thought. But maybe it's actually how it went? No way to know, I guess.

"No," Cripple said once more. "So long as you are within this cage, I must—"

And then the cage rumbled. Everything rumbled. A loud noise followed that sounded like a scream, but it reverberated through the air, detonating as if a thunderstorm had been unleashed within the prison. The Avatar froze and looked upward. Shiv did as well. A second thereafter, a loud broadcast filled the room. A broadcast unleashed telepathically, drenching the prison in a loud, orcish voice.

"Good evening, Pathbearers. If you heard that roar, that means that every single monstrosity you have caged within level 900 section 7 just got released. I don't know much about these mana controls you have here, but I do know enough about how to break them. Now, I'm going to go through every other mana control I can access and unleash everything you have caged in this prison. My name, for those of you who wish to know it, is Bonk. I'm an orc. I'm of the Challenger. And on this day, I will be offering you your in-prison entertainment. To the guards, I strongly suggest you band together and try to hold the prisoners at bay. This breakout will be rather brutal. I have taken a peek at some of the denizens in your

cells. They are quite substantial. You comparatively... Well, let's just hope your Ascendant here comes to save you."

And with every word Bonk said, Shiv's grin grew wider. I'm starting to love that orc.

The Avatar turned to stare at him, and Shiv cracked his neck. "All right, Cripple, let's come to another deal. You let me out of this cage, and I'll help you contain the breakout. Keep some of the guards safe. Or you can go yourself, and I'll try to break out in the meantime. You know I will, I'm not going to lie to you." Before Cripple could say anything, Shiv added a final suggestion. "Or we could both sit here and do nothing. But then all the deaths will be on your conscience. Can you take that?"

Cripple glared at Shiv for a long moment and then shook its head. "You will remain here. Attempt escape if you must, but understand that I will find you, and I will place you back within the cell. It is for your own safety."

"No," Shiv said, his voice turning harsh. "It's just for your security. Because you can't control me, and you don't want to risk someone else getting the reward on my head. And when I do break out the cell, I'm going to crush it. I'm going to crush it like a can, and I'm going to vanish. You will not find me. You will try, and it might take me a little bit to figure out this prison, but I'm going to get out. And when I do, I hope you get to Stormhalt before I do, because I have a few questions to ask him. And I won't be as nice as I was with you."

Just then, a piercing scream came from above. It was not a monstrous scream. No, it was a scream of a female Pathbearer, and it was accompanied by the sound of ripping flesh. A growl of frustration escaped Cripple, and it vanished in a puff of incandescent ashes. As soon as it did, Shiv enacted his plan. A tide of force exploded out from his body, rushing along the chains through his Orichalcum bonds.

They slashed into the mana infusing his Orichalcum cell and against the spell patterns present, and the mana began to rip and spill. Patterns broke like rusted cages or severed tendons. Several of the spells tried to trigger. A blast of Psychomancy hit Shiv, and he felt his mind collapse in on itself only momentarily before another innate pulse of might was generated. With that, he pushed it back. He held it at bay and tore through the spell patterns present.

A blast of heat struck Shiv in the chest. Lightning lashed into his bonds, trying to overwhelm his body. Lightning infused with Biomancy that was meant to compromise his nervous system. Shiv pushed back with more than his Legendary Skill. He used his Biomancy to keep himself stable, resisting the adversarial effects until he ripped that spell asunder as well.

Soon, Shiv's overflowing vectors were circulating through the Orichalcum prison. He unleashed more and more. Those he couldn't focus on detonated in slashes of surging force. But Shiv practiced his mind, practiced his Multi-Tasking skill, as the Orichalcum chamber rattled, screamed, and finally began to crack. Fissures spread along its length. It continued drawing from his willpower to sustain its toughness.

In vain.

Shiv's might far exceeded the durability of this cage. With a final ripple of strength, he channeled his might and pried at the cracks, bending it open as if a tin can rather than a cylinder of Orichalcum. The red-gold alloy of unmatched hardness shrieked as it endured enough kinetic energy to displace mountains and tear the earth down to the very foundations of the world. But soon Shiv's strength went beyond that, and the Orichalcum just couldn't keep up anymore. There was enough power leaking from him that it could turn unwarded cities to dust, could flatten mountain ranges. And all that force tore a ten-centimeter-wide gap into the Orichalcum.

The Deathless let out a wheeze as he shook off the burning feeling in his muscles. As another ripple of strength thundered out from inside him, he felt his vigor return—and turned his innate force on himself. He crushed his heart, pulping it in an instant. And as his body went slack, his Vitae burst out from his corpse, and he began to slither through the crack.

Multi-Tasking 24 > 26

Aegis of Assimilation 112 > 114

Just as Shiv started squeezing his way out, Cripple returned in a blast of incandescent ash. But the moment it rematerialized, Shiv shifted out of context. He slithered into the gap and disappeared.

Shiv couldn't help but laugh. Outside Context Problem was a wonderful skill to have. "Now," Shiv said to himself, "let's find Bonk so I can give him a hug. And also so that I can figure out where the rest of my equipment went." Despite all the dangers and threats looming on the horizon, he was feeling excited. "I always wanted to break out of a prison."

Outside Context Problem 87 > 88

The Ascendant stared at the corpse and looked up at the large spiderweb of fractures left in the structure. Cripple's core filled with dread as it considered what kind of creature was strong enough to tear a fissure like this into Orichalcum. That was a Legendary-Tier act of strength.

At least.

But then...

"Who are you?" Cripple asked aloud, staring at the dead, musclebound man hanging from his Orichalcum bonds. "And who did this to you?"

Chapter 170 (I) Rubix

There are situations where certain threats are deemed too grave a danger to be allowed to roam free, yet at the same time too valuable to kill. In these circumstances, the Yellowstone Republic has a solution:

The Rubix Wells.

Titled Rubix Wells due to being most often built deep underground, and also composed of modular and constantly shifting cubes. The Rubix Wells are used to hold everything from common criminals at the shallowest levels to extreme threats to the Republic's security. Most of the shallow levels are composed of one large cube, surrounded by several dozen smaller cubes. Its architecture is composed of Orichalcum, rendering even most Legendary-Tier prisoners impotent in terms of Physicality, and escape through brute force impossible. The surrounding guard cubes also have complete awareness about the general detention cubes, forming a certain panopticon, which allows them to constantly monitor the situation of the prisoners.

At the very bottom, however, things are dramatically different due to the severity of dangers and the Tiers of the prisoners contained there. The guard cubes are constantly cycling and moving. Furthermore, we have reason to believe that the so-called Zenith Sector of a Rubix Well is also entrapped by a sphere of looping Chronomancy. This means that should a prisoner manage to break out of their cell, somehow escape from their cube, and ultimately breach the sector, they still will not be able to escape the prison—for the mana core supporting the entire prison will see them reverted in time once they break free of the Zenith Sector's threshold.

As such, we will need to come up with an alternate strategy to reach [Redacted.] We understand that Aviary will not accept defeat or half measures, but we believe that breaching this prison to be all but impossible through direct means or even subterfuge. No one that has been sent down to the Zenith Sector has returned of their own accord, and we suspect that is the most viable angle to strike a deal with one of the Ascendants or another elite of the Republic.

Trying to breach the prison itself is hopeless.

-Report on the Rubix Wells: Yellowstone Republic Maximum Security Containment Facilities

"You know my favorite thing about this new Legendary skill," Shiv said, ignoring the knife the struggling warden was trying to put through his eye. "It just has so much control. Previously, if I was using Gravitic Wrestler, or maybe even the Heroic-Tier skill I got, if I squeezed a little too hard, crack. That'd be it. Frankly, not even crack. Your head would be bloody paste, whether I wanted it to be or not." The Deathless paused as he looked off to the side. "Okay, maybe that's a bit of an exaggeration. I had pretty good control with Gravitic Wrestler, but the Heroic-Tier skill with all that pressure around me? Forget about it."

The final wheeze came from the warden as their eyes rolled, their limbs went slack, and their legs kicked out a final time. Shiv let them slide down against the Orichalcum wall, but caught their head before they bashed against the ground.

Shiv wasn't sure what race the warden was. Considering their green skin, but generally human-like dimensions, he had to guess it was either an extremely evolved goblin or a human with a race-shift Blessing. There wasn't really such a thing as human-goblin crossbreeding. Not like there was human-elf crossbreeding or goblin-elf crossbreeding or, well, frankly, elf-anything crossbreeding. But looking at the ears, this Pathbearer definitely didn't have elf heritage.

One good thing about the Republic was that it didn't much care what race you were. It only cared that you served the Republic. And right now, this unfortunate bastard would be serving the Republic by taking a well-earned nap.

Nearby, six other Pathbearers lay splayed across the ground. Broken spell patterns flickered around them as leaking mana bled into the atmosphere. Shiv found himself in another valley, very similar to the one outside of the wolf-man's cage. But things were a little bit different now. He wasn't quite the same person anymore. Not in terms of power, and not even in terms of mindset.

He spent a bit of time thinking before he acted. And right now, he was trying to apply a bit of method to his madness. Because if he didn't, the odds of him breaking out of this prison were pretty low.

Especially considering he had no way of knowing where to go.

The Deathless rubbed his right thigh where one of the wardens had punctured him earlier. Their blade flashed a bright white, and they managed to drive it through him before he was prepared. It was a good reminder that he wasn't invincible and that there were other Heroic-Tier Pathbearers present, aside from the Ascendant itself. But still, the gap between Heroic and Legendary was remarkable.

After the enemy Pathbearer stabbed him, Shiv gripped the blade and unleashed a slight amount of force. Pointed vectors of overflowing kinetic energy slammed against the edge of the blade, and the adamantine weapon snapped as if it were a wooden toothpick. It took him considerably less effort to choke out the offending warden thereafter.

Shiv's Leviathan of the Shapeless Tides also allowed him another wonderful option: He attacked the spell patterns running down the valley walls like waterfalls directly. He shredded all the surrounding magic, breaking whatever spells were active and rendering this place a spot of darkness along a long stretch of light.

Ahead and behind, more spell patterns rained down to the base of the valley, bathing the narrow pathway with light. Along the pathway were many other cells, but whatever Bonk had done to free everyone, the prisoners took advantage of it. The insides of the cells were empty, and chains and bonds lay shattered on the ground.

Shattered, Shiv realized, blinking. Broken felling Moon. Just who the hells were they keeping in these cells?

Shiv activated and then deactivated his Outside Context Problem Skill briefly, just to confuse the Ascendant again. He didn't know where Cripple was, but every time he triggered the skill, Cripple couldn't think about him. That bought Shiv extra time. When he finished, he started draining from the world, and then he knelt down to see if this group of wardens had anything useful for him to pilfer.

"Hopefully you have something, unlike the last group," Shiv muttered to himself. "Damned Ascendant always on my ass. At least one of you has to be my size. Tired of running around bare ass naked. Felling asshole just had to steal my clothes."

As Shiv ran his hands across the warden he'd just choked out, he noticed their armor was smoking. The magic infused within it was spewing free, ruptured by Shiv's power. The Magical Resistance imbued within it was smashed to pieces, and the magical fields extending from it were also lacerated to the foundations. That had been the first thing Shiv attacked: their armor.

The moment he put his hands on the enchanted metal, he pushed his shapeless tides in, and he shredded the Psychomantic connection extending between the guards and the surrounding walls. The waterfalls of spells were connected to the guards in some fashion. That's why Shiv ripped through them using his tides, and judging how the guard knew exactly where he was after he attacked the first group, he suspected that there were monitoring spells or some kind of telepathic link that kept all the guards connected to one another.

Shiv didn't stick around after he disabled the earlier group, especially after another twelve guards teleported in, all of them seeming Heroic-Tier. He activated his Outside Context Problem and simply fled. As much as he wanted to fight, he didn't know what his enemies were capable of. And it wasn't dying he risked here; it was being disabled and put back in the cage. A Legend though he might be, he knew better than to underestimate Heroes. After all, Sullain had died to an army of Heroes and less, and there was still Cripple to be wary of.

Shiv could briefly contend with the Ascendant's might now, but that didn't mean he had the upper hand. Not even close.

Now, with this third group of wardens disabled, Shiv acted quickly. He found the tall goblin too thin of physique to offer any useful clothing, so he ripped their helmet off and projected his Psychomancy into their mind. Shiv wasn't an accomplished Psychomancer. Frankly, he wasn't a good Psychomancer at all. With everything that kept happening, he never had time to get more in-depth lessons with Uva, but digging through his own memories had given him some instruction when it came to delving through a mind.

It was still chaotic, and he was sifting through an overwhelming flood of details. Flashes from the goblin's life hit him. Sparring matches, the deaths of loved ones, foes bested, humiliating defeats, monsters they still had nightmares about. All that hit Shiv at the same time, and he struggled to process all of it. But, among the chaos, he got a glimpse of a few memories.

He recalled the guard teleporting from another place. Another cube? Shiv was confused. He wasn't sure why the guard was thinking about cubes. The tall goblin and their team had been dispatched by the

Ascendant itself through a telepathic broadcast. They used the mana rushing down the valley walls to rapidly move from place to place. Shiv stared at the Orichalcum walls as he realized through the guard that there were mithril supports hidden within as well.

Psychomancy 26 > 28

Briefly, he considered ripping the walls open and cracking the supports. Maybe that would disable most of the spells active. But he didn't want to give away his position, and Orichalcum was durable enough that he wouldn't be able to damage the structure so easily. It'd be a prolonged effort, and if he stayed in one place for too long, he would be dealing with Cripple itself.

"Not yet," Shiv told himself. "Not until we're out of ideas."

He moved on to the other wardens and finally found someone who was around his size. Shiv stripped the humanoid automaton as fast as he could. Their armor wasn't anything to note. It had self-repair enchantments, was made of adamantine, could emit light, and had Magical Resistance. Magical Resistance that Shiv found laughable at this point. However, it also had a Psychomancy enchantment. A very specific kind of Psychomancy enchantment. It was called Chain of Thought, and as soon as Shiv put the helmet over his head, he began hearing chatter.

Whispers brushed against his mind, and the helmet crackled. He tried to make out what it was saying, but then he realized the enchantment was likely damaged or disrupted by his Legendary Skill. "Right," Shiv said to himself, "I did have to tear through the armor's Magical Resistance and mana fields to do this. Well, at least I'm not naked anymore."

As he stole the black and white armor from the automaton, he noted that they weren't wearing any supportive clothing underneath, so the cold jagged bits of metal still prodded Shiv. It was awkward, but not uncomfortable. His body was Orichalcum by this point, so chafing wasn't likely. "Still, what would I

give for some underclothes?" Shiv muttered. He went through the items possessed by the remaining guards and stole a utility rig from one of them.

A leather vest filled with tools and potions now hung off his chest, and Shiv expected it to get broken the first moment he got into a hard fight. That made him endeavor not to get into hard fights. He was trying to escape, not turn this into a bloodbath. Before he left, he noticed one of the Pathbearers had interesting boots, non-prison issue boots.

Where everyone else had prismatic sabotons, this little elf was wearing pitch black leather shoes. Shiv looked down at his feet, and then he looked at the elf's shoes. Might be a snug fit, but Shiv shrugged. He had a feeling this would benefit him. He took the shoes off the elf and barely managed to force his feet inside. Once he did, a smile crept across his face as he took in the enchantments.

Equipment Obtained: [Nightwalkers]

Tier: Master

Condition: Stable

Composition: Shadeleather; Spatial Magic

Enchantments > Nightswim; Last Step of Midnight; Self-Mending

Immediately, he began to feel an affinity with the surrounding shadows. More than that, the shadows were lined with dimensional static. Being in the dark fed the shoes with power, and Shiv triggered the Nightswim enchantment for the first time. He splashed down into a puddle of blackness, and true to the enchantment's name, it did feel like he was in a pool.

He pointed his Shapeless Tides forward and glided across the ground. The moment he hit light, however, his Nightswim enchantment began to burn. Brightness affected the skill. Darkness recharged it. Then he activated the Last Step of Midnight enchantment and found himself standing back on the edge of darkness. In that patch of black, he made by shredding all those spell patterns. "Alright." Shiv chuckled. "I think I can make some use of you."

Just then, he felt a shudder of pressure in the air. The flickering spell patterns to his left and right broke. Shiv reacted intuitively. He cast himself back in time and went out of context. As he did, a burst of incandescence exploded into being over the six Pathbearers he'd just downed. Shiv jolted 600 meters away, and as his temporal shell settled, he found himself not far from his Orichalcum cell, but pointed in the opposite direction of his initial escape. His Nightswim enchantment was completely spent. It seemed that brightness damaged it even when he wasn't using the enchantment.

"I see," Shiv muttered. "Not quite as good as I thought, but it'll do in a pinch. Just won't last long. Another layer to my Stealth kit. Shit, I miss my Magebreaker."

He pointed his Shapeless Tides forward and blurred across the world without making a hint of noise. A chill was seeping past his skin and settling into his flesh. Despite this, he found himself more resistant to vitality loss with every level he gained in Outside Context Problem. He kept going forward as long as he could, and only when the chill reached his bones did he surface. As soon as he did, he slammed himself against the valley walls. The overflow vectors of force he had been gathering were unleashed as slashing tides.

Spell patterns became like strings severed by a sweeping blade. The magic here was strong, but it had little hope of resisting a Legendary skill. One after another, the spell patterns snapped. Soon, the mana

began to flicker, and Shiv started draining from the sheen layered over the world once more. He did so without fear now.

Even as billowing clouds of chaotic stormstuff slammed into him, he forced it aside with a slight snarl of effort. He stood before the rupture without fleeing, indifferent to the storm thanks to his Legendary ascension. And when he was restored enough, he went out of context once more.

He continued on like this for what felt like a near-hour.

As Shiv went forward, a building sense of unease grew stronger. Every other cell lining this place was vacant, and he hadn't seen any guards for a good long while. He had no idea how big this place was, but judging from all the cells he counted, it was colossal. He also knew that he wasn't going in a circle because he left a partially drunk flask behind him.

Shiv never saw that flask again.

"Just how many people are you bastards keeping down here?" Shiv muttered as he counted cell after cell brushing by below. He looked up and frowned. He had flown up along the valley walls earlier in the opposite direction from the magical waterfalls. It took him around 10 seconds to reach a ceiling capped by Orichalcum. And that was all it was, a ceiling. Maybe there was some other trick to it, but Shiv hadn't figured it out yet.

Right now, his mental map of the prison was a disc. The entire thing felt circular to him, and there was only forward and back in terms of direction. Up led nowhere. Left and right led nowhere. And the prison cells themselves? Shiv paused. He hadn't checked all the cells. Maybe there was a way out there? No, that didn't make any sense. If he were going to design a prison, why would he build an exit through one of the cells? It's most likely the only way out was through teleportation. That's how all the wardens got in. But Shiv couldn't quite leave through such means.

But then his frown deepened as he looked up at the ceiling once more. I can't leave through that way, but what if I try to make a direct escape? Make my own exit. He regarded the Orichalcum ceiling once more and launched himself upward. As he came to a halt before the ceiling, Shiv placed a temporal anchor there.

His Chronomancy field cracked, and he gave it a few seconds to recover. He looked down and around, but he didn't catch sight of any new wardens, or Cripple for that matter. Things were quiet here. A little too quiet for his liking. If there were other prisoners, were they gone? They couldn't have all escaped at once, right? He doubted that was a possibility. So the only other likelihood was that they were resolved by the Ascendant.

Cripple was barely gone for more than a few seconds before it returned to Shiv's cell. Shiv tried to imagine containing a prison of this size in just a few seconds and couldn't. He was missing something here, a larger picture, but he wasn't going to get it if he kept doing the same thing as before. He focused on cultivating as much strength as he could, and every few seconds, he would trigger Outside Context Problem and quickly dismiss the skill right after. When he was ready, he shot the Orichalcum wall a glare and began circulating his vectors, both overflow and innate, into his hands.

"Alright," Shiv growled, "let's see if I can crack you faster than my cage."

He drove his digits against the Orichalcum and channeled his overwhelming strength against the mystical metal. He tore at the Orichalcum, ripping it with his vectors in a way he couldn't with gravity, with a control he hadn't had until just an hour ago. Shiv strained, every muscle in his body tightened, and with each heartbeat, he birthed new force against the red gold metal.

One second passed, two, then three. The Orichalcum grew brighter, its durability feeding off Shiv's will. But with the seventh ripple that left him, the Orichalcum gave a loud scream as a deep gash was opened

in its structure. Shiv finally let out a shuddering breath as his heart leaped in triumph. He saw a rent opening before him, and he poured more strength in.

He pulled in two directions. His rippling vectors slashed into the Orichalcum, and the red-gold began to dent. Shiv whipped his head around for any sign of the Ascendant in the meantime. When Cripple didn't appear and punch a hole through Shiv, he continued on, tension warring with hope inside. With every subsequent tide of force, the gap he made in the metal grew larger and larger. What was a thin rent turned into a massive rupture, and soon Shiv pushed his way through.

As soon as he did, he went out of context again as he whipped his head behind. He expected to see Cripple there, just glaring at him, maybe even just a centimeter away, preparing to drive a fist through his chest. But there was no Cripple, there was no incandescent mana, there was nothing, just an open rupture lining the red-gold metal.

"That was way too loud," Shiv commented to himself. Cripple was there earlier. It must have heard him—unless it got distracted by something else. And that thought unnerved Shiv more than it pleased him. The way Cripple spoke to him made it clear that the Ascendant regarded him as an extremely dangerous threat. But there were other prisoners here. Zenith Category Prisoners. He knew he was referred to as Priority Zenith from some of the guards' memories. But what about the others? Considering how severe this place's security is, I would bet that they're Heroic-Tier threats at the least—

A piercing shriek crashed against Shiv's mind. He pushed back using his Shapeless Tides and barely managed to fling off the psionic attack. His vision was doubled, and his skull was still ringing. Shiv recovered after a moment but found his muscles shaking. The Deathless blinked and shook his head. Was not expecting that. Felt like a literal ocean of Psychomancy mana got dropped on my head. What the hells was that?

Once more, the shriek washed over him. This time, Shiv was ready to meet it. He unleashed his ripples outward and held the magic back before it could clamp down on his consciousness. But it remained a battle. He was pushing against layered tidal waves of translucent mana, and the scream just went on

and on and on. Shiv tried to rip through the mana like he did with the Orichalcum but to his astonishment, he found the mana even denser, even stronger.

"Alright," Shiv spat through gritted teeth. "Maybe I've done a little bit of underestimating. Maybe my neighbors are Legendary too." And that made Shiv grit his teeth. A bunch of Legendary Pathbearers and monsters imprisoned in the same place. Now it made perfect sense why Cripple was missing all the time. The Ascendant was trying to keep this breakout controlled. Shiv let out a growl of pure strain as he pushed his arms forward. Against all odds, he began driving the Psychomancy back, and then his fingers dug into it.

He tore at both sides. His vectors exploded in opposite directions, and a gash formed in the Psychomancy. The scream was cut off, and what followed thereafter was a pained cry. The Psychomancy receded. It slammed backward more like a bubble rather than a destabilized spell. Shiv guessed that whoever was projecting all that Psychomancy had just collapsed their field back in on themselves. But still, all that force, all that strength. "Hey, I don't know if you can hear me," Shiv grunted through his labored breaths, "but I'll stay out of your way if you stay out of mine."

The unseen Legend didn't respond immediately, and Shiv licked his lips, anticipating another attack. But what he didn't expect was a faint whisper that trailed over his mind.

"Deal."

It was a deep, rumbling voice, like a bag of marbles being scattered down a stone staircase. The Deathless swallowed as he felt an uncanny rush of fear glide over him. The sudden fear came and passed with the psionic whisper, and Shiv decided to continue on.

Chapter 170 (II) Rubix

As he traveled beyond the Orichalcum walls, he found that the warden's memories were right. The supports here were made of mithril, and there was so much mana circulating through them that they were practically as durable as Orichalcum itself to Shiv. Spell patterns of every type circulated within this space.

Shiv felt like he had smashed through drywall and found himself among the inner bones of the prison. Crawlspace was how he would describe it. Although there were still twenty meters of room between the mithril and the gear-shaped mechanisms that were fused to them. Massive pillars of mithril were connected to the Orichalcum by large bolts. The bolts were made from mixed components. Some were red gold, others were crystalline, an integrated set of materials.

As Shiv looked around, he noticed that the mithril supports were also connected to other structures. There seemed to be adamantine caps built over them, caps that were connected to the gears he'd noticed earlier. And before Shiv could wonder why there were gears here, said mechanisms began to spin. A loud rumbling followed, and soon sparks flew out from behind the mithril architecture. Shiv flinched back, expecting an attack of some kind. What he didn't anticipate was for the mithril around him to suddenly start moving.

One of the supports slammed into his back, and Shiv was briefly caught off guard. He found himself nudged forward before he converted the force acting on him into overflow tides. Suddenly, the gears around him screamed in strain, and several cracked, spraying out as broken fragments of metal. The mithril pillar that Shiv was pushing against shuddered with magic and launched him off at an angle. He slammed into another pillar and ended up cracking it with his Orichalcum pillar.

The crawlspace was filling with debris, but the overall structure continued moving. He could see more gears spinning along the sides of every mithril support in his field of view. And then, after a few seconds, there came a sudden crash as the gears shook. A vibration passed through the entire structure. Another burst of force washed into Shiv as striped vectors as he held himself steady against a structural bolt connecting the mithril to the Orichalcum walls.

A low groan filled the insides of this crawlspace, and the Deathless swallowed, not sure if he'd broken something essential or if it was supposed to be like this.

Regardless, after a second passed, Shiv reacted off of instinct. He flung himself at the gears, and he barreled through them with a spike of his shapeless tides. Compared to the mithril and Orichalcum, the gears themselves were positively fragile. They turned to dust at his approach, breaking apart into the finest grains. But as Shiv burst through them, he found himself slamming against another set of gears, breaking them too, before he breached into a new crawlspace, one that resembled the area he'd just left.

The Deathless bounced off a mithril pillar and came to a halt against a new layer of Orichalcum. He blinked as he tried to process what had happened. He spun his head and looked behind him. Through the way he came, he saw dangling mechanisms, broken belts, and mana bleeding into the air.

Alright, I am in a new place, he reassured himself. He placed his palm against the Orichalcum. This must be a new part of the prison. Suddenly, his mental map was updated. The prison no longer looked like a disk. Maybe it was a series of disks stacked together, and he was between them right now. But if it was a disk, then where was the larger prison? Was he going upward, down? Was this the right way out?

He bit back a hiss of frustration as he considered what to do next. Alright, maybe that's why there's no one else left in my area. Maybe that's why Cripple left too. It was tracking me when I was ambushing the wardens because I managed to pull some information from their minds. They stopped coming right after that... Godsdammit."

Shiv thought about how Cripple had pursued him when he had a kidnapped guard nearby. That had been the reason why Shiv couldn't claim a guide after choking him out. The bastards were just relying on him staying lost. Now he was in another section in the prison, and Shiv had a feeling it was going to be much like the prior one.

When he tore through these walls, he would find himself staring down a narrow valley. But this time, there might be new Pathbearers, new wardens, or maybe prisoners. And that's what Shiv was counting on. Prisoners. If there were other escapees, they might have better knowledge of this place's layout, or some other information he would find useful. Maybe if I break through enough of these places, Bonk might be able to find me, or I might be able to find Bonk. Another thing I could do is try ripping through the ground. It's made of Orichalcum too. I wonder what's on that side.

Part of him was afraid of it being more mithril and gears. Gears that led to another section of the prison. That he was trapped so deep and between so many layers that he was going to have to spend days or even weeks digging himself out.

As Shiv deliberated, the surrounding gears screamed to life once more. But as they tried to move, the entire structure locked up. Too much of the surrounding architecture had been damaged. Some gears spun on, connected to nothing. A shower of sparks descended on Shiv, and his surroundings groaned with strain.

And that brought a new surge of motivation to the Deathless. He might not know the layout. He might not understand where he was. But if he broke enough of the internal mechanisms, he could see this entire place locked up, stuck. And even if Cripple wanted him ignorant, sooner or later Shiv was going to figure out how this whole prison worked.

He drew in a breath. He drove his hands against the Orichalcum once more and began to tear. This time, there was no tension. He would deal with the Ascendant if it appeared. But he had a feeling that Cripple was somewhere else, probably trying to hunt down the Legendary Psychomancer that blasted Shiv's mind earlier.

"Wait!" Shiv growled as he made his first gap in the red-gold metal. "I should have asked that guy for directions! Or help! Dammit, Shiv, think!"

Feeding a spark of anger into his Legendary Skill, Shiv's hand blasted forward, and he tore a clean hole through the Orichalcum. Slowly he began forcing it larger, pushing at the sides using his vectors until it furled outward.

Shiv shot through.

Once he was on the other side, Shiv found himself greeted by a horrific sight of death and gore as he shot down the sides of an Orichalcum valley. "Broken Moon," Shiv whispered to himself as he looked down upon dozens of wardens decorating the ground. Most of them were in pieces, dismembered in brutal fashion, and all of them were missing their eyes. They also had what looked to be bladed feathers lodged in their torsos. The feathers radiated with magic and bled a bright-white aura into the air. Shiv wasn't sure what kind of mana that was, and had never seen anything with that hue or color before.

Tentatively, he descended, his black leather shoes splashing down into the blood, and he pumped Creeping Void out of himself just in case there was someone hidden preparing to ambush him. Shiv licked his lips as he regarded the bodies. He swept over them using his Aegis of Assimilation and studied their wounds.

Very clean cuts, probably done by a blade or something much sharper than that. Most of their organs are still intact. The eyes have all been gouged out. Shiv turned one of the bodies over and he winced in pity. He was looking upon the face of a relatively young human woman. Her shoulder-length hair lay splayed behind her, blonde locks drenched in red. Her features were twisted in a frozen scream, but her eye sockets had been brutalized.

Whoever attacked her drove their fingers in and crushed the sockets as well. And Shiv was willing to bet this was done by someone's thumbs because he felt the faintness of a print embedded against the woman's very bones.

Psycho-Cartography: The wounds to the bodies are clean, which means that we might be dealing with someone that has a Heroic or potentially even Legendary slashing skill. It could be from a weapon or a

specialized kind of Physicality. But with the eyes, I can't help but shake the feeling that there is hate here. They could have simply shredded the skulls of these Pathbearers. Instead, they took the time to systematically blind every single one of them and forcing them to die in anguish. That takes hate. Real hate.

Psycho-Cartography 62 > 63

New Skill: Investigation 1 (Common)

Shiv examined the other Pathbearers and found each of them in a similar state. With the amount of damage inflicted upon their bodies, their equipment was also unsalvageable. But then a glint flashed in the corner of his eye. Shiv turned and found a blade drifting in the blood. A blade that maybe wasn't so much a blade after all.

It resembled something between a wand and a dagger. The way it was shaped was pointed, and he could see a thick orb of Pyromancy dotting its tip. The spine of the weapon was made from focus crystal, but the sides were Orichalcum. Shiv blinked and walked over to the weapon and knelt down. He studied it for a moment, trying to see if there was anything wrong with the blade, before he reached down to pick it up.

The moment he did, a hand shot out from the blood. A clawed hand that clamped around his wrist. A surge of Biomancy surged out of that hand—

Shiv didn't bother wrestling with his foe. He flung himself back in time, shouldering a temporal wave aside with a roar of effort. And then, as his hidden enemy surfaced from the blood, he slammed into them, pinning them against the wall. He felt a lashing claw, infused with Biomancy, bounce against his shoulder. Shiv directed his overflow tides against it, and the blow was knocked aside. Before his enemy

could do anything else, Shiv wrapped his arm around the hostile's back, and he flung both of them in the opposite direction.

A loud crash sounded as Shiv slammed his ambusher head first against the opposite Orichalcum wall. A cry of pain escaped the ambusher, and Shiv wrenched them over his hip, slamming them against the wall once more. As they crashed down, he locked their arm and twisted hard. He pulled at an angle using his vectors and then slammed a fist down against their elbow. He tore the limb clean off.

The ambusher was wailing now, but they weren't done yet. They slammed their remaining hand upon the ground where all the blood was, and spears of red mana slammed against Shiv. Or rather, they would have, if his Aegis didn't catch them. He pushed back using his own Biomancy field, but gritted his teeth as he felt his adversary slowly overpower him. Definitely High Heroic.

"Yeah," Shiv growled, "you got my number there." But then he tipped the scales by slamming his foot down on the ambusher's chest. They let out a gasp of pain, and he pumped his shapeless tides into their body. A brief clash followed. His Legendary skill speared against their Magical Resistance and their Biomancy. And with every heartbeat, more of them broke apart.

Several blood-forged spears impacted Shiv, but he ignored them. A faint Orichalcum pillar came into shape around his body, and the blood constructs flashed harmlessly against his form. It helped that his force vectors were threading through his enemy's Biomancy now, making them far weaker than before.

For the first time, Shiv got a good look at his enemy and recognized them for what they were. "Fucking vampires," the Deathless spat. The bloodsucker writhed and twitched beneath his feet. He reached out with his remaining hand, gripping Shiv's ankle, trying to shred him from the inside. Shiv pushed back with another pulse of overflow vectors.

The vampire's fingers were bent back and twisted. Shiv didn't even have to reach down to do it with his hands. The vectors did the jobs themselves. Some halves of force angled the vampire's fingers backward. Others ripped the hand down the middle. The vampire opened his mouth, and Shiv saw bladed fangs coming up to bite his leg. The same bladed fangs were shattered as the Deathless brought his elbow down, crushing the vampire's jaw into the back of his throat.

With that, the vampire's Magical Resistance crumbled fully, and Shiv clutched him by the face as he tore his Biomancy asunder as well. A wailing cry escaped the ruined bloodspawn, which died off into unintelligible gurgles a moment later. Shiv drove his Aegis of Assimilation into the vampire's body and found their heart immediately. To his surprise, the vampire was pulling a new trick. Its heart was split into different pieces, all of them connected by dense strands of tissue. Shiv had no idea what that was, but he had a feeling that if he fought the vampire conventionally, just crushing one heart wouldn't do.

"You and your goddamn tricks," Shiv said. "Well, the tricks won't save you now." The bloodspawn made a whimpering noise. Shiv frowned. It was hard to tell the vampire's age with his narrow, vulpine-like features and that long mane of wild, white hair. The vampire had also seen better days. Its skin was sallow, like molded yellow wallpaper, and its eyes were pitch black.

What's more, Shiv could see its veins. They were filled with coursing darkness too, and Shiv had no idea what was happening there either. The vampire whimpered. It held out its remaining hand to Shiv, its remaining mutilated hand. Fingers were pointed in the wrong direction, but they were healing before the Deathless's very eyes. He snorted. "Yeah, no, you don't get to kill all these people, attack me, and expect mercy."

The vampire shook his head. Shiv paused. He looked at the dead wardens nearby and ripped the vampire off the ground. He held the bloodsucker up with one hand and pointed to the nearby bodies. "Why, you didn't kill them?"

"No, no!" The vampire shook his head vigorously. "Not me, not me. It was, it was the Rebis

."

"The what?" Shiv said, trying to decipher the vampire's slurred and broken words.

"Rebis!" the vampire cried, louder.

"What the hell is that?" Shiv asked.

"Zenith prisoner! Zenith prisoner escaped!"

"And you're not a zenith prisoner?"

"No," the vampire cried out. "I am only Zeroth!"

Shiv was having a hard time deciphering the vampire's messed-up words, so he projected his Psychomancy into its mind. With its Magical Resistance shattered and all its mana fields utterly destroyed, it had no capability to resist Shiv. He dug into its thoughts and stood amidst a whirlwind of chaotic memories. The vampire was terrified of him. A dense chain of blood and tissue formed between them, as Shiv's Shape of Monstrosity was empowered. "Alright, let's speak this way. It's more clear."

The vampire flinched as it heard Shiv's telepathic message, but he nodded in response. "Okay. Okay. I promise. I promise you. I didn't mean to attack you. I was simply—I was simply hiding, hiding from the monstrosity."

"Yeah, you were hiding up until I went for that knife," Shiv said. "And with how you seemed to know where I was standing, feels more like you set up an ambush instead of anything else."

"No," the vampire cried out. But a beneficial thing about Psychomancy was, you could get a general feeling when someone was lying, nested so deep in their mind. Shiv didn't want to kill any of the wardens, but vampires, well, aside from Angelo, most vampires were fair game. He didn't even really consider them people. He reached down and crushed its arm at the shoulder. The vampire let out a piercing cry.

"Do not lie to me again," Shiv said. He pulled on the fear chain running between them and noticed that he was growing a bit bigger. As he grew a bit bigger, parts of his newly stolen armor began to buckle and break. Shiv sighed. "Now look what you did."

"I'm sorry. Please, please understand that I was desperate— I have been trapped here, trapped here for years, years so long, so long without company, no companionship, so long without even blood. My Lineage Core screams inside my chest. The things they have done to me, the things they have done to us here..."

"Done to you?" Shiv asked.

"The Republic, the Republic is twisting us. The deniable prisoners. The Republic is testing things on us. This is, this is, this isn't just a prison, it's a laboratory."

Chapter 170 (III) Rubix

Shiv scowled as he took that information in. Why does it feel like every time I peel away, there's something even worse beneath it? The Deathless shook his head. The Ascendants were full of shit. Every bit of them was full of shit. Running someplace like this was... Shiv paused. He pressed his lips together.

Experimenting on vampires was something he might do, just for the hell of it.

A brief pulse of hypocrisy passed through Shiv as he decided to let that go. But what they were doing with him and what they were doing with some of the other prisoners, now that he might have a problem with. But he put that out of his mind for now as he looked down at the vampire. "Say, how well do you know the layout of this place?"

"I don't, I don't," the vampire wheezed. Shiv smacked his lips in disappointment.

"Fine, do you know someone who knows the layout of this place?"

The vampire went still. "I have spent a long time inside my cell. They give us scant minutes to walk the outer prison, but many of the others, they know what I am. They shun me. They have attacked me before."

"Yeah, and I can't really blame them," Shiv shot back. "So, where did they go?"

"Don't know. When we were released from our cages, when our bonds were disabled, I fled. I fled under chaos. I fled by hiding in the blood. I was trying to find my own way to escape." And for the first time, the vampire let out a sobbing gasp. And despite how much he tried to hold back, pleasure spilled from his mind. "So much pleasure, the pleasure of having tasted blood again after so many years. I fed," the vampire said. And it was a thing of beauty to the bloodsucker. "I fed after so long. I had forgotten the

taste. I had forgotten the texture. I had forgotten so much, so much. As I was lost to the hunt, as I was given unto my urges, I saw it, the Rebis! The monster... The abomination that they made here."

"The Republic made the Rebis?" Shiv asked, though he still had no idea what kind of entity the vampire was even talking about.

"Yes! They fused two prisoners together, an automaton and a human, both of them monstrous beings, monstrous Pathbearers of incredible power. They volunteered in exchange for service and freedom. If the procedure was completed and they remained alive, they were to be given their freedom. Such were the rumors among us. Such were the rumors. I felt such envy, such envy."

The vampire's mind now came aflame with rage and jealousy, but that died down to absolute terror.

"And then the procedure, it was... I saw them thereafter. The bodies were placed together. They were fused, part man, part machine, fused perfectly down the middle. The symmetry was sublime, but its mind, it was ruined! And now it remains a prisoner among us. It remains a prisoner because the Republic didn't know what to do with it, didn't know where to put it."

Shiv felt goosebumps crawl across his body as he looked forward and back. He didn't see anything, but somewhere out there was a messed-up magic project created by the most messed-up minds of the Republic for whatever messed-up reason they had to justify this whole mess.

Mess mess mess, Shiv complained to himself. Everywhere I go, there's some nightmarish bullshit happening.

"Then I pitied him. I pitied them," the vampire repeated over and over again. "I thought I was a miserable creature, but I heard them scream! We can all hear each other in our cells. It is the one privilege, the one pleasure we get down in those depths, in those coffins. We can hear each other.

Sometimes we spoke, but after the Rebis, no one spoke, because at night it sings to itself, and it screams, and it hates."

And just then, a piercing cry of misery and agony sounded from afar. "It has found a new victim," the vampire whispered. "It has found them, and it is not far away. We must flee, we must. If you see it, it will try to kill you. It hates anyone that lays eyes on it. It knows it's hideous now. It knows it's an abomination. Do not let it see you looking at it. Do not. Do not."

And Shiv could feel genuine concern coming from the vampire. This creature was practically insane. Even after all the damage Shiv had inflicted upon his body, the vampire was still terrified. Terrified of the Rebis, mortified of it coming back to finish them both off.

"Alright, fine. But just to clarify, you don't know how to get out of this prison." The vampire went still. "And you did kill a few of the wardens. And you did try to kill me." The vampire didn't respond. Shiv nodded. "I'll tell you what. I'm gonna make this quick."

And a final rasping breath escaped from the bloodsucker. "I knew. I knew I was going to die in here. I knew."

"Yeah," Shiv said. "And it could have been avoided if you hadn't attacked me."

The vampire's black eyes cleared up then, and Shiv saw bright-red irises regard him. A hint of sanity returned to the vampire for the first time, and he... sighed. "The taste of blood. You don't know what it's like. You don't know what the addiction is like."

"I know it's bad enough that it killed you," Shiv said. "Close your eyes."

The vampire shook his head. "No. I wish to be a Pathbearer before my end. I wish to see the face of my killer... Oh, you're so young... You poor thing..."

And that earned just a measure of respect from Shiv. He offered the vampire a brief nod, and then he placed his hand against their face and closed it. Vectors spilled along the vampire's body, and ripples of force came crashing inward to a single epicenter. Every single part of the vampire's flesh, bone, and blood collapsed inward. Shiv's final mercy was giving the vampire a quick death. One moment, it was an entire body. Next, it was a marble between his fingers. He dropped the bloody orb and retracted his hand.

With that done, he went for the wand dagger once more. It lay there just a few meters away from where he'd seen it earlier. Must have been knocked aside during the struggle. As he knelt down to pick it up, he felt power course along the spine of the blade. The crystalline matter lit up, and Shiv realized it was a little bit different from focus crystal. For one, its insides were veined, infused with branching streams of mana.

Moreover, he felt the Pyromancy come alive, but at its insides, there was a faint dot of static, a hint of Dimensionality. Shiv briefly eyed the enchantments but winced as another piercing scream distracted him. "Well, not a bad find at all. I needed a new knife anyway. Time to see how durable you are, Orichalcum knife."

He frowned and stared at the walls nearby. They had been ripped clean of mana. There wasn't even a flicker of spellstuff left. Shiv just noticed that. Once more, he regarded the crumpled ball of vampire and considered his final words. Wherever this Rebis was, it was probably ripping through the magical architecture as well, and that made them a Legendary-Tier adversary.

Shiv was trying to escape, but so was everyone else in this godsforsaken hellhole. With everything said about this Rebis guy, Shiv found himself curious. There were risks in pursuing them, but maybe they

could give him some insight into how to get out. Frankly, he felt bad for the poor bastard. Bastards. From what the vampire said, it's literally a human and an automaton stitched together down the middle. How the hells did that work?

"If things go bad, I don't need to fight them," Shiv said aloud. He planted a temporal anchor where he was and proceeded down the valley. "I'll just escape."

He sped forward for around three seconds before he unceremoniously came upon the so-called Rebis.

After so much build-up by the part of the vampire, Shiv was expecting some kind of nightmare of metal and biology. What he got was a winged creature kneeling over a body, driving its thumbs into someone's eye sockets.

The warden screamed. They writhed, but they no longer had any limbs. Their arms and legs were scattered. Judging by the blood that lined the edge of the Rebis's wings, Shiv had a guess as to how they were cut. Speaking of the wings themselves, Shiv noticed that the left side was purely biological, skeletal, with sheets of membrane lining between. The right, however, was entirely mechanical, with each wing projecting thrusts of force.

"Stop looking at me! Stop looking at me! Stop looking at me!" the Rebis said over and over again. It clutched the head of the warden tighter and tighter, and with a final jerk of its hands, the warden let out a cry and went silent.

Shiv grimaced at the murder, finding himself a little conflicted. He didn't really have a problem with killing, but the wardens hadn't given him cause, and it didn't take that much effort on his part to keep them alive but disabled. The Rebis seemed to hate them, judging from the few dozen bodies that lay scattered all over this place. Perhaps it had a good reason to. Shiv looked around, waiting for Cripple to show up, but the Ascendant didn't.

"Felling hells, Bonk," Shiv muttered. "Just what kind of monsters did you let out of their cage? Really good distractions, though."

Shiv clenched his new blade tight and considered how to proceed. His Psycho-Cartography told him that he needed to tread carefully, that it wasn't going to be so useful against someone entirely insane, but they did know something about it. They knew it hated to be looked at, and it hated these wardens for all the experiments that were conducted upon it. So Shiv decided to take a gamble.

He dropped, slamming his foot down upon the skull of an eye-gouged warden. Their head burst like a wrecked melon, and Shiv spat on them. "Piece of shit," he said. He felt his Acting skill go up, and suddenly, the Rebis turned. It was far faster than he. Legendarily fast. In a moment, its wings were pointed directly at his neck. Shiv didn't even see it move. The Rebis left no shockwave, no afterimage. It was in one place, and then it was another. And Shiv kept his gaze down, avoiding looking the Rebis in the eye.

Acting 15 > 16

But through his periphery, he still caught sight of the creature. It wasn't nearly as ugly as the vampire had described, but it was still a pretty gruesome sight. Half of a person was fused with part of an automaton. The automaton side was easier to describe. It was a thing of smooth metal, with only a black bead for an eye. The texture of its chassis was mercury, but that ended at a threshold of raw-red flesh. The human part of the Rebis was extremely emaciated. There was no fat in the man. He was practically bone—and his genitals were missing too.

Shiv sighed. Poor sonnabitch.

“Who-who...” The Rebis sniffled as it looked at Shiv. The man-half of its face shuddered and flinched. It looked down at the warden Shiv had just crushed. “You... are a prisoner?”

“Not anymore,” Shiv replied. “And I see you aren’t either. See you managed to find your way out. I heard you doing your butchery and decided to see if you wanted a second pair of hands.”

The Rebis stared at him for a long moment, and it let out a whimper. “You... are not scared of me. I can taste fear. I can smell and feed from it. You are not scared. You are not like the others... I don’t know you...”

Shiv frowned as he noticed something—the notification marking him as a target of the System didn’t pop up with the Rebis.

But why?

“But I know him. Sort of.” A new voice entered the fray. Shiv didn’t even see the Rebis turn. It was just suddenly facing the other direction. He looked past its head—and moved away from its extended wing to see a familiar face.

The wolf-man Shiv had shared a cell with earlier was ripping pieces of machinery out from an automaton. He was armored now—clad in a dense plate of adamantite with a series of automaton heads lodged along his back like spines. Beside him, drones hovered in the air. Winged drones that had crossbows and other implants sticking out from underneath them.

Some kind of Artificer or Engineer Path, Shiv guessed.

“You know...” The Rebis whispered to the wolf-man.

“He’s the Deathless,” the wolf-man said casually. “He dropped in to say hi earlier, and the System offered me a most peculiar reward for his head.”

Shiv began gathering overflow force. He prepared himself for battle, for the wolf-man to come for him—or the Rebis to take his head off.

The wolf-man regarded Shiv and chuffed. “So. You managed to escape, and your orc friend let all of us free too? Quite impressive. Quite impressive indeed.”

Shiv blinked. “You knew about Bonk?”

“Oh, yes. You have a very peculiar Chronomancy Skill, do you know that? And the orc was rather loud until he started playing dead—and he did that admirably after you were brought down. I was surprised the Ascendant didn’t finish you off. Why is that?”

The Deathless considered his options. “I’ll tell you if you tell me how to get out of here.”

The wolf-man chuckled. “That’s going to be a bit bigger of a project than you might think. However... With your help, I think we might be able to capture a Guard Cube.”

And there it was once again. "Why cube?"

"You don't know?" the wolf-man said, tilting his head. "Ah. Unfortunate. You are in the Well. The Rubix Well. Here, the most powerful and curious of the Republic's victims and enemies languish. And we are at its very bottom. Trapped in so many layers, our prisons but shifting modules. Like parts of a rubix cube."

"Wait, the gears..." Shiv muttered.

"You saw the mechanisms?" The wolf-man said, suddenly interested.

"Yeah," Shiv confirmed, "I tore my way into this place from the Zenith Cube, I think."

"Tore," the wolf-man breathed. "Then, your strength must be..." He trailed off and took a few steps closer to the Rebis. He whispered something Shiv couldn't catch in the mutilated creature's ear and looked at the Deathless with a smile. "Well. This changes things. Now I know we can take one of the guard stations. And after that, we just might be able to make good on this mad escape. Be you interested in joining us?"

"Tell me about how we're getting to one of these guard stations first," Shiv said. "Then, I'll give you my answer."